

# Explorations in Reconciliation

ROUTLEDGE

New Directions in Theology



Edited by David Tombs and Joseph Liechty

## EXPLORATIONS IN RECONCILIATION

*This book represents the next generation in studies on social reconciliation. Until now much of the writing has been filled with 'shoulds' and 'oughts'—prescriptions for what might be done at some future point. This book, however, is built on a great deal of experience with the difficult work of reconciliation. It recognises the difficult balancing acts that reconciliation entails in the real world, and the necessity of seeing both sides of issues at the same time. This book is a genuine milestone that will give orientation to efforts at reconciliation for the future.*

Robert Schreier

Author of *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*

Theologians and scholars of religion draw on rich resources to address the complex issues raised by political reconciliation in the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. The questions addressed include: Can truth set a person, or a society, free? How is political forgiveness possible? Are political, personal and spiritual reconciliation essentially related?

*Explorations in Reconciliation* brings Catholic, Protestant, Mennonite, Jewish and Islamic perspectives together within a single volume to present some of the most relevant theological work today.



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# Explorations in Reconciliation

New Directions in Theology

*Edited by*

DAVID TOMBS

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and

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This book is dedicated to our colleagues at the Irish School of Ecumenics, and especially to the former Directors, Geraldine Smyth OP and Kenneth Kearon, who initiated the Belfast programme in Reconciliation Studies.



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# Acknowledgements

The contributors to this collection are all in some ways practitioners of reconciliation and write in the light of their practical experience in South Africa, Croatia, Ireland, Bosnia, Latin America and elsewhere. For this reason some of the chapters were first offered to a specific audience at a conference or public lecture and have subsequently been revised for publication here. Gopin, Volf and Smyth's chapters have been revised from papers first written for the 'Boundaries and Bonds' conference of the Irish School of Ecumenics in Belfast, 1997. Wilhelm Verwoerd's chapter is a revised version of his John Whyte Memorial Lecture, University College Dublin (20 November 2003). The chapter by Ada María Isasi-Díaz is a slightly modified version of an article that originally appeared in the *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 8.4 (May 2001) and is reprinted with kind permission. Likewise the chapter by Cecelia Clegg was presented first in the Margaret Beaufort Lecture Series, University of Cambridge, England, November 2002, and subsequently published as 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', *New Blackfriars* 85 (January 2004). It has been revised and reprinted with the kind permission of the Dominican order. The cartoon on page 113 is reprinted with permission from *Truths Drawn in Jest*, edited by Wilhelm Verwoerd and Mahlubi 'Chief' Mabizela (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2000). As editors we are grateful to all concerned for making this possible. We must also give special thanks to Emily Hersberger and Caroline Clarke for help in preparing the manuscript and to Sarah Lloyd and the staff of Ashgate Publishing for their professional and friendly assistance in bringing it to fruition.

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# Introduction

David Tombs and Joseph Liechty

The urgent need to prevent, end and recover from the ethnic, religious and nationalist conflicts that have multiplied since the end of the Cold War provides the context for new explorations in the theology of reconciliation. In recent years a number of important books in political science, jurisprudence and ethics have debated the challenges of reconciliation, peace-building and transitional justice in societies emerging from sustained and often bloody conflicts. This literature raises ethical and other questions for theologians and scholars of religion to work with when addressing the complex issues raised in the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Rwanda, Latin America, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. It includes questions like: can truth set a person, or a society, free? How is political forgiveness possible? What need is there for repentance and for justice? Is reconciliation, especially the aspect of forgiveness, compatible with justice? Are political, social, personal and spiritual reconciliation essentially related?

From the writings of the apostle Paul onwards, Christian thinkers have struggled to read the signs of the times and reflect theologically in response to political events. A constructive engagement between theology and politics is as necessary now as it has ever been. For Christian theologians to take up the political challenges of reconciliation is particularly appropriate because these raise so many related theological questions.

Paul says, 'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us' (2 Cor. 5:18–19). For Paul himself there was an immediate political relevance to this message, as shown in the radical egalitarianism of his vision of being reconciled in Christ: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ' (Gal. 3:28). However, Paul also shows elsewhere in his writing, understanding the radical implications of such a message is not always easy. Since Constantine, the Church has tended to focus on the sacramental and personal aspects of reconciliation, and generally neglected the political and social dimensions. Fortunately, in recent years this has started to change. Christian theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars have started to address old questions in new ways and the political relevance of reconciliation has become both a demanding challenge and an exciting opportunity for theology.

This book, written by scholars working in varied contexts, draws together key developments in this new work and extends them further. A first group of essays considers religious resources for reconciliation, a theme that was vital long before the tragedy of 9/11, but undeniably so since then. The first author, Marc Gopin, has been a passionate advocate of the idea that every religious tradition, although sometimes, frequently or even currently associated with violence, has resources for making peace that are drawn from the particularities of its traditions, texts and practices, and the search for peace can never bypass these resources.<sup>1</sup> Here the theorist turns practitioner, as Gopin offers from the depths of his Jewish tradition an extended and intimate reflection on the theme of the stranger in the Hebrew Bible and what it can teach us about the relationship of the self and the Other. He also takes on the additional task of considering how these scriptural and theological insights might be integrated with theories of conflict analysis and resolution in the context of complex cultural situations.

In the second essay, Miroslav Volf amplifies themes he had earlier developed in his highly regarded book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, presenting God's call to embrace (reconciliation) as revealed in the cross of Christ. As a Croatian offering a theologically grounded response to the practices of exclusion that generate political and social conflicts in the Balkans and around the world, Volf speaks here as a Christian to Christians, and yet readers from diverse perspectives will find much to consider and act upon.

In one sense, David Herbert's chapter on 'Islam and Reconciliation' is the exception in this first section, because he writes as a sociologist and from outside the faith tradition. However, Herbert uses this stance to write a carefully nuanced account, making the case, in parallel with Gopin and Volf, for searching out resources for peace within the varied traditions of Islam. As he draws attention to aspects of Islam likely to be positive for conflict resolution, he also offers a corrective to those scholars who would settle for an essentialist and therefore simplistic reading of Islam. In contrast to most of the other chapters in the collection, he also does more to examine reconciliation in the context of international relations, not only conflicts within states. The controversy still swirling around Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis makes this international approach important, especially in relation to Islam.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Marc Gopin, *From Eden to Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilisations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (Summer 1993), 22–49. A shorter version appeared as 'The Coming Clash of Civilizations or, The West Against the Rest', *New York Times* (6 June 1993), E.19; a later expanded version appeared as *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

A second section of three chapters focuses on the dynamics of reconciliation and Christian theology. Joseph Liechty, writing out of his long experience of reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, notes that the fresh surge of post-Cold War writing on reconciliation is sometimes hampered by the lack of an agreed set of terms and definitions. He proposes an approach to definition through an account of the internal dynamics of reconciliation and in the process gives particular attention to problems and complexities around the understanding and practice of forgiveness. He argues that if the different aspects of the Christian forgiveness process are identified and distinguished more clearly, it can help to resolve the often unhelpfully general debates such as whether repentance must precede forgiveness or vice versa.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes as a *mujerista* theologian born and raised in Cuba and now working in the United States. She presents reconciliation as a religious, social and civic virtue in which the practice of reconciliation links God to human beings and human beings to each other in ways that embody a spirituality of peace and justice. Her chapter illustrates how the emergence of contextual political theologies can give new relevance to traditional theological teaching.

David Tombs describes the work of the Interdiocesan ‘Recovery of Historical Memory’ (REMHI) project in Guatemala as a practical outworking of a prophetic political theology. As a Church-sponsored ‘truth commission’ to support an official UN initiative, the REMHI project was a remarkable achievement in confronting painful truths. Yet at a practical level, the project also exposed the difficulties that remain in the pursuit of justice when perpetrators enjoy impunity and those in power frustrate political reforms. Tombs points to this dilemma as an ongoing challenge that a political theology of reconciliation cannot ignore.

The third part of the book, ‘The Ongoing Challenge of Reconciliation’, looks at the continuing practical challenges that the churches and society face in making reconciliation a reality in everyday life.

Wilhelm Verwoerd draws on his background as a political philosopher, his experience with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and his work in Northern Ireland with former combatants to develop a philosophical approach to the significance of inclusive memory that embraces the humanity of all. Whilst not directly addressed to religious questions, the issues that arise from this in relation to sectarianism and religious identity, will be obvious to those interested in the application of ‘inclusive memory’ to social and religious identities in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Balkans and elsewhere.

Cecelia Clegg draws on the findings of the ‘Moving Beyond Sectarianism’ project – a major six-year research project in Northern Ireland – and the notion of ‘embrace’ in Miroslav Volf’s work to address the sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Drawing on her training in



psychology and psychotherapy, and guided by the need to ‘speak the truth in love to the churches’, Clegg offers a pastoral challenge for churches and other faith communities to respond to in addressing the continuing legacies of conflict.

Geraldine Smyth starts with Brian Keenan’s reflections in *An Evil Cradling* on his time in Beirut, and his experience in crossing cultural boundaries. Keenan’s words are shown to have a special relevance to the politics of identity in his native Belfast. She goes on to look at Jesus’ crossing of the Jordan to show how Jesus’ frequent crossing and recrossing of boundaries (between Jews and Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor) offers a theological resource for creating and maintaining right relationships.

Whilst the chapters have a common concern – the challenges and opportunities that arise from the inter-relationships between social identity, religious faith and political reconciliation – each author addresses their own social context and reflects on their own experiences. They do not speak with a single voice, but they all recognise the complexities of reconciliation and offer an engaged commitment to exploring how this might be understood more deeply.

PART I  
RELIGIOUS RESOURCES  
FOR RECONCILIATION



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# The Heart of the Stranger<sup>1</sup>

Marc Gopin

The concept of stranger in human experience is relevant to almost all relationships. We human beings constantly create both very large and very small societies in which someone is a stranger to that society. Simultaneously we ourselves frequently experience varying degrees of estrangement in one setting or another. From a religious point of view, there is always the question hovering over our experience as to whether we are in close relation to or estranged from God at any given time.

The centrality of the stranger in both law and metaphor in biblical religions is at least one key to how a believer is supposed to love the other who is different and how the believer may also be loved by others or by God. The idea of a stranger who is also beloved holds in tension the ethical experience of love together with the ontological reality of human differences and separation. The concept of stranger, the living reality of strangers, and the laws obligating love for the stranger are therefore highly suggestive as to how believers can create community without consuming unique identities, how we can be both strangers to each other in our uniqueness and differences but also beloved, and how we, through our ability to meet and coexist, thereby embrace and welcome home the ultimate Stranger to this world, the Divine Presence. The God of the Bible seems to be occasionally at home in the midst of human beings and occasionally alienated by our abominable behaviour, but always hoping that our own embrace of strangers becomes the basis for welcoming the Divine stranger into the community of human beings.

In this chapter I explore the theological centrality of the stranger or sojourner, the *ger*, in the Hebrew Bible. I also explore theological approaches to boundaries between self and the ultimate Other, the Divine Presence, and the nature of coexistence between different beings. These themes are all dealt with extensively in the Hebrew Bible. It is a Bible that Jews and Christians share, even if I see it through the overarching lens of rabbinic Judaism's 2000-year-old religious constructs whereas Christians see it through the lens of the New Testament and 2000 years of Christian traditions. In the final pages I turn to some pragmatic integration of these theological

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of this chapter was presented to the 1997 'Boundaries and Bonds' conference, held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and organised by the 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism' project of the Irish School of Ecumenics.

concepts with theories of conflict analysis and resolution in the context of complex cultural situations.

### **God, the Stranger, and the Boundaries of Coexistence**

When I use the term ‘the Other’ I am, of course, engaged with Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and many others attempting to understand this space or boundary between the individual and the person or the world, including the God or the Sacred, that the individual encounters. In addition, much of what I say about the self and the Other refers to collective selves as well, to whole ethnic, religious or national groups in their encounters with ‘other’ distinct groups. I acknowledge, of course, that identity in the real world is more ambiguous than any of these categories; we see ourselves as part of more than one collective identity – the human race, the nation, the clan, the family, the religion – and this complicates the question of self, other and boundaries.

The biblical creation story in Genesis is perhaps the most fundamental blueprint of biblically based cultures for everything that is right and wrong about human existence. It offers us a window into the biblical version of how, as human beings, we can create or destroy, construct society anew or perpetuate a morass of violence. The creation story also reveals God as Creator from out of this world, as the first biblical stranger who reaches across impassable boundaries to give birth, to nurture life, even as He or She is not completely part of it but rather in some undefined relationship.

Before we explore God the Stranger, however, we must engage a more fundamental discussion about the nature of God. We think so often of an expansive and limitless concept of God, both in time and in space. Traditional Judaism, through the Hebrew Bible, shared with the world the concepts of a Divine Being who is prior to the universe, a Creator who is eternal and beyond this world. And yet we cannot conceive of divinity without reference to this very universe.

When we say something is limitless we delimit it by adjectives of space and time. Thus, every traditional name of God refers in some way to a Divine relationship to the physical world. Even the most obscure name, *eyn-sof*, literally ‘without end’, used in classical Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, to refer to the utterly unknowable aspect of God, is conditioned by concepts of space and time. Talk of limitlessness has as its referent the limitations of physical dimensions.

Nevertheless, tradition does affirm a concept of God beyond physical existence. Maimonides, certainly, was the most keenly aware of the problematic nature of Divine address and attribution precisely because that attribution cannot move beyond the physical universe. In his *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides realised that the attribution of positive qualities to

God, such as kindness, implies a kind of limitation of God to the physical universe. And he was very conscious that a Jewish God cannot be collapsed into the universe.

It appears, then, that we have an inescapable paradox in the relationship of God to the world. This has been encapsulated traditionally by the terms 'immanence' and 'transcendence'. But this is an uncomfortable paradox and each term or way of describing God is fraught with problems. God as transcendent means little, because we have no way to intellectualise what is beyond space and time. God as immanent is scandalous when analysed carefully, at least from a strictly Jewish monotheistic view; it seems to either justify earthly idolatry, or render the concepts of Creation and Creator meaningless. How can a Creator create Himself if He is immanent in the universe? How can an Immanent Presence, solely defined in such a way, and completely identified with an object, be itself the Creator of that object? Furthermore, traditional Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah have understood well the perils of over-identifying God and the world. If God is defined only as immanent in the world or identified with it, then the entire conception of good and evil, virtue and sin, falls apart. In the modern period, no one understood as well as Hermann Cohen, the German idealist philosopher, that the ethical 'ought' has no reality, and the political ought of messianic Judaism, that is, the ideal of creating the good society on earth, has no reality unless they are distinguished from the immanent 'is'. God must be the source of the ethical ought and the political ought, and in order to play that role, to give those oughts ontological reality, God must be even more transcendent than those very oughts. The dream of what should take place in the human relationship to the universe must have reality if virtue and sin, *mitsvah* and *averah*, are to be meaningful categories. But they cannot be real unless they are given a source in Transcendence. Either the dream of what is not yet real has reality or it is simply the play of neural transmitters, synapses and the reconstruction of emotional states. If it is the latter one could argue that this can make no serious claim on the human conscience. In order for it to be more than that, it must in some way reflect what is not quite of this world. If God exists in Transcendence then it is possible for Good to exist in Transcendence, and then it can make a claim on the physical world. It can say to members of the physical world, 'Strive to reach beyond yourselves and your current moral level of behaviour.'

Here is the paradox, however. If God is not immanent in at least some sense of that term then the practice and experience of religion – as the vast majority of human beings have understood it – is impossible. If God is not immanent then prayer means nothing because no one is listening in any real sense; the soul as an image of God, or an expression of Divine Presence, is a figment of the imagination; hope in Divine aid to change oneself or change the world is foolhardy; and the idea of Divine truths occurring to human minds at some critical juncture, in the forms of prophecy or inspiration, is a pipe dream. This

does not preclude a serious commitment to the idea of the Good (or to the idea of *mitsvah* and *averah*, which emanate from a concept of the Good) that emerges from a posited faith in or knowledge of Divine transcendence. But most of deep religious experience is gone, leaving the emotional life of the individual without spiritual moorings.

There is one way to solve this dilemma, and that is to hold Divine Immanence and Divine Transcendence in dramatic tension. Since at least one pole of that dramatic tension involves a reality that is unknowable then the only way to understand this is by use of metaphor, which the Torah (meant here as the Hebrew Bible, but also the texts of rabbinic Judaism) provides through one of its most prominent themes and concerns: the sojourner or guest, also called a stranger or the *ger*. From Abraham to Ruth, from the Exodus stories to countless laws of interpersonal aid, from remonstrations in the five books of Moses to the social criticism of the prophets, there is no person of greater concern in the Bible than the stranger who is with us but not with us, whom we know but do not know, who is a source of great mystery and yet ancestral familiarity, whose treatment by us is ultimately a litmus test of whether we and our culture have succeeded or not in the eyes of God, and whose experience is essentially a yardstick of our moral stature. If we love the stranger, protect him and see to his needs, then our society passes a kind of Divine test, and we also have the emotional and spiritual fulfilment of identifying completely with an echo of ourselves. The admonition in Exodus 23:9 to not oppress the stranger is given poignant emotional depth by saying to the listeners that you know the heart of the stranger having been strangers in the Land of Egypt, having experienced what the worst kind of estrangement is when one human being makes another into an object, into a slave. Loving the stranger in the present becomes an opportunity to heal yourselves, heal your history, and also heal others through the existential meeting with and moral care for the Other who lives across a clear cultural, economic or political boundary.

The stranger or sojourner is the classic Other in monotheism. The sojourner is also, I would argue, a not so thinly veiled metaphor for God in this world. The God of the Bible loves the stranger intensely because it is He/She. In Jewish theology the *she'khinah*, the Divine Presence, can be both part of the innermost workings of our physical existence, and yet simultaneously hold from view Her mysterious identity. The *she'khinah* is immanent even though the true nature of God is distant, unknowable and estranged. We cannot find God or see God or even know how to do so without meeting the human stranger through love. The stranger is the key to the Divine paradox.

Before we can fully understand the relationship between God and the concept of stranger, however, we must ask, what is a stranger? A stranger is one who is foreign to us in many ways, utterly unknowable in some fashion, and yet is in some potential relation to us at the same time – someone who I at

least begin to know in some way. We pass a stranger on the street, and we have no idea who she is; in the crowded cities we pass thousands of people whom we will never know; at the airport in some foreign city we will never know these strangers whom we have seen in a fleeting glimpse. We will never know their history, their habits, their dreams and their failures, no matter how we may long to know them. But at some moment we occupy the same space and time of the stranger. If a spectacular event had occurred as we passed these strangers, if the building had been hit by an earthquake and we had been trapped together, or if we together had helped save the life of a person suddenly gone into cardiac arrest, we might have created an intimate relationship transforming us from complete strangers into lifelong friends. But such is usually not meant to be. There is some element of tragedy in the fleeting encounter with strangers: an opportunity lost perhaps for the greater unity of the human spirit on this earth that is achieved when strangers become committed to each other through some shared experience. In Jewish theology there is an element of the Divine in every human being, in every stranger, and at the moment of the brief encounter of strangers who meet is the possibility of the reunion of the Divine with itself, but it remains unfulfilled. There is some element of divine tragedy in strangers who have failed to be reunited, though the reunion seemed so possible at that instant. But the public space – between families and groups, at the border of the lives of strangers, especially where there is tragedy – also presents an immense opportunity for spiritual discovery and ultimate moral fulfilment.

Estrangement is insidiously pervasive in human experience. Let's return to the strangers passing in the airport. Even if we had met those strangers in the airport, would they have ever ceased completely to be strangers? Who knows another human being so well that he cannot say of the other that he is a stranger? I have lived with and loved my wife for twenty years now, and I have not begun to recount to her all the events of my life, and it is not for lack of trying. If she cannot see all that I see in my mind's eye, if she cannot have my memories, feel my longings and my traumas, feel my sources of shame or see the history of my fantasies (thank God!), will she ever really know me? Do I ever completely cease to be a stranger?

There is an elastic quality to the concept of stranger that allows it to elude definition. For example, can you love a stranger? The biblical tradition repeatedly demands the most intimate care for the *ger*, the stranger, including the command to love the *ger* (Deut. 10:19). But how can we feel these love emotions even as we are estranged from another, or even as we perceive the other as stranger? It seems logical on a certain level that at the moment in which we experience love for the stranger, the category of stranger must become absurd. Yet the biblical text holds love and the stranger in paradoxical tension. As we quoted earlier, 'And do not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having been strangers in the land of Egypt'



(Ex. 23:9). Somehow, it must be possible to retain the title of stranger and still be loved.

Love of God is at the heart of monotheistic religion, and yet God is the quintessential stranger to this world in the pull and tug of Jewish theology. God must remain a stranger at the doorstep of physical reality. If we invite God too far inside we end up worshipping something else – not God, but ourselves quite often, or a piece of land – and in idolising a physical object and thinking it to be God we actually destroy the very Divine Presence that we sought to invite into our reality. We make sanctification of place a dangerous enterprise.

If we do not, however, open the door to this extraordinary Stranger then we risk an existence bereft of meaning, of spiritual and emotional depth. It will also be bereft of the hope that comes from the knowledge that virtue is real, that virtue shares in some way an ideal realm with an existing God.

The reality of something as abstract as virtue has depended through much of intellectual history on the reality of God. Virtue's actualisation in the religious mind is therefore a pregnant possibility, always luring the human heart one step further towards fulfilment. Virtue's existence is at the heart of the Jewish understanding of Revelation, while the dream of virtue's realisation in human political community is the distant dream of messianic Redemption. Virtue is never completely actualised, however. We human beings are grossly imperfect, and yet we are good enough to aspire toward virtue's actualisation both in our personal ethical life and in political life.

*Ger* encapsulates and symbolises the fundamental relation of humanity to the world and beyond. It also characterises and defines for us the essential link between God and world, God and the human being, God and the soul. It allows God to exist in abstraction or transcendence, but also in immediate relationship. It is a being who we can love with great intensity without fearing that our human narcissistic tendency to overwhelm, to consume and imperialistically strangle the things we love might destroy an authentic and morally independent understanding of God. We all know of love that helps the other grow and love that strangles. We learn to distinguish love that is unconditional from love that is self-serving, love that liberates, ennobles and empowers from love that stifles and tortures. It is the same with love of the Divine. The danger in monotheism has always been that the love of God, this invitation of the Sacred into human existence, has turned out to be a vehicle of self-love, strangling the very presence of God through self-worship, through idolisation of land, nation and states.

It is not scandalous in Jewish theology to reflect that God, the stranger, needs the human being to be looking out of existence toward God even as God is looking in. If there is no one looking out, even as God looks in, then the door between God and the world ceases to exist. The door must be *perceived* as a door on both its sides. Authentic relationship occurs only through the

consciousness that the Divine Sojourner, this visitor from transcendent realms, has an identity in this world and also the possibility of loving and being loved.

The concept of the human being created in the image of God is crucial for the foundation of Jewish ethics, but it also serves as the critical existential linkage of God and the human being as two parallel strangers in the drama of Creation. Both of them yearn and succeed – in different ways – to negotiate their estrangement and their discovery of relationship.

There are many bases of Jewish ethical behaviour. Few of those arguments challenge monotheistic human beings as profoundly as the idea that the God we fear and love happens to reside in the image, the *tselem*, of the other human being – the other who now transforms into a sacred Other. Arguments for love and compassion, or the duties owed to another person, are frequent in biblical literature. But it is hard to expect love or compassion, or even a sense of legal duty, to another with whom one is at war, or who hates you or abuses you. And yet Judaism does demand such leaps of conscience. The concept of *tselem* is crucial for this moral leap to take place.

The idea that God resides in the image of the other person who, therefore, becomes a sacred Other is startling, and it is inextricable from the odyssey of the religious psyche towards Divine encounter. No religious human being lives without the longing for Divine encounter. Torah texts in various places have the audacity to redirect that longing toward the Other, to place the ‘image’ of that God in the human Other, no matter who that Other is: a difficult father perhaps, whom one must nevertheless honour; or an enemy to whom one must offer a means of escape in the heat of battle and to whom one offers peace; or an enemy who hates you to whom the Bible insists you must offer help to when he is struggling with a burden, like the burden of bad leadership. It is as if a Divine voice says perpetually to the inner self who is conscious of the sacred laws of morality, ‘You want to find Me? You want to fast and suppress your body, or engage in any number of demonstrations of devotion in order to locate Me or conjure Me? Fine, go right ahead, but you have only to look and really see the stranger or estranged Other who walks past you every day. And the more that you truly see him or her the more you will find Me.’

An image, however, is elusive by definition. It recalls the original of which it is a copy, but it is not the original, and it must not be. The door that opens between God and the world, Transcendence and Immanence, can allow an image to pass through, reflected in the universe, and reflected in the face of the human being. But, once again, the image and the reality remain separate.

The image of the Transcendent Being inside the human being is testimony to the phenomenon of sojourning across boundaries at the very core of God’s relation to the world. Just as God the Creator in the Genesis story sees

the human being, Adam, as alone in the Garden of Eden in need of a partner, He too saw Himself as alone, in need of the universe, but, in particular, in need of the conversant and communicative human being. The consciousness of the human being who is alone, who cannot communicate with others, who has no *ezer ke'negdo*, no partner confronting him, is not true consciousness. The fully conscious human being is a communicative human being, empathically related to the living beings around him. God is in need of this conscious, communicative being. It is possible then that *ezer ke'negdo* did not just refer to the creation of the full human pair of man and woman, but was self-referential. God realised that He had created an *ezer ke'negdo* for Himself, namely the human being. The human being is a helpmate that stands with God but also apart from God in the drama of the Creation story, fulfilling the crucial task of taking care of the Garden of Eden, taking care of the earth. But the human being is also an *ezer* who is *ke'negdo*, opposite God or separate from God because of his finitude and capacity to fail.

The human being could never be wholly communicative with a transcendent Being. Ultimately God cannot have the intimacy and intertwining of self and Other that is possible for physical lovers. The splitting of the human into the male and female is a crucial moment of creating the reality of aloneness but also the possibility of companionship of indescribable physical and spiritual intimacy. When these two human beings enter the story, the Divine engagement with the world becomes immediately more indirect, oblique, dependent to some degree on the human being who now carries the image of God. The Garden of Eden story shifts toward the essential questions facing the human interaction with the world and away from the immediacy of Divine action in the world. But the image of God in the human being is conscious self-awareness and communication. Estrangement between the human and the Divine is answered or alleviated by sharing this consciousness, this communication among human beings, especially between lover and beloved.

As we communicate fully with each other through thoughts, emotions, empathy and altruism, especially in the drama of lovers' intimacy, we complete who we are as images of God. No ideas are true until they can be articulated; no feelings are true feelings until they are communicated by deed, by dialogue, or in some non-verbal fashion. In completing communication with each other we complete communication with the Other. Communication is the ultimate fulfilment of consciousness for strangers. As we communicate we not only complete human consciousness in the act and experience of love, we complete the image of God and overcome His estrangement as well as our own. It is as if the image of God is activated in us in its fullest sense as we love and come to know intimately the other being who is our *ezer ke'negdo*. In so doing, we also allow the door to Transcendence to be fully opened. We give

God a way to be in the world through His image and a way to overcome the austere and awesome estrangement of creating the world alone.

Transcendence and Immanence in the Divine relationship to the world have their parallel in the human choices of aloneness and engagement. The stranger is in the place in between these two dramatically different places. He is at the gateway waiting to enter or not to enter, should we choose to invite him in. But there is another choice available to the Other who is not yet engaged. It is a sinister choice that can and should be called evil. It is the choice of consumption. Consumption lies at the heart of both human existence and human destructiveness, life-giving and death-giving. The need to be all-consuming, to leave no space in which one does not consume, is the real key to human evil.

The relationship between over-consumption and the destruction of a natural environment is self-evident when it is seen in its ecological expression. Certainly our generation more than any other knows the consequences of over-consumption. Or perhaps not enough of us see it clearly enough to stop our own destruction. What is clear is that the loss of boundary between the human and the one tree that was off limits in the Garden of Eden is the story of over-consumption and breaking boundaries – not in order to meet the other, to engage and appreciate the tree, but in order to consume and thus destroy it. Appreciation of the Other must respect boundaries of separate existence. Where there is no boundary there is no recognition of anything but the self. Where there is nothing but the self there is only demonic destruction and self-worship.

The Edenic story, however, is not just about the boundary between the self and a natural universe that calls for care and respect. It is also about the fundamental relationship of the human being to all other beings. When Adam reached for the tree his motives may have been the purest in the world. He may have felt that the world will be redeemed if only he can bring his Divine image into every space of the Garden, and thus know the entire garden. Yet in his rapaciousness, his inability to resist the one tree out of many, Adam embraced the greed that cost him his ability to maintain a boundary. By consuming rather than meeting the Other, he practised ultimate alienation from the sacred aspect of the Other in the world. So have all zealots of history, religious or otherwise, felt as they blazed a path of destructive consumption, with the result of millions of lives wasted in brutal warfare. So too have many political, ideological and religious systems failed to understand that no matter how pure the motive, the reach for every last piece of territory grossly violates the keys to true knowledge and wisdom: humility and self-limitation.

Adam's rapaciousness, the key to the Eden story, is thus the key to the question of the sojourner, the *ger*, and boundaries. It raises the fundamental questions – indeed, the essential challenge that so many political, ideological

and religious systems have failed to address – of how to relate without consuming, how to meet others and not destroy them in the name of trying to meet. This is exactly why the stranger is the essential metaphor of biblical experience and why it is the key to its ethical stance.

It is precisely because Adam and Eve were guilty of the consumption of the Other, of the destruction of boundaries and the elimination of the viable existence of the different and the strange, that they lost their son at the hands of their other son. Jealous murder is the ultimate consequence of the deadly side of human consumption, and children often accentuate the nascent tendencies of their parents. That is, I would argue, the intent of the biblical theme regarding the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons. A society that in one generation dehumanises and takes advantage of a stranger or a minority, consuming him in some sense, can easily commit genocide in the next generation. Cain did not commit genocide, but he took the first step towards it.

Nothing calls into question the worthiness of the human race more than the phenomenon of massive violence. It is precisely the actions of Cain that set in motion a series of events over generations that led to Divine regret at the creation of the human race. This is the essence of the Flood symbolism in Genesis. The Flood is a Divine gesture to the world of exactly what the world, in turn, had gestured to God: random destructiveness. Thus, the metaphorical framing of the question of boundaries between and recognition of the self and the Other leads eventually to a radical questioning of the worth of the human race in the hands of the biblical story.

What is crucial about the Flood story is naturally Noah. Noah is the single one. Noah is lonely and isolated. Noah stands against a generation, and in so doing he evokes the image of a stranger, outside the boundaries of his generation. But Noah also evokes the most important paradox associated with the strange Other, the single one. It is the stranger, be it God, Noah or some other leader, who, while standing outside the bounds of physical reality or even sociological reality, is able to be a creator, even a nurturer. It is the curious destiny of the stranger to be both nurturing of life but also outside of it, even necessarily outside of it. Peculiarity is the destiny of the stranger. But the peculiarity nurtures and creates or recreates life on a universal scale. Noah embodied this nurturing: as a stranger with a radical respect for boundaries, he did not consume the world around him but nurtured it and was chosen to recreate the world.

The Noah episode is the first indication we have that a fundamental paradox of disengagement with the world will be wedded to a nurturing care for the all of humanity. Further, it suggests that radical unity of the world, the breaking of all boundaries between selves, is not constructive in and of itself. In fact, this kind of universalism, as powerfully symbolised by the peoples of the Tower of Babel, is destructive, antithetical to the conception of God, and

therefore the Good, that biblical Judaism is seeking to convey to all of humanity.

This sets the stage for the destiny of the stranger, the particular Other, who remains in his particularity, but who relates to God as one of two strangers united in their common love of and commitment to the world in its entirety. The stranger is loved but not consumed. The stranger continues to be different but is loved nevertheless. The boundary remains. And the love travels across the boundary day to day like light from the sun. But it does not consume and is not consumed. Both remain vibrant and effluent, and the metaphor of Divine relationship to and love for the world is re-enacted in the relationship of self and other, in the ethical relationship of meeting across boundaries that are never destroyed.

Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, but also the traditional father of Islamic peoples and an important figure of faith in Christian tradition, is singular in his peculiar relationship to God. At the same time, however, with all of his distinct rites and ceremonies and his unique storyline, he is also a man through whom all nations will be blessed (Gen. 12:3) and who follows the ways of God which involve a universal commitment to justice and righteousness. The latter are expressed truly in their most radically universalist sense, because Abraham will use these very Divine characteristics to defend even the most vile community of rapists and murderers in Sodom, demanding before God that the innocent should never be swept away with the guilty (Gen. 18:22–33).

Nothing like the following verse defines more precisely the exquisite paradox of the sanctified life of the stranger, a blend of radical particularity in a morally challenging world, together with an acute commitment to the same world. God says, 'For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Eternal God, to practice righteousness and justice, in order that the Eternal God may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him' (Gen. 18:19). The act of singling out and making promises to a particular clan are clear evidence of the valuation of boundaries. But this simultaneously frames a commitment to a universal set of ideas whose radical universalism will become clear just four verses later when Abraham extends these ideals even to the most corrupt inhabitants of Sodom. Thus it is out of a place of *particularity*, of being a sojourner who nevertheless crosses boundaries with a universal concern, that Abraham presents an ideal model of engagement with the world, without consuming that world or allowing it to consume him. Relation becomes possible without violence, while the spiritual mission of interrelationship is not only maintained but is realised on a far deeper level than would be thought possible.

There is no easy solution to the problem of the boundary between self and Other, nor to the pitfalls of both universal pretensions and particular

identities. It seems that violence has emerged in the history of religious traditions, especially monotheistic traditions, from a universalist stance bent on consuming or exterminating all things and people in its path. But violence has also emerged from particularist stances that do not care for or do not value the existence of others who are not members of one's clan or sect.

One of the essential dangers of monotheistic notions of particularity and mission has been the concept of chosenness, essentially the beloved relationship of the stranger with God, with her own agreement and arrangement with God as to what she is called upon to do in the world. It is nothing less than the chosenness of a child by a parent who loves all her children, and gives each of them a special task to accomplish. The successes and failures of that agreement and relationship are a strictly internal affair, between a person or a group and God, not a litmus test of global success or domination.

There is no question that this concept as it has been appropriated by all three traditions, as far as I can tell, has been one of the most destructive and misinterpreted conceptions in the history of monotheism. For the Prophets of Israel this chosenness was just as frequently framed as a chosenness for special punishment as special rewards, and most often a chosenness for obligation and mission. How anyone in their right mind could have read the Prophets of Israel and come to the conclusion that chosenness meant superiority or privilege is beyond me. And yet I continue to be amazed at how any religious idea, no matter how good or decent, can be reinterpreted in some historical period by the highest of authorities for the lowest of purposes. The number of groups that, in the name of monotheism, have used the chosenness metaphor to destroy indigenous peoples physically or emotionally in the past millennium defies the imagination. Such is our burden in being inheritors of historical religions and historical mistakes.

Till now, I have addressed these issues on a theological plane. Now, however, I would like to integrate this with consideration of the empirical questions facing humanity: questions relating to sectarianism, boundaries and the role of religion in peace and conflict.

Organised religion, especially in its more uncompromising forms, generally denies the fluidity of identity in religious life. But from the vantage point of conflict and violence, there are various ways in which religious communities are evolving all the time, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. Of the key factors involved in this process, some are external to the community and the individual and some are internal. The external factors involve economic, political, social, psychological, ethnic, military and security matters that deeply affect us every day of our lives. These factors interact in complex ways both with the inner life of religious individuals, be they simple parishioners, leading clergy, religious institutions and their hierarchies. This in turn causes an inner and ever-evolving process of

interpreting the spiritual and moral priorities of the religious traditions (or, in some interpretations, the spirit of God) as to how to react to these new circumstances. It also evokes struggle over institutional change.

There is also an unmistakable complexity to all of this in the fact that education and many other factors make the depth of someone's religious identity and sense of self extremely variable. Each person sees some fundamental elements of their religious world-view as non-negotiable. Often, however, there is great identity confusion in many parts of the world, particularly among those who are violent in the name of religion, as to what their religious identity really is as an in-depth experience. Thus in conflictual situations we tend to take a binary approach to the world: we practise negative identity and define ourselves by who we are not.

This negative identity is not very pleasant. It needs conflict and misery in order to sustain itself, and it puts the human being or the community that experiences it, or has significant elements of it, in an impossible position. On the one hand, much evidence suggests that the normal human reaction to the world is to renounce violence. Most people, especially mothers, would rather not bury their children and would do anything to avoid that horror. I feel that reality more than ever before as a father. On the other hand, the need for identity is so powerful a force in human life that millions of people over the millennia of human civilisation have been willing to die for this negative identity, or kill for it, or both. If identity is essentially negative, if there is deep doubt or lack of vision for conceiving of a substantive identity without the enemy, then there is no choice but to recreate the circumstances in which conflict with an enemy is necessary.

Another factor that drives this process of negative identity particularly concerns eras of human life in which the nature of civilisation pushes the average person towards a loss of deep identity, or positive identity. The irony here is that the liberal state, the noble effort (to which I wholeheartedly subscribe) to create a state in which everyone has civil rights without regard to religion or ethnicity, has led to an effort to homogenise culture. Above all, however, it is an unlimited form of capitalism, or the drive to expand the sale of goods by whatever means, that has led to an onslaught of common and homogenising experience, of clothing, entertainment, food, language and many other things. This has led to a massive level of identity poverty and/or ambiguity, which, in turn, has made representatives of all the major religions desperate to recapture identity through chauvinism and exclusivity, even to the point of developing completely new religious rules – which they claim as ancient – in order to solidify the negative identity of these homogenised millions of vaguely religious, but positively lost individuals around the globe.

As is often the case, we members of the human race are victims of our own noble efforts to improve the world, in this case our efforts for enlightenment and industrialisation. We have not wasted our time in trying, however. In the



last few centuries we have substantially improved the quality of life for millions of people. But our arrogance prevents us from seeing what we have destroyed in the process and where we have erred. George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist, has noted that communism failed because it could not face its flaws, and that capitalism will fail also if it does not recognise its major flaws. This is very wise.

Yet it is in understanding the depth and the sources of religious violence and conflict that we understand its solutions. Correcting one of the fundamental errors of modern civilisation – namely, the tendency to ignore the importance of cultural particularity for the individual and for the community, and failing to integrate it into the meaning structures of modern society – is not a simple task. Concretely, it means we cannot enter as peacemakers into a culture or a religious society with a pre-programmed, homogenised set of values and principles, unless those principles are accompanied by an embrace of the unique identity of groups and individuals. It means we can no longer afford to bury the individual in a sea of universal principles. It requires us to express the depth of identity, including religious identity, in a way that embraces its own uniqueness but also shares with the whole society a set of shared meanings. Yet recognising this delicate combination, and seeking it in an evolving world that comprises multiple cultures and religious expressions, brings us closer to ending religious violence.

What has this to do with the biblical stranger? Everything. The stranger as the paradigm of particularity but also universalism is exactly what I am proposing for complex civilisations and for peacemaking. We must learn how to embrace our particularities and honour them. We should cease to build cultural life based solely on homogenised identities that deeply threaten so many people's commitments to their past, their families and their very sense of self. We must construct ways of relating, ways of envisioning and constructing our futures, ways of healing our pain and solving our social problems and conflicts, which embrace the particular. But that particular identity, or the identity of the stranger, cannot be one that is over against the larger world; it must see itself as *in service of the world*, as Abraham did. It must see a society that is not threatening because it does not promise to consume the minority or those who are different. This society merely calls for members to care for it, each in their own way, through the expression of their own values and customs. And the society, in turn, will set up a mode of interaction that has as its challenging task a way of negotiating and including these different contributions to an envisioned future.

It goes without saying that we, who are all strangers to each other, have our past injuries, all of them deep and important. Strangers who have the strength of deep identity, and who are not threatened with loss by society, are not as prone to reject the pain of the other. It is the deeply felt mortal threat to

existence that usually shuts off the possibility of healing, contrition, even forgiveness, more than pride or stubbornness, at least in my observations. In frustration, we label lack of contrition for mistakes as stupidity, stubbornness, arrogance and the like. But, in truth, we must understand the sense of mortal threat that lies at the bottom of an angry soul. It is this threat to the soul of the strange Other that we have insufficiently seen, heard and felt. And it does not matter whether that stranger is rich or poor, powerful or weak. The dangerous alienation is the same. We have not devised our strategies of peacemaking in such a way as to heal the mortal threat to identity which, in turn, creates virulent forms of sectarianism.

Thus the particular identity is not a challenge or threat to peaceful civilisation. On the contrary, it is increasingly attractive to people all over the world. It is sectarianism based on negative identity that is most deeply threatening, a kind of sectarianism that cannot see itself as a biblical stranger in the company of strangers, all inhabiting this earth before God, capable of loving and being beloved, capable of helping and being helped, capable of seeing the Divine in the strange Other, while holding fast to the depth of one's own unique, special love relationship with God.

## **Resolving Conflicts**

The theology of identity that I am proposing may offer much to the tragedies surrounding the conflict in Israel and Palestine, and especially the inner workings of Israeli society. Understanding this tragedy means recognising the role that sub-conflicts play in the perpetuation of the larger conflict. Often large human groups perpetuate a conflict in order to avoid facing problems that are even more terrifying than current conflicts. Secular Jewish Israel and religious Jewish Israel have been at war with each other for most of this century, but due to the convenient presence of the larger conflict with the Arab world, the war has been muted or stalemated. The fact is that anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the mixture of actual and perceived threats of hostile Arab states to Israeli existence have held together a people radically injured and confused by the events of the twentieth century. In addition, they are reeling, as we all are, from the advent of modern culture. Israel is experiencing a crisis in positive identity, and I would argue that Palestine has been experiencing it also. This leads to negative identity and often to a secret need to perpetuate the circumstances creating the negative identity, rather than face the deeper questions of who we are. Negative identity involves a need to abuse the stranger, emerging out of one's own experience of being a stranger. If the rule of deep identity of the stranger is 'love your neighbour as you love yourself' (Lev. 19:18), then the rule of superficial identity or negative identity is 'do unto others what they have done unto you, or before they do it unto you again'.

In Israel, the religious world and the secular, liberal world have an uncanny capacity to abuse each other and guarantee that there will be no real ability to create a society together. Thus these worlds are held together only by war with larger enemies. That is not to say that Israel has not had dangerous enemies; it has. But major parts of the electorate have perpetuated the existence of the enemy by the way in which they treat the Palestinians, without realising the deep injuries and identity crises that perpetuate this abuse.

I have tried in various ways to get each side of this sub-conflict to engage in basic conflict resolution gestures. I have especially tried to suggest conflict resolution measures that explicitly embrace and utilise all the cultures that are involved in the conflict. This is vital to the healing of the destructive element in sectarianism, and some of this work is going on in Israel, at least on the popular level. But even as the high-level peace processes with Arab and Palestinian leaders continue, deep religious rifts in both Jewish and Arab society extend a stubborn resistance to this process. This is the case despite the plain evidence that religiously motivated violence on both the Arab and the Jewish side, including bombings, random violence and assassination of high leaders, is one of the most blatant characteristics of the derailing of the Oslo accords. Why the resistance to facing the importance of religion? It has much to do with stubborn commitments on all sides to negative identities formed over against another. Furthermore, there is a fear of creating a future in which no side plays an undisputed hegemony over the culture. There is, I believe, a mortal fear of the future, because there is a mortal fear of the future of both secular and religious identities.

In addition to the secular/religious rift, it seems clear to outsiders that a flourishing culture in Israel will have to have Jewish elements and Arab elements, secular elements and religious elements. Israel will have no future without embracing the Jewish cultural and religious identity of its people. But there is also no future for an Israel that does not embrace the liberal values of civil rights, separation of synagogue and state, and freedom of religion. There is also no future for an Israel that does not embrace its indigenous culture, the culture of the Palestinians, and embrace Palestinians' role in the future of their own state, as well as in the future of Israel. Finally, there is no good future for a Palestinian state without the cultural understanding that its land is also dear on a religious level to Jewish people all over the world. Both countries will need to incorporate the love of the stranger, or Other, as social policy, making space, and even honouring the presence of the Other. This, essentially, is the embrace of the stranger, the acceptance of a marriage between the particular and the universal in the context of a civilised state of the future.

I remember once having a chance encounter with a young Jordanian Palestinian, whom I immediately liked. We engaged in conversation, and I

remember how much I wanted to escape my identity as a Jew and simply meet him beyond ethnic and religious identities, beyond the wars in which the people he loved killed the people that I loved. But as I devised a basic conflict resolution strategy, that is, as I thought about how to reach out to him, all of the Jewish religious values that I had been taught as a child kept coming to mind. I ran to get him a seat, because I remembered the rabbinic text that says, 'Who is honoured? He who honours his fellow human being.' As he said things in anger, that made me angry, I remembered the ancient advice, 'Do not approach a man in his hour of anger', and 'The key to wisdom is silence.' And when I had the opportunity to help him, but hesitated, the words of Exodus 23 sprang to mind, on helping an enemy with his burden. But, above all, as he sat before me and I looked into his eyes, I imagined what he must have looked like as a child, I imagined his parents, and then I dreamed of all the places in the Torah, where God speaks of all human beings as His children. All the anger in my heart melted, even despite myself. I realised that I met him as a stranger, as an Other, who is nevertheless beloved. And I made peace with him, not just as a homogenised, universal citizen of the planet, but mainly as a Jew in all my outrageous peculiarity, meeting him with all of his peculiarities, in the presence of the Eternal Stranger.

I have also come to realise that there are so many overt symbols of my identity in my religious life. Kosher and Sabbath restrictions, my blessings obligations and all the verses and texts running through my head, give structure and identity to my moral and cognitive universe. So when I meet the Other who is somewhat like me, when I meet the Other who has been my enemy, I easily embrace him. But when I am weak in my identity I deeply fear these meetings and usually fail at them. When my identity is strong then there is no mortal threat to my Jewish identity because the structure of my identity is clear. It frees my mind and heart to enter into the Other without fear of dissolution.

Each time I engage in difficult meetings with the Christian Other, for example, a voice inside me says that I am a traitor, stepping on the graves of millions of innocent Jews throughout history who were tortured, killed or made to live miserable lives simply because they would not utter the name Jesus as a name of God. I have to live with that voice always, and I see those poor Jewish victims before my eyes all the time; I feel it much more deeply than the anger I may have at the Islamic world, despite the past forty years. I have three choices in response to that voice. I can live a life of Jewish substance and spirituality and stay completely away from the Christian world. Or I can leave the Jewish world, follow this passion I have for peacemaking, and care for all of humanity, all the while living with the guilt of that voice. Or I can give as much nourishment to the boundaries of my Jewish identity as I can without losing my vision of the love of a stranger, learning to live with that mournful voice of parents and community inside, and hoping that over

time I will be able to embrace the angry voice inside as yet another beloved stranger.

The confusion I have just described inside my soul drives many of us towards no identity at all. By contrast, it is important to realise that war gives structure to identity in the absence of one, even for the best of us, even for the peacemakers. When war decreases, domestic violence increases, because the structure of identity is threatened. The answer to this is not less identity but more identity – an identity that embraces the Other in the spirit of the highest ideals of my culture or religion. But asking the questions, ‘Who would I be without the war? Could I cope with life without this conflict?’ becomes important. We all must ask these questions and reflect on our answers every day in order to keep conflict and war from becoming something we unconsciously perpetuate as a substitute identity.

Besides Israel, intractable conflicts involving religious identities are taking place in Bosnia, the former USSR, Sri Lanka, India, the United States, Canada and other places. Each situation requires its own answers. But the common underlying principle is that those committed to peace and broad liberal ideals may in fact be undermining their own goals by not listening to their adversaries and attempting to include them in a vision of the future. When adversaries, religious or otherwise, cannot envision themselves in the future, and if we have not tried mightily to help them envision themselves in that future, then violence seems like a viable option. It becomes a way of ‘going out in a blaze of glory’ as long as one expects to die anyway.

‘The boundary’, it seems, is a surprisingly important spiritual value and of profound importance sociologically as well. But the uses to which the boundary has been put in human history have been on the whole quite dismal. Conversely, the attempt at coercive nullification of boundaries has seen an equally evil history, to which the Jewish people can easily attest. The negotiation of the nature of the boundary, however, and the steady work on the guidelines of crossing the boundary – of embracing the stranger in all her particularity – is the key to the creation of deep and meaningful human identity.

The *ger* philosophy that I have suggested here is a theological framework for negotiating a position *vis-à-vis* the Other that makes neither the universalist, all-consuming error nor the particularist error of chauvinistic dehumanisation of the Other. It is a philosophy of seeing others and oneself as sojourners with God on this earthly plane. One loves the sojourner, joins him, but sees the boundary; and then, far from recoiling, becomes even more enamoured of the stranger by virtue of the boundary. The boundary makes one a lover and also beloved, offering love in its highest expression: as ultimate valuation of the other as an independent and treasured being. To summarise texts in both the Bible and the Koran, one thanks God and praises God for His manifold creation, for the creation of so many distinct beings and

peoples, who in their very differences speak to the aesthetic and moral genius of the Creator, whose only hope for an end to estrangement is in the love that He witnesses and partakes in between the many strangers and sojourners of this sacred earth.

# A Theology of Embrace for a World of Exclusion<sup>1</sup>

Miroslav Volf

In his recent memoirs, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Elie Wiesel called the poem quoted below ‘magnificent’.<sup>2</sup> It was written more than fifty years ago in Bucharest by a young Jewish poet little over twenty-five years of age. Listen to the unpredictable rhythms of its provocative metaphors and to the mixture of tenderness and brutality in the story it tells:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night  
we drink and we drink  
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped  
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes  
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair  
Margareta  
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling  
he whistles his hounds to come close  
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground  
he commands us play up for the dance ...

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland  
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink  
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye is blue  
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true  
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete  
he loses his hound on us grants us a grave in the air  
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus  
Deutschland  
dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith.

You might recognise in the dark music of this poetry the first and the last stanzas of what must be one of the most remarkable literary creations about

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was presented to the 1997 ‘Boundaries and Bonds’ conference, held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and organised by the ‘Moving Beyond Sectarianism’ project of the Irish School of Ecumenics.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 356.

the most infamous event in the twentieth century. The event is the Holocaust; the poem is Paul Celan's 'Deathfugue'.<sup>3</sup> Behind the outlandish lyric about digging graves 'in the air' and 'in the ground' and about 'playing up for the dance' lies a brutal reality. It was a common practice in Nazi concentration camps to order one group of prisoners to play or sing nostalgic tunes while others dug graves or were executed. Young German men cultivated enough to occupy themselves with writing and tender enough to daydream about their girlfriends' golden hair were masters of death: they committed mass murders in cold blood and were cynical enough to grace the atrocity with music.

The Holocaust may be unique in its perpetrators' combination of barbarity and cultivation, primitivism and sophistication; it may be unique in the sheer number of murders committed; and it may be unique in the single-mindedness and technological skill with which the Nazis directed genocidal intentions against a single people, the Jews. But in many respects, a holocaust is not an anomaly in the world we live in, not a violent intruder into the otherwise peaceful house of contemporary. Death is not just a blue-eyed master 'aus Deutschland'. Rivers of blood and mountains of corpses – most recently in Bosnia and Rwanda – are a horrifying testimony to the fact that in many places in our world, the most brutal forms of exclusion are the order of the day.

What is more, there are no signs that the practice of exclusion is a short dark tunnel with the bright light of social harmony shining at its end. Rapid population growth, diminishing resources, unemployment, migration to shanty cities, and lack of education are steadily increasing the pressure on the many social faultlines of our globe. In the wake of the demise of the bi-polar world defined by socialism in the East and capitalism in the West, the tectonic plates that underlie society are defined less by ideology than by culture. As Samuel Huntington argues, 'the faultlines between major civilisations – the broadest level of cultural identity people have – will be the lines along which future battles are fought'. Though we cannot predict exactly when and where social quakes will occur or how powerful they will be, we can be sure that the earth will shake. Conditions are ripe for more Rwandas and Bosnias. In many places in the world, the soil has been well prepared and the seed of the bitter fruit of exclusion has been profusely sown. Many a person will find her cup filled with the black milk of daybreak.

In this chapter I want, first, to look briefly at the practice and, more specifically, the character of exclusion. Second, I want to offer a vision of

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Celan, known for his Holocaust poetry, first published 'Deathfugue', or '*Todesfuge*', in German in a collection of poetry entitled 'Poppy and Memories', or *Mohn und Gedachnis* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt GmbH, 1952). Extracts cited are from John Felstiner, *Poet Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 31–2.

*Editors' Note:* Felstiner refers to the two characters as 'Margareta' and 'Shulamith' in English, but preserves Celan's 'Margarete' and 'Sulamith' when quoting the German original. The same convention is followed in the discussion below.



embrace inspired by the character of God as revealed on the cross of Christ. Third, by building on a story from Sarajevo, I will offer some reflections on what good, if any, a soft embrace can do in the harsh world of exclusion. In conclusion, I will return to Celan's Margarete and Shulamith.

## **The World of Exclusion**

The mad world of exclusion is too complex for me even to attempt to describe fully in the scope of this paper. I will concentrate on what one may call its inner logic, that is, on how we think and act as we exclude. I use the first-person plural when I say this because I believe the practice of exclusion is not just something that the evil and barbaric others do out there; exclusion is also what we, the good and the civilised people, do right here where we are. True, most of us do not 'whistle our Jews' and command them to sing while shovelling their own graves. Yet the tendency to exclude lurks in the dark regions of all our hearts, seeking an opportunity to find a victim.

As the term 'ethnic cleansing' – the most powerful recent metaphor for exclusion – suggests, the logic of exclusion is a logic of purity. Blood must be pure: German blood alone should run through German veins, free from all non-Aryan contamination. Territory must be pure: Serbian soil must belong to Serbs alone, cleansed of all non-Serbian intruders. Our origins must be pure: we must go back to the pristine purity of our linguistic, religious, or cultural past, shake away the dirt of otherness collected on our march through history. The goal must be pure: we must let the light of reason shine into every dark corner, or we must create a world of total virtue so as to render all moral effort unnecessary. The origins and the goal, the inside and the outside, everything must be pure: plurality and heterogeneity must give way to homogeneity and the unity of one people, one culture, one language, one book, one goal. Anything that does not fall under this all-encompassing 'one' is considered ambivalent, polluting and dangerous. It must be removed. To have a pure world, we push others out. To be pure within, we eject otherness from inside ourselves. Implicit in the drive for purity is a whole programme for arranging our social worlds – from the inner worlds of our selves to the outer worlds of our families, neighbourhoods and nations. It is a dangerous programme because it is totalitarian and governed by a logic that reduces, ejects and segregates.

In the extreme cases, we kill and drive out. To ensure that the vengeance of the dead will not be visited upon us in their progeny, we destroy their habitations and their cultural monuments. Like the robbers in the story of the Good Samaritan, we strip, beat and dump people somewhere outside our own proper space, leaving them half-dead (Luke 10:30). This is exclusion by elimination, which was at work with such shameless brutality in Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Third Reich. The more subtle side of exclusion by

elimination is exclusion by assimilation. You can survive, even thrive, among us, if you become like us; you can keep your life, if you give up your identity. Using the notions developed by Claude Levi-Strauss in *A World on the Wane*, we can say that exclusion by assimilation rests on a deal: we will refrain from vomiting you out if you let us swallow you up.<sup>4</sup>

The second, more benign, strategy of exclusion is to assign others the status of inferior beings. We make sure that they cannot live in our neighbourhoods, get certain kinds of jobs, receive equal pay or honour; they must stay in their proper place, which is to say, the place we have assigned for them. As Lucas Beauchamp's neighbours put it in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, they must be 'niggers' first, and then we may be prepared to treat them as human beings.<sup>5</sup> We subjugate them so we can exploit them in order to increase our wealth or simply inflate our egos. This is exclusion by domination, spread all over the globe in more or less diffuse forms but existing most glaringly in the caste system in India and in the former apartheid policies of South Africa.

A third form of exclusion is becoming increasingly prevalent not only in the way in which the rich of the West and North relate to the poor of the South but in the way that suburbs relate to inner cities, or the jet-setting 'creators of high value' relate to the rabble beneath them. It is exclusion as abandonment. Like the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, we simply cross to the other side and pass by, minding our own business (Luke 10:31). If others neither have goods we want nor can perform services we need, we make sure to keep them at a safe distance. We close ourselves off from them so that their emaciated and tortured bodies can make no inordinate claims on us.

The practice of exclusion goes hand-in-hand with a whole array of emotional responses to the other, ranging from hatred to indifference. Before Israeli Prime Minister Itzaak Rabin was murdered in 1995, right-wing Israeli demonstrators carried large posters portraying him like Yasser Arafat, with *keffiyeh* on his head and blood dripping from his hands. The image was designed to generate hate, that revulsion for the other that feeds on the sense of harm or wrong suffered and is fuelled by the humiliation of not having been able to prevent it. Some of the most brutal acts of exclusion depend on hatred, and if the common shared history of individuals and communities does not contain enough reasons to hate, masters of exclusion will rewrite those histories and fabricate injuries in order to manufacture hatred.

Strangely enough, the havoc wreaked by indifference may be even greater than that brought by hatred as it is felt, lived and practised. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman notes that the mass destruction of Jews in

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<sup>4</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *A World on the Wane* (trans. John Russell; New York: Criterion Books, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Random House, 1948), 18.

the Second World War ‘was accompanied not by the uproar of emotions, but the dead silence of unconcern’.<sup>6</sup> Especially within a larger geographical frame of reference, where others live at a distance from us, indifference can be more deadly than hate. Whereas the fire of hatred flares up in proximity to the other and then dies down, we can sustain cold indifference over time, especially in contemporary societies. I turn my eyes away and I go about my own business. Numbed by the seeming inevitability of exclusionary practices taking place outside of my will, I start to view horror and my implication in it as normal. I reason that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho will always be littered with people beaten and left half dead; I can pass by – I *must* pass by – without much concern. The indifference that led to the prophecy of a road strewn with bodies carries within it its own fulfilment.

### A Vision of Embrace

Then how should we respond to the practice of exclusion? In my book *Exclusion and Embrace*, I have suggested that as Christians we should respond by developing a theology and a practice of embrace.<sup>7</sup> But what is embrace? Let me try to explicate the meaning of this metaphor by briefly exploring a notion that is central to both Scripture and modern political philosophy: that of a covenant. And in order to get a handle on the covenant, I need to look briefly at the idea of ‘social contracts’.

Political liberalism, which conceives life as essentially about individual self-interest, has promoted the contract as the master metaphor for social life. Plagued by fear of harm and driven by desire for comfort, individuals enter into contracts that favour them with security and gain. Contracts let each person achieve with the help of others what none could achieve alone. Civil society emerges as the offspring of such contractual interaction. But are the shoulders of contract broad enough to carry the social burden placed on it?

The social utility of contracts is indisputable; without them, life in modern societies would be nearly impossible. But will contract do as the master metaphor for social life as a whole? Does it suggest a vision of how we *should* live, a vision of the good life? To the contrary, along with a chorus of other thinkers, Robert Bellah has argued in his best-selling book *Habits of the Heart* that contractual relations render all commitments unstable and undermine social life. In order to counter the damage created by a contractual

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<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

understanding of human relations, he suggested we need to retrieve the covenant as the alternative master metaphor for social life.<sup>8</sup> With its origins in the world of religious commitments rather than business transactions, covenantal relations better express the communal and moral dimensions of human life.

The understanding of social life as covenantal has its roots in early Calvinism's so-called Calvinist monarchomachs – the fighters against monarchy. For them, the covenant between human beings was based on and preserved by God's covenant with them, and the covenant's moral foundations were supplied by the covenant-making God. The duties of human beings as God's covenant partners were expressed in the 'moral law', the Decalogue, which mapped a moral order that extended as far as the rule of the one God did and encompassed the whole of human community. So 'covenant' became a useful political category because it was first a moral category, and it became a moral category because it was at its core a theological category. It embodied the understanding that all human covenants, from family and neighbourhood to state, must be subordinate to God's inclusive covenant that encompasses the whole of humanity and is guided by substantive values.

I want to suggest, however, that for Christian reflection on social issues the new covenant of Jesus Christ is much more significant than the original covenant of God with God's people. First, the new covenant was a response to a persistent pattern of humans breaking the original covenant; because Israel has broken God's covenant, God offered a new one. In social terms, then, a covenant emerges from a backdrop of enmity, understood not as some fictive state of nature, but as a pervasive social dynamic between the people who already belong to the covenant but fail to keep it. Second, the new covenant raises the fundamental issue of how to transcribe the covenant's moral demands from 'tablets of stone' onto 'hearts of flesh' (Jer. 31:31ff.). In social terms, the new covenant suggests that we need more than rules and regulations. Rather, it is essential for covenant partners to be shaped by the covenants, they have formed so that they do not betray and tyrannise one another.

If Christian theologians want to explore the social meaning of the new covenant, they need to turn to the cross of Jesus Christ, on which they see what God did to renew the covenant that humanity broke. We can learn three things from the cross about how to renew a covenant: how to strengthen covenants that are fragile, repair those that are broken, and keep covenants from being completely undone.

First, on the cross God renews the covenant by *making space* for humanity in God's very self. The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

does not want to be a God without humanity; God suffers humanity's violence in order to embrace it. What could this divine 'making-space-in-oneself' imply for our mutual relations?

I argued earlier that unlike a contract, a covenant is not simply a relationship of mutual utility but of moral commitment. We have to go a step further, however, for covenant partners are not simply moral agents who have certain duties to one another within the framework of a long-standing relationship. Precisely because a covenant is lasting, it does not allow us merely to be separate individuals, unaffected by one another or even proud of our independence. To the contrary, the very identity of each of us is formed through our relation to others. I, Miroslav Volf, am who I am not only because I am distinct from Judy Gundry-Volf, my wife, but also because over the past fifteen years I have been profoundly shaped by a relationship with her. Similarly, to be 'black' in the United States means to be in a certain relationship – all too often, an unpleasant one – to 'whites'. Our identities are shaped by others with whom we are in relationship.

For these reasons, renewing a covenant asks us to transcend the perspective of our own side and take into account the complementary view of the other. Even more, renewing a covenant means attending to shifts in the other's identity, to make space for the changing other in ourselves and to be willing to renegotiate our own identity in interaction with those of others. Each person in a covenant must understand her own behaviour and identity as complementary to the behaviour and identity of her covenantal partners. Without such complementarity and the continual readjustment of dynamic identities, moral bonds alone will not guard against the stresses a pluralistic context puts onto a covenantal relationship. Sustaining and renewing covenants require those involved to mutually work to 'make space for the other in the self' and to reshape the self in light of the other.

Second, renewing a covenant entails *self-giving*. On the cross, the new covenant was made 'in blood' (Luke 22:20). Notice that the blood of the new covenant was not the blood of a third party (an animal), shed to establish a fictive blood relation between the parties of the covenant and dramatise the consequences of breaking it. In this respect the new covenant is profoundly different from the first covenant God made with Abraham. In Genesis 15, Abraham cut the sacrificial animals in two, and 'a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch' – both symbols of theophany – passed between the halves (15:17). This unique ritual act performed by God was a pledge that God would rather 'die', much like the animals through which God passed, than break the covenant. The thought of a living God dying is difficult enough – as difficult as the thought of a faithful God breaking the covenant. At the foot of the cross, however, that difficulty widens into unbelievability. For the narrative of the cross is not a self-contradictory story about the God who died because God broke the covenant, but a truly incredible story about the God

who did what God should have been neither able nor willing to do: to die because God's covenantal partner, humanity, broke the covenant.

The blood in which the new covenant was made is the blood of self-giving, even self-sacrifice. One party had broken the covenant, and the other suffered the breach because it would not let the covenant be undone. If such innocent suffering strikes us as unjust, in an important sense it *is* unjust. Yet injustice is precisely what it takes to renew a covenant. One of the biggest obstacles to repairing broken covenants in families, neighbourhoods and nations is that broken covenants invariably produce deep disagreements over what constitutes a breach and who is responsible for it. Partly because of the desire to shirk the responsibilities that accepting guilt involves, those who break a covenant do not or will not recognise that they have broken it. In a world of clashing perspectives and strenuous self-justifications, in a world of crumbling commitments and aggressive animosities, covenants are kept and renewed because those who, from their perspective, have not broken the covenant are willing to do the hard work of repairing it. Such work is self-sacrificial; something of the individual or communal self dies performing it. Yet the self by no means perishes, but is renewed as the truly communal self, fashioned in the image of the triune God who will not be without the other.

Third, the new covenant is *eternal*. God's self-giving on the cross is a consequence of the fact that the covenant is everlasting. And the covenant is everlasting because God is unable to give up the partner who has broken it. 'How can I hand you over, O Israel?' Hosea's God asks rhetorically, with 'compassion grown warm and tender' (Hos. 11:8). Bound to Israel with 'bonds of love', God cannot hand over Israel; God's commitment is irrevocable and God's covenant indestructible. Similarly, while a political covenant may be dissolved, a broader social covenant is strictly unconditional and therefore 'eternal'. It can be broken, but it cannot be undone. Every breach of such a covenant still takes place within its ongoing life, and the struggle for justice and truth on behalf of the victims of the breach takes place within that context. Nobody is outside a social covenant, and no deed is imaginable that would put someone beyond its borders. The will to give ourselves to others and to welcome them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, comes before any judgement about them other than that of simply identifying them as human. The will to embrace precedes any truth about others and any construction of our sense of justice. This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable. It transcends our efforts to map good and evil onto our social world.

Here, then, is a vision of a new covenant that is foremost a vision of embrace: to embrace, we need to keep readjusting our complementary identities, we need to keep repairing covenants even if we have not broken them, and we need to keep refusing to let covenants ever be undone. This is exactly what the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son did when he embraced

his returning son. God's new covenant was God's embrace of the humanity that keeps breaking the covenant; our covenants, modelled on God's new one, are our way of embracing one another – even our enemies.

### **Embrace Instead of Exclusion**

Someone might object that the practice of embrace – never giving up on the other, sacrificing the self, and cultivating a willingness to rethink our thoughts and reshape our very identities in response to the other – will be not only inefficient but positively harmful in the harsh world of exclusion. Let me respond by commenting on a story found in one of the most profound reflections on the war in Bosnia, Zlatko Dizdarevic's *Sarajevo: A War Journal*. Here is the story as he tells it:

In Sarajevo a three-year-old girl playing outside her home is hit by a sniper's bullet. Her horrified father carries her to the hospital. Bleeding, she hovers between life and death. Only after her father, a big hulk of a man, has found a doctor to care for her does he allow himself to burst into tears. The television camera records his words. These words, every one of them belong in an anthology of humanism, helplessness, and forgiveness at its most extreme – not so much forgiving the criminal who shot a three-year-old child, as forgiving the wild beasts for being wild beasts, for being debased by an evil that destroys every human impulse. Two of his sentences give rise to thoughts that will linger long past today or tomorrow. The first comes when the stricken father invites the unknown assassin to *have a cup of coffee with him so that he [the assassin] can tell him, like a human being, what has brought him to do such a thing*. Then he says, aware that this question may not elicit any human response: 'One day her tears will catch up with him ...'

After relating this story, Dizdarevic offers the following comment, surprising in its negative assessment of the father's offer and of its implications for the future of Bosnia:

There is absolutely nothing to be done for this nation. It will never attain justice and happiness if it cannot bring itself to recognise an executioner as an executioner, a murderer as a murderer, a criminal as a criminal. If the most barbaric act imaginable in this war, a sniper shooting at a three-year-old girl playing in front of her own home, elicits only an invitation to a cup of coffee and hope for forgiveness, then Bosnia-Herzegovina doesn't stand much chance to survive.<sup>9</sup>

The murderous act of deliberately shooting a three-year-old, explicable only in terms of the radical evil of the perpetrator, demands a strict and unmerciful punishment, not an offer of understanding and forgiveness, reasons Dizdarevic. Wild beasts – those with every human impulse destroyed by evil –

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<sup>9</sup> Zlatko Dizdarevic, *Sarajevo: A War Journal* (New York: Fromm International, 1993), 15–16, original emphasis.

must be tracked down and then either killed or driven out, not invited to participate in a ritual of friendship. Without punishment of the evildoers and banishment of wild beasts, argues Dizdarevic, Bosnia will attain neither justice nor happiness. From this perspective, that big hulk of a man who wants to share a cup of coffee with the assassin was a sentimental fool who, if he had things his way, would have hurled any nation into perdition.

I want to propose a different reading of this story than the one Dizdarevic offers. I am not about to suggest that the executioner should not be recognised and named as executioner. Murder cannot simply be disregarded. Truth must be told, and justice must be established. Neither am I about to suggest that the perpetrators should not be stopped, that they should be allowed to continue with their atrocities until they are 'somehow' persuaded by the power of forgiveness. The instruments of evil must be taken out of their hands. But I do want to suggest that the best way – the Christian way – to respond to iron and blood is not with iron and blood. The hope for Bosnia, indeed the hope for a whole world infested by the evil of exclusion, lies precisely in men and women who, despite the outrage committed against them, will muster enough strength to want to invite the perpetrator for a cup of coffee and inquire of him, as a human being, what has 'brought him to do such a thing'. The hope of Bosnia lies in those who believe in the power of tears to catch up with the enemy because they are persuaded, as E.M. Cioran puts it, that tears are not 'swallowed up by the earth' but that 'by paths unknown to us, they all go upwards'. The hope of Bosnia and of our whole world, wrecked by exclusion, lies in those who, despite enduring humiliation and suffering, have not given up on the will to embrace the enemy.

Why should one start walking the difficult road toward embrace in the midst of raging exclusion? Because we must resist being sucked into the vortex of inhumanity. 'The rifle butt in the back', writes Dizdarevic elsewhere in the book, 'shatters everything civilisation has ever accomplished, removes all finer human sentiments, and wipes out any sense of justice, compassion, and forgiveness.'<sup>10</sup> If the rifle butt in the back creates inhumanity, then the hope for Bosnia cannot lie in a rifle butt in the back of the perpetrator. For this would only ensure that a sense 'of justice, compassion, and forgiveness' will forever be replaced by the rage of revenge and hatred. Though Dizdarevic seems to expect 'justice and happiness' from unforgiveness, at times he is aware of the way in which people who find themselves helpless and enraged can become caught in self-fulfilling cycles of hatred and fear. He writes, 'But what we'll neither forgive nor forget is that they have broken what is the best in us; they have taught us to hate.'<sup>11</sup> As hate leads to unforgiveness and unforgiveness reinforces the hate, the downward spiral of despair keeps

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<sup>10</sup> Dizdarevic, *Sarajevo*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Dizdarevic, *Sarajevo*, 34.



turning. The hope of Bosnia, the hope of our world, lies with men and women who are determined to fight evil every step of the way while at the same time refusing to let the rifle butt do its work on their souls after it is finished doing its work on their bodies.

The refusal of victims to let violence committed against them contaminate their souls must be one of the most difficult and most heroic acts a human being is capable of. Dizdarevic slights it by describing the response of the father in his story as ‘only an invitation to a cup of coffee and hope for forgiveness’. Does he think that the father does not condemn the act? Does he think that no rage had to be attended to before the invitation could be offered? Does he not see what a superhuman effort it would take to look the assassin in the eyes and ask ‘why’ instead of letting the flood of legitimate accusations flow? Without such heroism, which seeks to offer forgiveness without dispensing it glibly, strives to establish communion without condoning evil, and reflects the very heart of the triune God, we may be doomed, in Paul Celan’s words, to drink the black milk of daybreak, to ‘drink it at evening’, to ‘drink it at midday and morning’, to ‘drink it at night’.

### Margareta and Shulamith

‘Deathfugue’ ends with the following lines: ‘dein goldenes Haar Margarete/ dein aschenes Haar Sulamith’. Margareta is the blonde-haired German girl – the romantic ideal drawn from Goethe’s poetry – of whom the SS executioner tenderly daydreams. Shulamith is no ‘ash blond but the “black and comely” maiden in the Song of Songs ... Shulamith is the beloved par excellence and is seen as the Jewish people itself,’ writes Celan’s biographer John Felstiner. At the end of his comments on ‘Deathfugue’, he notes that when Celan twins Shulamith and Margareta, ‘nothing can reconcile them. Celan’s word *aschenes* [the ashen hair of Shulamith] tells why’.<sup>12</sup>

No one can blame Celan for leaving Margareta and Shulamith unreconciled, side-by-side, as symbols of the unbridgeable gulf between the Jews and the Germans created by unspeakable evil. When he wrote ‘Deathfugue’ in 1947, the ovens that had sent millions of his compatriots, including his parents, to their ‘grave in the air’ had barely cooled down. But what about followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah who, as the Apostle Paul writes, died for us, the ungodly and the enemies? ‘Deathfugue’ is a kind of mission statement in reverse, a poetic narration of what we do when, instead of seeking to anticipate a world in which love of God and of neighbour will reign, we are bent on anticipating hell. A testimony of atrocity and grief, ‘Deathfugue’ is a powerful reminder that in a world of exclusion – a world we

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<sup>12</sup> John Felstiner, *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, 38.

ourselves are part of and have helped create – we must engage in the arduous task of reconciliation.

Reconciliation between God and humanity is at the heart of the Gospel we proclaim; reconciliation between human beings estranged on account of injustice, deception and violence must be at the centre of the mission we pursue. This difficult task of reconciliation should command our imagination, our intelligence and our resources. We should not rest until Margareta and Shulamith, blacks and whites, Bosnians, Croats and Serbs have extended their arms to each other in joyful embrace.

# Islam and Reconciliation: A Hermeneutical and Sociological Approach

David Herbert

The Believers are a single Brotherhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers: and fear Allah, that ye may receive mercy.

(Qur'an, Sura 49:10)

Allah fills with peace and faith the heart of one who swallows his anger, even though he is in a position to give vent to it.

(Qur'an, Sura 42:37)

The rejection of non-violent methods is [partly] related to the threat associated with the global invasion of Islamic communities by modernization, including industrial and urban lifestyles. Unfortunately, in the minds of many Muslims and non-Muslims [in the Middle East], non-violence is associated with Western Christian philosophy. As a result, they assume that a 'de-authentication' of Islamic culture and tradition will ensue from a Muslim embrace of non-violence. Underlying such an approach is a misconception that conflates non-violence with Christianity and modernization.<sup>1</sup>

I have ... never heard a phrase used in Arabic that would translate, however idiomatically, as 'the system failed' – whether it be applied to the legal system or any other part of the political structure. Indeed, the idea of institutional failure is virtually unimaginable when persons ... take up all the space of institutions.<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the mobilisation of Islam as a political ideology by a range of state and non-state groups across the world, and the increased suspicion and hostility towards Islam heightened by these events, one approaches the topic of 'Islam and reconciliation' with some trepidation. In this chapter I aim to do three things. First, I will consider some ways in which Islamic texts are used in the contemporary Muslim-majority world, and, in this context, explore some of the hermeneutic arguments that have developed among predominantly Muslim scholars over texts which bear on attitudes towards and understandings of reconciliation amongst Muslims. As the first two quotations make clear, there are resources at the heart of the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 121.

<sup>2</sup> L. Rosen, *The Culture of Islam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 71.

Islamic textual tradition which appear to be highly supportive of an ethos of reconciliation; but there is dispute over the scope of applicability and meaning of these texts in view of the broader scriptural tradition and conditions of contemporary interpretation.

Second, I will consider some examples of reconciling practices in contemporary Muslim communities, both those of a more traditional nature and those influenced or instigated by Western agencies. In reality these two sets of practices overlap, but it is important to consider them separately from an analytic standpoint. As indicated in the third quotation above, this is partly because of the kind of obstacles that inhibit adoption of methods perceived as Western in origin, and partly because the character of some traditional practices raises questions about their suitability in contemporary contexts. As one participant in a traditional third-party mediation process in Gaza put it: 'You can be certain that the outcome is not going to be in favour of the poor, even if justice requires it.'<sup>3</sup>

Third, I will consider these arguments and practices against a broader socio-cultural background of arguments about the character and structure of Muslim communities and societies, and about the relationship between Islam, civil society, democracy and human rights. If reconciliation is fundamentally a social practice, that is, something enacted in the spaces and connections between individuals, communities and nations, then teasing out these relationships is fundamental to developing an understanding of what reconciliation can mean in Muslim societies and in situations involving Muslim participants. I have described the approach here as both hermeneutical and sociological, because I believe that it is important to understand both the meaning of reconciliation for social actors involved, and the cultural and structural constraints acting on them.

One point of particular importance brought to light by recent ethnographic work is that whereas it may once have been assumed that patterns of social order, authority and meaning associated with traditional Muslim societies (such as tribalism, charismatic religious leadership and Sufi religious practices) would inevitably be weakened by modernisation, it now appears that such patterns and practices are much more capable of adapting to modern conditions than was once thought. Hence the range of possible trajectories for cultural traditions (and hence patterns of intercultural transaction) contingent on modernisation has greatly increased. In these circumstances, reconciliation cannot be assumed to mean convergence on Western cultural norms of, for example, individual human rights, the bearer of which is a self readily divisible from his or her social roles. This is because such a conception of the self has limited influence in Muslim-majority societies, even ones strongly influenced by urbanisation and other aspects of

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<sup>3</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 207.

modernisation.<sup>4</sup> As the final quotation above suggests, social processes of reconciliation may need to be thought about differently in highly personalised cultures. However, this kind of generalisation about cultures is also problematic.

This is clearly a lot of ground to cover in a single chapter, making the risk of over-simplification considerable. Muslim-majority societies are not uniform, and many Muslims now live in Western countries where they are a minority. Many of their assumptions relevant to their understandings of reconciliation – the social and political role of religion, the scope of private choice, and of obligations to kinship networks – are influenced by that context, whether in the direction of convergence, reaction or various forms of hybrid. Given the global influence of modern systems, institutions and connectivity, not least amongst migrant groups, distinctions between West and non-West are also problematic, as many scholars have argued.<sup>5</sup> In particular, generalisations about cultural systems – such as the absence of the differentiated self, personalisation of social networks and problems of building depersonalised institutions, as found by Rosen in his studies of North African Muslim-majority societies – appear to run counter to universal humanist assumptions that arguably underlie much work in reconciliation studies. They may smack of the kind of cultural essentialism famously attacked by Said.<sup>6</sup>

However, a range of ethnographic studies, both of Muslim culture in general and of peace-building activities in particular, continue to throw up evidence of persistent and evolving cultural difference, as well as increasing recognition of and ambivalence towards Western norms such as human rights and gender equality.<sup>7</sup> Thus we simply must find ways to deal with this mottled pattern of both universality and difference, regardless of perceptions of political correctness.

First, then, I turn to an examination of some of the ways and contexts in which Islamic textual sources are currently interpreted, and hence to a consideration of resources for reconciliation in the Islamic textual tradition.

### Contexts for the Interpretation of Islamic Texts

The major textual sources of Islam are the Qur'an and *hadith* (traditions), especially traditions about the Prophet (*sunna*). The former consists of

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<sup>4</sup> See Rosen, *The Culture of Islam*, and G. Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> R. King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> K. Dwyer, *Arab Voices: the Human Rights Debate in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1991); A. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

revelations to Muhammad and was collated to reach its final textual form within thirty years or so of his death.<sup>8</sup> The *hadith* were passed on by oral and written traditions, and collated into major collections about 250–300 years after the death of the Prophet.<sup>9</sup> These collectors established a system for discerning the authenticity of this vast collection of material based on the reliability of the chain of transmission (*isnad*) from the Prophet or his companions. The Qur'an and *sunna* are two of four recognised sources of Islamic law (*sharia*) in Sunni tradition, the others being *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy from the former two sources) and *ijma* ('consensus'), which has for most of history been understood as the consensus of religious scholars (*ulama*), who issue *fatawa*, 'legal judgements' (or *fatwas* in post-Rushdie Anglicised form), on controversial issues.

Historically the *ulama* have tended to be supportive of the state while retaining a certain amount of independence from it, an autonomy materially based (as with medieval Christian monasticism) on property endowments (*waqf*). But since the expansion of the modern state, often including much nationalisation of property, governments have had more direct influence over the *ulama*, and have often sought to use them to legitimise state action. This process of co-option has somewhat undermined their credibility, perhaps especially amongst the more Western-influenced elite.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, the absence of a central religious authority (compared with Rome for Roman Catholicism) has also weakened the resistance of the *ulama* to state influence (although Al-Azhar university in Cairo has played a significant transnational leadership role in the Sunni world, and also Qom in the Shi'ite world). Recent surveys in some societies enable us to gauge the extent of erosion of confidence in the *ulama*. In fact, in spite of increased criticism, the *ulama* remain quite widely respected across Muslim societies, depending on national and local political conditions. A recent study in the three most populous Muslim-majority societies found that just over half of respondents in Egypt and Indonesia (53 and 55 per cent, respectively) and 40 per cent in Pakistan expressed 'a lot of trust' in the *ulama*, while only about a fifth (19, 18 and 21 per cent, respectively) said they had 'no trust' in them.<sup>11</sup>

However, while public trust in the *ulama* may remain fairly high (and this must be seen in a context in which the credibility of state institutions has been substantially undermined), the *ulama*'s monopoly on the interpretation of

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<sup>8</sup> A. Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. Volume 1: The Formative Period* (London: Routledge, 1990), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Rippin, *Muslims*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> I. Abu-Rabi, 'A Post-September 11 Critical Assessment of Modern Islamic History', in I. Markham and I. Abu-Rabi (eds), *11 September: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 32–3.

<sup>11</sup> R. Hassan, *Faithlines: Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 158.

Islam's sacred texts has been considerably eroded and subjected to a variety of challenges. Thus modernist critics have argued that the *ulama's* traditional education ill equips them to face the challenges of the modern world.<sup>12</sup> Feminist scholars such as the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi have acquired knowledge of the *hadith* tradition and used it to challenge the basis of popular sayings used to limit the public role of women.<sup>13</sup> But most significantly, unprecedented levels of literacy, a state education which teaches children to read Islamic tradition as a source of practical knowledge, the growth of private mosques and the spread of communications technologies which enable the rapid spread of a range of views and are difficult to regulate have cumulatively produced a proliferation of interpretations of these sources.<sup>14</sup> In a process analogous to the Protestant Reformation in Christianity, each person becomes their own interpreter, and a range of views are able to become popular, or at least influential for some. As one commentator writes, 'The upshot of all these changes is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Islamic authority has badly fragmented and competing *fatawa* [legal opinions] are flying thick and fast.'<sup>15</sup>

One notorious example of the exercise of this interpretative freedom and opportunity for dissemination is the story of Muhammed Abd al-Salam al-Faraj, a self-styled handyman preacher in a family-built mosque in Cairo's slums, who produced a pamphlet in the late 1970s. This simplified the argument of Islamic radical Sayyid Qutb who posited that unjust Muslim rulers should be regarded as illegitimate, and developed its own, based on a novel reading of a thirteenth-century Islamic scholar ibn Taimiyya. Faraj drew the conclusion that 'We have to establish the rule of God's religion in our country first ... There is no doubt that the first battlefield for *jihad* is the extermination of these infidel leaders.'<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the pamphlet, a young army officer, Islambuli, approached Faraj with a plot to assassinate Anwar Sadat, Egypt's president since 1970. On 26 September 1981, Islambuli and three accomplices halted an armoured car they were parading in past the President, and hurled grenades supplied by Faraj at Sadat, killing him and several of his entourage.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Abu-Rabi, 'A Post-September 11 Critical Assessment of Modern Islamic History', 35.

<sup>13</sup> F. Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 1–15.

<sup>14</sup> G. Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998); E. Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> C. Murphy, *Passion for Islam: Shaping the Modern Middle East: The Egyptian Experience* (London: Scribner, 2002), 197–8.

<sup>16</sup> A. Shadid, *The Legacy of the Prophet* (Oxford: Westview, 2002), 76.

<sup>17</sup> Shadid, *The Legacy of the Prophet*, 78.

Islamic textual sources are then open to interpretations that legitimise violence against the state. On the other hand, they are also used to support violence on behalf of the state (at least by a Muslim ruler), and, as we shall see, to support nonviolent approaches to conflict. This openness of ancient textual sources, and the success of political groups of all persuasions in co-opting them, has led one sceptical commentator to argue that ‘No ... essential Islam exists: as one Iranian thinker put it, Islam is a sea in which it is possible to catch any fish one wants ... [T]he answer as to why this or that interpretation [is] put on Islam resides ... not in the religion and its texts but in the contemporary needs of those articulating an Islamic politics.’<sup>18</sup>

This context is important for assessing the potential for these sources to be used as a resource for reconciliation. However, I would argue that while textual sources underdetermine contemporary meanings – or you can argue with interpreters who fundamentally disagree until the cows come home, and never secure agreement – this means neither that all hermeneutics are pointless, nor that texts are simply the unresisting victims of their interpreters. Rather, making the hermeneutical argument for nonviolent, reconciliation-friendly readings matters because hermeneutical arguments, albeit indirectly, have social consequences. In addition, texts offer what might be articulated as a kind of ‘resistance’ to their interpreters; they are not infinitely plastic, and they offer a hermeneutical horizon of images, tropes and stories which subtly influence their readers even if they do not determine particular readings.

Furthermore, Halliday’s scepticism is expressed in an international context in which powerful voices both in the West and in the Muslim-majority world argue the exact opposite. That is, they advocate ‘essentialist’ concepts of Islam, meaning they support the idea that the tradition has one single correct meaning or position on any matter, and that all other interpretations are deviant. Essentialist tendencies in the West include media presentations of Islam as a homogeneous ‘Other’, especially in the post-Cold War period.<sup>19</sup> The increasing dominance of television as a global communication medium, and its tendency to favour clear, simple presentation of information over complex argument, leads to a propensity to reinforce existing stereotypes. There have been attempts to counter this tendency by presenting a diverse picture of Islam as, for example, the British media has done since *The Satanic Verses* controversy (1988–90). But the fact that conflict is often more ‘newsworthy’ than cooperation means that images of conflict tend to outnumber and outweigh more harmonious images and stories.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the mass media,

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<sup>18</sup> F. Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2000), 134.

<sup>19</sup> E. Said, *Covering Islam* (London: Penguin, 1997 [1981]).

<sup>20</sup> T. Liebes, *Reporting the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1997).



international relations and popular philosophy literatures also tend to oversimplify the diversity of Islamic groups.<sup>21</sup>

In Muslim-majority societies essentialist voices include authoritarian governments keen to assert official versions of Islam, and Islamists – a broad term denoting those who argue that a return to Islam is central to Muslim revival in all areas of life – keen to challenge their authority. States have tended to use their control of the mass media to reinforce their message, with Islamist groups countering through ‘micro media’, such as videos and audio tapes. Recently, rapidly expanding satellite networks such as al-Jazeera, founded in 1996, have increased access to television for Islamist voices – witness the broadcast of bin Laden’s videos – hence Arab audiences’ access to Arabic and other language media sources from across the region and internationally.<sup>22</sup> However, in spite of this diversification, Islamist and state sources predominate, and both tend to convey stereotypical images of the West.

Yet accepting that there are strong forces favouring an over-unified presentation of Islam is not the same as embracing Halliday’s apparent position: that Islam is purely at the mercy of its interpreters and exerts no shaping force at all on the modern politics pursued in its name. Rather, between essentialist readings and total relativisation of its meanings, it is important to articulate a position which asserts that there are a plurality of possible readings of the Islamic textual tradition, including strands that strongly support a reconciling ethos. Hence, acknowledging that there are many Muslim voices and histories, and that the presentation of Islam both in the West and the Muslim-majority world is prone to bias and distortion, I shall attempt to present a balanced view of a small sample of Islamic textual traditions relevant to the topic of reconciliation.

Abu-Nimer sees three main strands of interpretation in a rapidly growing academic literature ‘that addresses the question of whether and how Islam as a religion supports principles and values of non-violence, peace and war’.<sup>23</sup> The first group sees Islamic tradition as basically war-like, and emphasises military interpretations of the concept of *jihad*. Some of these commentators, like Gilles Kepel and Bernard Lewis, have been quite influential amongst Western audiences.<sup>24</sup> A second group argues that Islam only legitimises the use of violence under quite clearly defined conditions, and this literature

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<sup>21</sup> S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); P. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (London: Norton, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> M. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994); B. Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003).

tends to argue for a position approximating to the just war tradition in Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Although the concept is not necessarily central when thinking about Islam and reconciliation, the issue of *jihad* dominates the literature; its proper interpretation is likely to be in the background of many discussions, and so warrants some consideration here. Finally, a third group of scholars argue for a strong nonviolent, reconciliation-supportive strand to the tradition.

### ***Jihad* and the Problematic Assumption of Muslim Political Domination**

The concept of *jihad* ('struggle') is central to Islamic legitimisation of the use of force, and has been subject to a range of interpretations. While discussion in this section will focus on the external meanings of *jihad* which sanction the use of physical force, it should be noted that *jihad* also presents an internal imperative to overcome temptation, develop spiritual life and struggle for social justice without physical conflict. In this latter sense *jihad* can be a powerful resource not only for nonviolent resistance but for reconciliation, especially in so far as the latter involves a struggle to overcome one's desire for vengeance and struggles to make peace.

Interpretations of the external *jihad* range from an insistence that *jihad* is properly only a defensive war launched with the aim of 'establishing justice, equity and protecting basic human rights'<sup>26</sup> to the view that it is properly understood as 'armed struggle for the defence *or* advancement of Muslim power ... until all the world either adopts the Muslim faith or submits to Muslim rule'.<sup>27</sup> Given this range of interpretation, it is particularly important to understand the development of the extrinsic sense of *jihad* in the context of early Islamic history.

One of the main thrusts of the Qur'an is a hatred of the *fitna* (civil war or strife) endemic amongst the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula into which Muhammad was born. Against this anarchy, Islam asserts strict limits on what is permissible in warfare. Overall, the solution to *fitna* which the Qur'an proposes is the unification of warring factions in submission to Allah. This solution was highly effective in that time and place, but ironically, however, was also perhaps one of the reasons for Muslim involvement in conflict in the modern period. From the time of the *hijra* (622 CE), when Muhammad's persecuted followers fled Mecca and negotiated themselves

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<sup>25</sup> H. Zawati, *Is Jihad a Just War?* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2002); A. Sachidena, 'The Justification of Violence in Islam', in J.P. Burns (ed.), *War and its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Zawati, *Is Jihad a Just War?*, 111.

<sup>27</sup> B. Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), 24–5, emphasis added.

into a position of political power in Medina, the sacred sources of Islam presuppose a situation in which Islam is politically dominant, or in which it will eventually become so. The Islamic empire's expansion until 750 CE, as far as the Indus Valley to the East, and to the western tip of Northern Africa and the Iberian peninsula, gave little reason to revise this perspective.

By the time the Islamic expansion was halted, the connection between divine and political unity (*tawhid*), and thus the assumption of Muslim political authority, was well embedded in Islamic tradition. Hence the world is perceived as divided into *dar al-Islam* ('house of Islam', in which Islam is politically dominant) and *dar al-harb* ('house of war', in which Islamic rule is absent). Between these domains only temporary truce (*dar al-sulh*) ameliorates conflicts. Scholars seeking to challenge this classic division of the world need to argue that it 'was dictated by particular events, and did not necessitate a permanent state of hostility between these territories'.<sup>28</sup> Within the politically controlled territories, subject peoples of recognised religious groups were allowed limited autonomy over their affairs in exchange for payment of a poll tax (*jizya*). Jews and Christians were initially included in this category, which was later extended to Zoroastrians in Persia, and by the Mughals to Hindus in India. This autonomous status generally compares favourably with that of subordinate groups in medieval Christendom, but none the less was an inferior role which does not equate with modern standards of equality or citizen rights.

So, until the modern era, Islamic political history did not involve power sharing between groups of different religious convictions on an equal footing. This in itself is nothing unusual in the history of world religions, since pre-modern political formations tended to resolve religious differences through social stratification, whether by the subordination of Jews in medieval Christendom or of lower castes in the Hindu-dominated Indian caste system. It was only through the division of Western Christendom, brought about by the Reformation (sixteenth century) and the subsequent strife of the wars of religion (seventeenth century), that Europe developed a different way to contain religious difference: through the gradual process of religious belief and practice coming to be seen as a private rather than public matter. This process has not occurred widely in the Muslim world where the connection between political legitimacy and religious orthodoxy (or at least conformity) remains. For example, a survey conducted in 1996–97 in the most populous Muslim countries found that 89 per cent of Egyptians, 84 per cent of Indonesians and 74 per cent of Pakistanis agreed with the proposition that a 'person who says there is no Allah is likely to hold dangerous political views'.<sup>29</sup> Such views raise questions about the role of minorities and the

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<sup>28</sup> Zawati, *Is Jihad a Just War?*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Hassan, *Faithlines*, 63.

development of democracy in the Muslim-majority world, an issue to which we shall return in the third section on broader contextual factors shaping prospects for and understandings of reconciliation.

It is fair to say, therefore, that Islam's sacred sources contain an assumption of Islamic political authority, support defensive war, and historically have mostly been understood as legitimising expansive war aimed at extending Islamic political authority. However, this is not the whole story; a number of Muslims have argued that it is necessary to move beyond traditional understandings of relationships with 'others', and that the Islamic tradition has deep resources for doing so.<sup>30</sup> Hence there is also a type of literature, smaller than that on *jihad* but growing, which 'focuses on core Islamic values that provide the basis for articulating the essential premises of active non-violence, such as *'adl* (justice), *ihsan* (benevolence), *rahma* (compassion), and *hikma* (wisdom).<sup>31</sup> To this one may also add *sulh* (reconciliation). It is to these concepts and their contemporary development that I now turn.

### Theological Resources for Reconciliation in Islam

The recompense for an injury is an equal injury thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah.

(Qur'an, Sura 42:40)

[A]lthough the use of force is prescribed in the Qur'an under specific and strict conditions, nevertheless, Islamic values systematically give higher ground to forgiveness than to revenge or violence.<sup>32</sup>

Scholars who argue that there is a strong warrant in the Qur'an and *hadith* for rooting an Islamic ethic of nonviolence point to the range of virtues extolled in this tradition which supports such an ethos. As well as justice, benevolence and compassion, *'amal* (service), *yakeen* (faith) and *mahabbah* (love) have been highlighted.<sup>33</sup> Supportive values are also found in the Islamic legal tradition, including *shura* (mutual consultation), *ijma* (consensus) and *ijtihad* (independent judgement), and these are particularly relevant to processes of reconciliation because they involve nonviolent methods for settling disputes, or for dealing with post-conflict situations. The scope of both *shura* and *ijma* has been considerably extended by recent commentators. Traditionally, the former has meant consultation amongst elders, but has been extended to all adults, and interpreted as a mandate for democracy. *Ijma* has similarly been extended from consensus amongst scholars to a broader public.

<sup>30</sup> Sachidena, 'The Justification of Violence in Islam'.

<sup>31</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, Chapter 2.

Such developments in interpretation depend on the legitimacy of *ijtihad* – literally, ‘effort’, and from the same root as *jihad* – that is, new interpretation of the Qur’an and *sunna*. Debate on this has been at the heart of controversy between modernist and traditionalist legal commentators for the last 150 years because the consensus among the latter has been that *ijtihad* ended in the tenth century CE. This event, known as the ‘closing of the gate of *ijtihad*’, has historically exerted a powerful conservative influence on Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which has persisted to the present. Shi’as, by contrast, never ceased the practice of *ijtihad*, and indeed its use has increased since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> But even amongst Sunnis, since the mid-nineteenth century many reformers have argued for reopening the gate of *ijtihad*,<sup>35</sup> and indeed have challenged the legitimacy of the original ‘closing of the gate’:

During the period when Baghdad was under the mercy of the nomadic warriors of central Asia [Moghuls, fourteenth century CE], the jurists in Iraq reached a wrong consensus to close the door of *ijtihad* which they had not practised much anyway since the tenth century AD. No one, in fact, had a right to put a stop to the process of *ijtihad*.<sup>36</sup>

In contemporary Islam, then, there are opportunities for rethinking the tradition in response to new challenges. This is precisely what some scholars argue needs to happen in relation to ideas of nonviolence, so that these should assume a much more central place in the tradition. Hence, where most invocations to reconcile are made to Muslims, and while peacemaking between Muslims and other peoples of the book are advocated, this has been traditionally understood as applying to temporary conditions of truce prior to a future Muslim hegemony, and contemporary conditions challenge this tradition. Hence in a context of global interdependencies, threats of mass destruction, and a geo-political setting in which Muslim-majority states coexist in equality with non-Muslim ones at least formally, some argue that ‘past juridical decisions have become irrelevant in the modern system of international relations, and they are thus unable to shed light on the pressing task of recognising religious pluralism as a cornerstone of human relations’.<sup>37</sup>

Hermeneutically, one of the key points underpinning such arguments is that already in the life of the Prophet (especially in the first Meccan period) there is a template for Muslim approaches to living under conditions without political hegemony. In these circumstances, which included persecution, the

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<sup>34</sup> M. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’a Islam* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Exemplars of the practice include Muhammad ‘Abduh in Egypt and Muhammad Iqbal in India. See J. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 2nd edn), 116.

<sup>36</sup> A. Rahman, *Shari’ah: The Islamic Law* (London: Ta-Ha, 1984), 69.

<sup>37</sup> A. Sachidena, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49.

nascent Muslim community adopted a nonviolent stance. However, traditionalists may counter such arguments by pointing out that under the Islamic legal principle of *naskh* (abrogation), where there is conflict between earlier and later suras, the later overrides the earlier, thus privileging the Medinan period over the Meccan. Yet many unabrogated verses advocating tolerance from the Meccan period remain.

Furthermore, precedents for nonviolent approaches to dispute resolution – and indeed for a proactive stance by Muslims as mediators and peacemakers – are found in the *sira* (biography) of the Prophet, and stem from the post-*hijra* period. For example, ‘[I]n the incident of the Aws and Khazraj tribes of Medina, the Prophet acted as mediator according to the Arab tradition and ended their enmity; in arbitration between the Prophet and the Banu Qurayza (a Jewish tribe), both agreed to submit their dispute to a person chosen by the tribes.’<sup>38</sup>

In acting as a third-party mediator in disputes, the Prophet drew on an Arab tradition of conflict resolution that grew out of the pre-Islamic past, and which continues to this day. It is to this tradition, in which Islamic and other cultural elements intertwine, that I now turn.

### **Traditional and Modern Reconciliation Practices in Contemporary Muslim Societies**

The social and cultural institutions of mediation (*wistahah*), arbitration (*tahkim*), and reconciliation (*sulh*) are integral components of the structure of Muslim communities, traceable to Bedouin traditions, tribal laws, and society, even before the spread of Islam. Many tribes in the Middle East still use these mechanisms in resolving their disputes.<sup>39</sup>

But indeed if any show patience and forgive, that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs.

(Qur’an, Sura 42:43)

The second quotation here is cited by Abu Nimer as one of three Qur’anic texts recited at the opening of a reconciliation ceremony (*sulha*) between two clans in a Palestinian village in 1998. Hundreds of villagers gathered in the main square to witness the ceremony, which served to reintegrate members of a clan exiled seven years previously, after one of their relatives committed a double murder.<sup>40</sup> The reconciliation ritual represented the culmination of a three-stage process, which began with the victim’s family’s acceptance of an *atwa*, a sum of money indicating their acceptance of a state of truce (*hudna*) in which the affair would be investigated, and undertaking not to seek revenge

<sup>38</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 63; referring to M. Kadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

<sup>39</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 99.

during this period. After acceptance of the *atwa*, the period of *hudna* can begin.

‘Clan’ or ‘family’ in this context is defined as a patronymic extended family of five generations descended from a single grandfather.<sup>41</sup> In this context, honour/shame (*ird*), which might be understood as a right to treatment as an equal and in which public recognition of this right plays an important role, becomes a central social value.<sup>42</sup> If honour is lost – for example, by the violation (murder or rape) of a relative – the victim’s family becomes dishonoured and to restore face must take revenge. But here the Islamic system builds on pre-existing processes within tribal traditions which seek to contain the dangers of spiralling revenge killings through practical and symbolic methods. These include the acceptance of a payment as part compensation, agreement to a process of arbitration, public apology by the perpetrator’s family, and waiving of further payments by the victim’s family in return.

These traditional practices rely heavily on respect for elders as third-party mediators in disputes. This means that they normally have a rather conservative orientation aimed at restoring rather than changing existing power relations, and hence tend ‘to function primarily as a social control mechanism’.<sup>43</sup> This can particularly disadvantage poor families and women – in the latter case a father, brother or elder son may act as a spokesman in dealing with a third party.<sup>44</sup>

In Palestine such tribal processes continue to have influence both in settled rural and urban contexts.<sup>45</sup> In post-civil war Lebanon, the failure of state authority led Hizbullah (*hisb-ul Allah*, ‘the party of Allah’) to develop such Bedouin practices into a more formalised six-step process in an attempt to reduce revenge killings:<sup>46</sup>

- 1 Hizbullah is invited to mediate, and presents the victim’s family with a choice of taking the dispute to a *sharia* court or entering negotiations.
- 2 Hizbullah forbids vendettas.
- 3 Hizbullah prevents vendettas by holding the accused in protective custody.
- 4 After tensions have subsided, Hizbullah conducts negotiations with both parties seeking agreement over the fate of the accused. The process

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<sup>41</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> F. Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> N. Hamzeh, ‘The Role of Hizbullah in Conflict Management within Lebanon’s Shi’a Community’ in P. Salem (ed.), *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1997).

typically takes one to three years, and the victim's family typically opt for exile for the accused plus compensation (*diyya*).

- 5 All family members are visited to achieve consensus on the outcome.
- 6 A public ceremony (*musalaha*) is held, including public apology/acceptance, often the waiving of right to compensation, and a shared meal.<sup>47</sup>

Thus traditional patterns of conflict resolution have been adapted to meet a contemporary need, and in the process been transposed from nomadic to rural to urban contexts.

Modern conflict resolution and peace-building methods – that is, those supported by theories and traditions of practice which generally assume a cultural framework characterised by strong individualism, equality between citizens, and often the presumption of a reasonably effective state – have also increasingly been introduced to Muslim-majority societies, especially since the end of the Cold War.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes responses to these initiatives by Islamic leaders are very positive; Abu Nimer cites the example of a professor from the Islamic University in Gaza, who commented at one such workshop: 'Those values are often repeated in weekly preaching in the mosque. Your training workshop is only a way of systematically operationalizing those skills, so they become accessible to all segments of society.'<sup>49</sup>

However, Abu Nimer also lists a number of frequent obstacles and objections he encountered while running such workshops in North Africa and the Middle East. The first group of obstacles relates to political and organisational cultures: bureaucratic and patronage-based recruitment policies,<sup>50</sup> patriarchal and other hierarchical assumptions which run contrary to the egalitarian ethos of peace-building methods,<sup>51</sup> and a tendency, in imitation of governments, to avoid critical self-examination, focusing instead on blaming external factors for current problems: 'Instead of examining the shortcomings and internal problems of schools, factories, government institutions, and family and tribal structures, the masses, at the prodding of the elites, focus on external factors such as colonialism, imperialism, Zionism, and, more recently, globalization.'<sup>52</sup>

Previous periods of Islamic history may be idealised, deflecting attention from practical and critical analysis of the present.<sup>53</sup> The possibilities for local

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<sup>47</sup> Hamzeh, 'The Role of Hizbullah', 110–15; also in Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 94–5.

<sup>48</sup> M. Abu Nimer, 'Conflict Resolution in an Islamic Context', *Peace and Change* 21.1 (2001).

<sup>49</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 113.

<sup>51</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 116–17.

<sup>52</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 118.

<sup>53</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 124.



and small-scale action may be missed because of the apparent hopelessness of political situations, and a focus on elite political action.<sup>54</sup>

A second raft of issues relates to scepticism about the effectiveness, underlying ideologies and cultural appropriateness of peace-building and conflict resolution methods. For example, as the third quotation given at the beginning of the chapter indicates, such methods may be associated with Western countries and agencies, and to be underlain by Western or Christian cultural assumptions. Furthermore, participants may fear that by rejecting violence the individual or community surrender their rights and search for justice, and is thus caving in to Israeli or American pressure.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the relative lack of 'justly resolved political conflicts' in Muslim-majority societies also creates a credibility problem,<sup>56</sup> as well as a belief in the efficacy of violence – the Arabic saying 'what was taken by force can only be returned by force' is often cited in the Palestine/Israel context.<sup>57</sup>

In spite of these difficulties workshops have achieved some successes. Prejudice against nonviolent methods has been overcome by pointing to the example of the Prophet, and by explaining that these methods do not rely on idealisations of a conflict-free society, nor require individuals to abandon their search for rights or justice. Furthermore, the disempowerment participants experience when they find their individual efforts swamped in corruption and politically deadlocked situations can sometimes be countered by focusing on the kinds of helpful actions that are possible. For example, in a workshop in Gaza in 1994, in the wake of deep disillusionment after the failure of the Oslo process to achieve effective progress towards Palestinian autonomy:

The training team spent one day listening to and identifying problems. After the participants had identified 113 different problem categories, the training team posed these questions: On which of those problems do the Israelis have the least impact? Can those problems be dealt with? In which areas can you as an individual make an immediate impact? After rearranging their priorities, the participants realized their potential range of influence and agreed to act on that basis.<sup>58</sup>

Appropriately facilitated, such workshops can empower participants by enabling them to break out of established patterns of thinking and possibly also behaviour. Activities aimed at encouraging nonviolent methods and constructive engagement in situations of protracted conflict like that in Israel/Palestine can be seen as preparation for possible future reconciliation.

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<sup>54</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 121.

<sup>57</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 119.

<sup>58</sup> Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 123.

Abu Nimer and Groves offer an extended discussion of the role of Islam in the Palestinian *intifada* (1987–1993; 2000–) from this perspective, and the account below summarises and develops their account to reflect specifically on issues of reconciliation.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Palestinian *Intifada*: A Case Study of Islam and Reconciliation**

Through the activities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Islam's role in the Palestinian *intifada* may be perceived as one of escalating violence rather than promoting reconciliation. Yet it is estimated that no more than 10 per cent of the Palestinian population are active members of these groups; some 49 per cent describe themselves as 'strongly religious' and a further 20 per cent as 'moderately religious', begging the question of the role of religion in the situation for the majority of believers in the Palestinian population.<sup>60</sup> Amongst this group, religious institutions (especially mosques) functioned as a space for organisation, social and practical support, and resistance; religious symbols signified hope and defiance, and a deeply embedded and somewhat religiously encoded culture of hospitality encouraged acts of reconciliation in the face of deepening divisions between Palestinians and Israelis.

Abu Nimer and Groves relate one example from the West Bank city of Hebron in 1989.<sup>61</sup> An Israeli patrol had shot and killed a stone-throwing youth, and a member of the patrol had subsequently become separated and found himself surrounded by an angry mob. Frightened, he beat on the door of the nearest house with his rifle, and was admitted by a woman who served him coffee, and waited until it was safe for him to leave. It was the woman's son that the patrol had killed. The story was recounted to a researcher by a Palestinian man who had been asked about the role of religion in the *intifada*. His initial response had been 'Religion and culture enable us to preserve our humanity', and he told the story when prompted to explain, adding 'We will never become like the Israelis and hate our enemy; we will offer him hospitality. That soldier could come back again, and the woman would offer him coffee again.'<sup>62</sup> The story illustrates the importance of religiously supported practices which witness to a common humanity and the possibility for relationships beyond the military, physical and political barriers separating Palestinians and Israelis.

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<sup>59</sup> M. Abu Nimer and J. Groves, 'Peace Building and Nonviolent Political Movements in Arab-Muslim Communities: A Case Study of the Palestinian Intifada', in M. Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*.

<sup>60</sup> Shadid, *The Legacy of the Prophet*, 662–4, 681–2.

<sup>61</sup> Abu Nimer and Groves, 'Peace Building and Nonviolent Political Movements', 128–9.

<sup>62</sup> Abu Nimer and Groves, 'Peace Building and Nonviolent Political Movements', 128.

Formal interfaith groups which seek to bring deeply hostile parties into some kind of dialogue have also been established, often on Jewish Israeli initiative. Indeed, there is also a tradition of interfaith dialogue that runs back to the British Mandate period.<sup>63</sup> While this was initially restricted to academic circles, contemporary organisations such as the Israel Interfaith Association and Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) have much wider reach; for example, the IEA has brought settlers from the strongly Jewish nationalist National Religious Party together with Hamas supporters.<sup>64</sup>

Between individual hospitality and formal attempts to create interfaith dialogue lie a range of ways in which religion plays cultural, social and political roles that have the potential to promote reconciliation. The main organisation responsible for the coordination of the *intifada* – the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) – makes considerable efforts to include and represent both Muslims and Christians in its campaign of resistance to the Israeli occupation. Examples include a campaign of fasting led jointly by both Orthodox Christian priests and Muslim *imams*, protest marches led by both religious leaderships, and UNLU publications which use the phrase ‘church and mosque’ to emphasise unity.<sup>65</sup>

Even for the minority actively involved with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it is important to recognise that these are not simply organisations dedicated to uncompromising opposition to the Israeli presence. They also provide education, welfare and other social services in the Occupied Territories, for example:

Hamas runs a network of educational institutions such as kindergartens, schools, libraries, youth and sports clubs, and adult education centers. In addition, like other Muslim Brotherhood associations in neighbouring Arab countries, Hamas provides medical services and runs hospitals as well as charities for the needy. Indeed the Intifada forced Hamas to direct larger portions of its financial resources for the welfare and support of those families whose members had been killed, wounded, or arrested by Israel.<sup>66</sup>

In these roles Islam may be seen as serving reconciling functions amongst Muslims and, to some extent, between Muslims and Christians. However, these forms of reconciliation grow out of an ‘Islamicate society’, a society in which minorities of Christian and Jews have long been present, but in which it is presupposed that Islam influences the public life of society. Muslims are usually a numerical majority, and there are often restrictions on the role of non-Muslims in public life. Traditions of equality of citizenship regardless of

<sup>63</sup> N. Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy* (London: Cass, 1983).

<sup>64</sup> G. Wilkes, *Land of Promise and Conflict*, Module 809 of the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations MA programme (Cambridge: Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, 2000), 130. Quoted with permission.

<sup>65</sup> Abu Nimer and Groves, ‘Peace Building and Nonviolent Political Movements’, 167.

<sup>66</sup> S. Mishal and A. Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), viii.

religion, which have grown up in Western democracies, have long been familiar in segments of Muslim-majority societies, but their status is problematic and contested. In this final section, then, I will consider broader questions of the relationship between Muslim cultures, democracy and human rights; given the global influence of these concepts it is Islam's articulation of them that will most likely inspire Islamic understandings of reconciliation.

### **Broader Contextual Factors: Islam, Civil Society, Democracy and Human Rights**

Civil society – a layer of institutions between the individual and the state within which individuals exercise their autonomy by engaging with others in self-chosen association – is seen as important for the development of democratic traditions by Western political scientists and theorists.<sup>67</sup> However, individuation (the development of understandings of the individual as separable from his/her social roles and able to exercise considerable individual agency) and reasonably strong but legally limited state institutions (that effectively and discretely regulate the free market of associational activity) are both important to the concept of civil society, and yet problematic in Muslim-majority societies.

In sociological theory, these processes are both seen as part of a process of social differentiation, and social differentiation has often taken a rather different course in Muslim-majority societies. However, while these differences do present real difficulties – including the problematic reception for concepts perceived as ‘Western’ in the Muslim-majority world – I shall argue none the less that Islam and civil society are indeed compatible.

Islam is perhaps the prime example of a religious tradition that the West widely considers to be in tension, if not in outright conflict, with the normative tradition of civil society.<sup>68</sup> Contemporary perceptions are now further shaped by the events of 11 September 2001, and subsequent Islamic terrorist attacks. It is therefore extremely important to consider the evidence for these perceptions of incompatibility. In his influential *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* the late Ernest Gellner claimed that Islam is fundamentally unsecularisable, and concludes from this that Islam is also incompatible with civil society, both normatively and empirically.<sup>69</sup> Gellner

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<sup>67</sup> J. Keane, *Civil Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996); J. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>68</sup> F. Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> E. Gellner, *The Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin, 1994), 15.

understands secularisation as the declining social significance of religion: ‘in industrial or industrializing societies religion loses much of its erstwhile hold over men and society’.<sup>70</sup> While religion remains socially significant, argues Gellner, the development of individual autonomy is constrained. This in turn constrains the development of civil society because, as Özdalga explains: ‘Individuals, who are not able to act independently of the community of believers, cannot become the building-stones of the kind of intermediary organizations on which civil society is built.’<sup>71</sup>

This section challenges each stage of Gellner’s argument, and hence its polarising consequences. First, I shall argue that Gellner neglects the different ways in which modernity has been mediated to different regions, and hence the consequences of this for modern institutional forms and discourses such as civil society. Second, I shall argue that Muslims have generated a range of responses to the discourses of democracy, civil society and human rights. This contradicts the simplistic integralist position – that Islam insists that all aspects of life should be directly governed by its unchanging precepts – that Gellner attributes to Islam. Third, I shall argue that the historical model on which Gellner bases his argument in fact applies only to a minority of historic Muslim societies, and that the historically predominant model of Muslim society has been characterised by institutional differentiation. Fourth and finally, I shall argue that in practice in many parts of the Muslim world today Islam has proven itself capable of mobilisation as a public discourse by contributing to rather than stifling democratic pluralism.

First, then, the impact of modernity on a region as a whole may be a key factor in shaping the reception and cultural embedding of modern ideas such as civil society. Therborn outlines four routes to modernity. First, the Western and Central European route in which both modernity and anti-modern movements were an internal development.<sup>72</sup> Second, the route of the New Worlds in the Americas and Australia, areas where European settlers came to constitute a majority of the population, and where opposition to modernity was principally perceived to lie in the old European world. Third, the Colonial Zone, where modernity arrived from outside and resistance to modernity was domestic and suppressed, but where those of non-European origin none the less continued to constitute a majority of the population, for

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<sup>70</sup> Gellner, *The Conditions of Liberty*, 15.

<sup>71</sup> E. Özdalga, ‘Civil Society and Its Enemies: Reflections on a Debate in the Light of Recent Developments within the Islamic Student Movement in Turkey’, in E. Özdalga and S. Persson (eds), *Civil Society and Democracy in the Muslim World* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1997), 74.

<sup>72</sup> G. Therborn, ‘Beyond Civil Society: Democratic Experiences and their Relevance to the “Middle East”’ in Özdalga and Persson (eds), *Civil Society and Democracy in the Muslim World*, 45–54.

whom 'everyday life ... kept its own laws and customs, though often rigidified by colonial intervention or "indirect rule"'.<sup>73</sup> Fourth, countries characterised by 'Externally Induced Modernization', selectively imported by a ruling elite never over-run but pressured by European and American imperial powers, of which he gives China, Japan, Iran, the Ottoman Empire/Turkey and the North African states most resistant to colonialism as examples.

Most Muslim societies fall into the third or fourth category. In such contexts:

The key actor [in modernisation] is ... a modernizing part of the ruling body, trying to adapt both the state and society to external challenge and threat. Cleavage patterns tend to run both between modern and anti-modern parts of the elite and between the former and anti-modernists among the people, with the latter sometimes winning, as in Afghanistan and Iran. In this complex pattern of conflicts and alliances ... the meaning of popular rights is ambiguous, not seldom rejected by (large parts) of the people as anti-traditional.<sup>74</sup>

Under these conditions, one might anticipate ambivalent attitudes to modern discourses, including civil society: certainly this has occurred with other modern discourses such as democracy and human rights. Indeed, normatively, Muslims have in fact taken up a full range of positions on the compatibility or incompatibility of the relationship between Islam and both democracy and human rights. Thus Goddard outlines four positions on the relations between Islam and democracy, ranging from the view that democracy is anathema to Islam, to the view that democracy is essential for Islam.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Halliday outlines five positions that Muslims have taken on human rights, again ranging from full compatibility to outright rejection.<sup>76</sup> Each position within both spectra seeks to justify itself in relation to the Qur'an and Sunna.

This contemporary ideological pluralism corresponds to the diversity of historical forms of Muslim society. For example, Ira Lapidus argues that whereas Gellner, working principally from North African examples, sees just one Islamic blueprint for society, two have in fact been present from a very early stage of Middle Eastern history, with Gellner's model historically the less influential:

The Middle Eastern Islamic heritage provides not one but two basic constellations of historical society, two golden ages, two paradigms, each of which has generated its own repertoire of political institutions and political theory. The first is the society integrated in

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<sup>73</sup> Therborn, 'Beyond Civil Society', 50.

<sup>74</sup> Therborn, 'Beyond Civil Society', 51.

<sup>75</sup> H. Goddard, 'Islam and Democracy', paper presented to Politics and Religion Group, Political Studies Association, Sheffield, 24 February 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*.

all dimensions, political, social, and moral, under the aegis of Islam. The prototype is the unification of Arabia under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century ... The second historical paradigm is the imperial Islamic society built not on Arabian or tribal templates but on the differentiated structures of previous Islamic societies ... By the Eleventh century Middle Eastern states and religious communities were highly differentiated ... Thus, despite the common statement that Islam is a total way of life defining political as well as social and family matters, most Muslim societies ... were in fact built around separate institutions of state and religion.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the Western history of social differentiation is not the only one, and historically most Muslim societies have been socially differentiated. Yet Gellner the sociologist does not simply argue that Islam is normatively resistant to differentiation. Rather, he argues that this normative orientation coincides with structural features that render Islam 'secularization-resistant'.<sup>78</sup> Drawing on North African examples, Gellner characterises Muslim history until modernity as a cyclical process driven by relations between two versions of Islam: an urban, scripturalist, 'High' version, and a rural, ritualistic, ecstatic and saint-mediated 'Low' version. The High version is prone to laxity and pragmatic compromise over time: but at just such times it has been reinvigorated by the zeal of discontented followers of the Low version who appropriate the ideals of 'High' Islam, and are powered by *asabiyya* (energy of tribal groups). But modernity broke this cycle:

Come the modern world however – imposed by extraneous forces rather than produced indigenously – and the new balance of power, favoring the urban centre against rural communities, causes central faith to prevail, and we are left with a successful Ummah at long last. This is the mystery of the secularization-resistant nature of Islam ....<sup>79</sup>

The centralised state, asserting its authority over rural areas and destroying tribal society, is able to sustain the reforming zeal of High Islam. Both versions of High Islam are compatible with instrumental aspects of modernity – such as industrialisation and urbanisation – and hence increasingly displace the popular saint-led Low Islam throughout an increasingly urbanised society, except for Westernised elites. Furthermore, it is the puritanical version of High Islam that triumphs over the lax variant because only the latter has genuine local appeal.<sup>80</sup>

However, while this account helps to explain the popularity of Islam in some, and especially in North African societies, it remains limited. First, it is limited in geographical and cultural scope, because as we have seen

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<sup>77</sup> I. Lapidus, 'The Golden Age: The Political Concepts of Islam', *Annals of the American Academy*, 524 (1992), 14–15.

<sup>78</sup> Gellner, *The Conditions of Liberty*.

<sup>79</sup> Gellner, *The Conditions of Liberty*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Gellner, *The Conditions of Liberty*, 23.

(following Lapidus) it does not fit societies where imperial Islam has long predominated and the influence of tribal groups has remained marginal (for example, Ottoman and Mughal lands). Second, it neglects the central historical factors that have shaped the emergence of modern political Islam – namely the crisis in nationalist ideologies and the failure of both socialist and capitalist development models in many parts of the Muslim world.<sup>81</sup> Third, it flies in the face of the fact that where Islamic groups have been permitted to enter the democratic process as political parties, they have shown themselves both willing and able to follow democratic procedures. As Ibrahim comments:

Beyond the Arab world, Islamists have regularly run for elections in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey since the 1980s. In Indonesia, Malaysia and the Islamic republics of the former Soviet Union, Islamists have peacefully been engaging in local and municipal politics ... It is important to note that in three of the biggest Muslim countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey) women have recently been elected to the top executive office in the land ... The important thing in all these cases is that Islamic parties have accepted the rules of the democratic game and are playing it peaceably and in an orderly manner.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, other discourses dependent on strong individuation – such as human rights – have also taken firm root in many Muslim societies, such that, in spite of the ambivalence associated with them, they now form part of the terms of public debate. This is illustrated by Dwyer's conversations with intellectuals about human rights in Tunisia, Morocco (precisely the societies Gellner characterises as dominated by an integralist version of Islam) and Egypt, many of whom were active in human rights organisations. Indeed the range and persistence of such organisations, in spite of the difficult conditions in which they operate, is itself refutation of Gellner's thesis. But more than this, Dwyer shows the extent to which human rights discourse, contested and polysemous as it is, has penetrated contemporary Middle Eastern societies. As he concludes, 'Few Middle Easterners I spoke to seem ready to dismiss the idea from their cultural repertoire: they may challenge its foundations, or its provenance, or the content given it by specific groups, but the concept itself has come to constitute a symbol of great power.'<sup>83</sup>

Thus Gellner essentialises connections between Islam, civil society and democratisation which are in fact contingent. Islam is not necessarily incompatible, normatively or practically, with structural differentiation, and many Muslim societies in practice support both diverse civil societies and democracy, even though, and unsurprisingly given the manner of their reception of modernity, these discourses are contested and viewed with

<sup>81</sup> N. Ayubi, *Political Islam* (London: Routledge 1990).

<sup>82</sup> S. Ibrahim, 'From Taliban to Erbakan: The Case of Islam, Civil Society and Democracy', in E. Özdalga and S. Persson (eds), *Civil Society and Democracy in the Muslim World*, 41.

<sup>83</sup> Dwyer, *Arab Voices*, 192.



ambivalence. Furthermore, it is important that the problematic reception of these discourses in the Muslim world is not viewed against their presumed-to-be unproblematic acceptance in the West. Here too the articulation of these concepts is problematic,<sup>84</sup> yet both in the West and Muslim-majority societies there are many resources for reconciliation that give grounds for optimism.

## Conclusion

From perspectives influenced by assumptions of secularisation, Islam has shown itself to be surprisingly capable of rearticulating itself in conditions of structural modernisation, such as global communications systems, social differentiation and urbanisation. Sometimes this articulation has taken integralist ideological forms hostile to democracy and human rights: yet forms of Islamism that engage positively with discourses of democracy and human rights have also developed across many parts of the Muslim-majority world (Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia), and are arguably on the ascendant.<sup>85</sup> Considering these political developments alongside the textual traditions and local practices of reconciliation we have examined, it seems that there are some good reasons to hope for the development of reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslims both within the Muslim-majority world and in the West, in spite of the formidable antagonisms that have developed.

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<sup>84</sup> H. Lanham and D. Forsythe, 'Human Rights in the New Europe: A Balance Sheet', in D. Forsythe (ed.), *Human Rights in the New Europe: Problems and Progress* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

<sup>85</sup> C. Murphy, *Passion for Islam: Shaping the Modern Middle East: the Egyptian Experience* (London: Scribner, 2002); G. Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## PART II

# THE DYNAMICS OF RECONCILIATION AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY



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# Putting Forgiveness in its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation

Joseph Liechty

In Northern Ireland, work towards reconciliation long preceded careful reflection on the meaning and dynamics of reconciliation. As reflection began to emerge, it revealed shared themes and understandings, but considerable confusion as well. As I explore the broader international literature on reconciliation, I find much the same. Even work of real value can betray less than careful understandings of the elements of reconciliation and the relationship between them, if not outright confusion.

Wherever reconciliation is addressed, a jumble of terms is likely to emerge, with forgiveness, repentance, apology, justice, truth, peace and, of course, reconciliation itself being among the most common ingredients of the reconciliation stew. Unfortunately, these and related terms are too often undefined, ill-defined, or idiosyncratically defined, and they are linked in varied and sometimes bewildering fashion. I take as a typical example a recent book, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*. I choose this book not because it is weak but because it is excellent and therefore suggests how pervasive is the problem. That title, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*: why have these two concepts alone been plucked from the reconciliation stew? Are they the same thing? Complementary qualities? What is the relation between them? Is one part of the other? Are they sufficient to account for the whole of the reconciliation process? Apparently not, because early in their introduction, the authors announce that this book is ‘a study in political penitence’.<sup>1</sup> Then why is ‘penitence’ not included in the title? Is this another synonym and therefore needless? Is it part of reconciliation or part of forgiveness? In this book as in many others, I do not find clear answers to such questions.

Neither good understanding of reconciliation nor still less good practice will be entirely stymied by weak conceptualisation, of course. But sometimes confusion does distort practice, and both understanding and

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen (eds), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia, PA and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), xvii.

practice would be enhanced by a better grasp of the whole network of actions and qualities that make up reconciliation. Towards that end, I focus here on sketching a brief account of reconciliation as a set of interlocking dynamics, with a particular emphasis on placing forgiveness within that framework.<sup>2</sup>

## **Repenting and Forgiving**

At its most basic, reconciling involves the complementary dynamics of repenting and forgiving, the first a way of dealing with having done wrong, the second with having suffered wrong. Thus reconciliation is achieved when perpetrators have repented and victims have forgiven. While the picture is much complicated in a situation of long-term conflict like Northern Ireland, where determining which parties are perpetrators and which victims, and in what proportion and combinations, becomes itself a cause of contention, repentance and forgiveness remain underlying requirements for reconciliation.

Given the necessity of both repenting and forgiving for reconciliation and their complementarity, it is worth noting that the Christian tradition, and with it the broader Western tradition, is heavily weighted towards forgiving rather than repenting. That these traditions are weighted towards forgiving I base on impressions to which I can recall just one significant counter, the recent and remarkable attention to apology in Australia. A useful measure of the bias towards forgiveness at the expense of repentance comes from the online bookseller, Amazon. In preparing a lecture, I had occasion to search the Amazon.com website for books on forgiveness and repentance. 'Forgiveness' turned up 387 titles, a mixture of pop psychology, pop religion and serious scholarship, with only a tiny minority written from perspectives other than Christian or secular. 'Repentance', on the other hand, yielded just 72 titles, and what had been a tiny minority of Jewish authors under 'forgiveness' became a large minority under 'repentance'. Furthermore, the 22nd best-selling book on repentance was already designated 'out of print/limited availability', while the 93rd best-selling book on forgiveness was the first to be out of print.<sup>3</sup> Virtually every reading of mainstream Western culture I can think of points towards the same conclusion: that the Western imagination is captivated by forgiveness in a way that repentance cannot match.

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<sup>2</sup> What I cannot develop within the confines of this essay is how the dynamics of reconciliation differ depending on the level of social or political organisation to which they are applied. My contention in such an account would be that the understanding of the dynamics of reconciliation that I develop here has significant applications to all kinds of human relationships and conflicts, whether those be interpersonal, intercommunal, or interstate.

<sup>3</sup> These figures were taken from the Amazon.com website on 29 September 2004.

Whatever the reason for the imbalance, it is unhealthy. However difficult, forgiving involves dealing with how we have been wronged, while repenting involves what most of us find more difficult, dealing with what we have done wrong. Moral maturity requires both. Healing of relationships, that is, reconciliation, whether personal or political, requires both.

While the dynamics of repenting can be named in various ways, five stages typically emerge when working with groups in Northern Ireland: acknowledging a wrong done, accepting responsibility, expressing remorse, changing attitudes and behaviour, and making restitution. These stages are in a logical order, with the exception of 'expressing remorse' and 'changing attitudes and behaviour', either of which might come before the other. Minimally, we might label a process as repenting if it yields changed behaviour, especially if that change is willing, the three previous stages can be taken as implicitly accomplished or the change would not have occurred. Restitution, though, is the capstone, too rarely applied, that completes and fulfils the repenting process; restitution is also the element most likely to persuade the party wronged that repentance has been genuine.

The idea of apology, with its overtones of verbal expression of regret, corresponds closely to 'expressing remorse'. As such, apology occupies an ambiguous position in repentance and therefore in reconciliation. On the one hand, it is not strictly necessary, since effective change may itself function as a non-verbal but powerful expression of remorse. On the other hand, apology can play a critical role in repentance. The right words of apology at the right time can be as decisive as restitution in persuading the other party that repentance has been authentic. In fact, where complete and literal restitution is not possible (and in situations of endemic conflict, full restitution rarely is possible), then apology – verbal expressions of regret – may also become part of symbolic restitution. Furthermore, apologising marks a crucial development in the repenting process. Apologising is the first of these five stages that requires the repenting party to turn what could have been up to that point a private and internal process into one that recognises that this is about restoring a relationship and therefore takes the difficult step of turning outward to address the offended party.

Forgiving, like repenting, might be defined in terms of stages in a process. Because I want to identify some problems around the way the concept of forgiveness is used, however, I will instead work with two main strands of meaning. Forgiveness is a broad and rich concept. Ironically, in that very breadth lies the possibility, too often realised, of intellectual confusion that can limit the potency of forgiving in practice.

The first strand is forgiving as 'letting-go'. This feels familiar, because letting-go has become the conventional meaning of forgiveness in modern therapeutic terms. But the roots run much deeper. However one assesses Hannah Arendt's claim that '[t]he discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the

realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth',<sup>4</sup> it was clearly a central theme of his teaching and of the New Testament, and thus hugely influential in the Western tradition. Forgiving as letting-go may well derive from this source, as this is the apparent root meaning of the New Testament Greek word, *aphiemi*, which is usually the word translated as 'forgive'. If 'forgive' is almost always a translation of *aphiemi*, the reverse is certainly not the case. In fact, *aphiemi* is translated as 'forgive' in less than half of its 146 occurrences. It is more often translated as 'leave' and beyond that in an apparently bewildering variety of ways, including 'consent', 'divorce', 'give', 'neglect', 'yield', 'abandon' and 'desert'. 'To let go' is one way of naming the common meaning behind all the translations.

That variety of translations suggests one of the key conceptual and practical problems around forgiveness: in letting go, exactly what are we letting go of? The answer will vary from case to case, but if it is to fit under the heading of forgiveness it will always involve letting go of at least three things: vengeance, punishment of the wrongdoer in exact proportion to the wrong done,<sup>5</sup> and, in so far as possible, those feelings, especially hatred, that will damage, immediately or eventually, the wronged party. Whatever else may need to be let go of in *particular* circumstances, nothing else need be let go of in *all* circumstances. And if the practice and pursuit of forgiveness is to be meaningful, one thing *may not* be let go of: that is, the justice claim that occasioned the need for forgiveness. As suggested by the ideas of 'letting go of vengeance' and 'exactly proportionate punishment', forgiving is a way of dealing with a justice claim. True, it is sometimes radically different than other ways of dealing with justice, but it is not the abandonment of a justice claim. In fact forgiving has little meaning other than as a way of dealing with a justice claim.

A second strand of the meaning of forgiveness is 'love given before',<sup>6</sup> 'love' being understood in this case in the entirely unsentimental sense of willing, seeking and extending oneself for the good of another. As such it is the perfect complement to forgiving as letting-go, indicating what is embraced in place of what has been let go of. It is worth noting that love-

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn 1998 [1958]), 238.

<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere through this section, I am closely following the work of Donald Shriver, especially *Forgiveness and Politics: The Case of the American Black Civil Rights Movement* (London: New World Publications, 1987), 20. See also his later work: Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> I had been labouring for some years under the impression that the prefix 'for' in forgiven was equivalent to 'fore' and thus 'before'. However, my Goshen College colleague Paul Keim, a linguist, has pointed out to me that in this case the meaning of the prefix 'for' has nothing to do with 'fore' or 'before', so it is simply an interesting and unlikely linguistic accident that the strand of forgiveness being discussed here can be described as 'love given before'.

given-before, although a major New Testament theme, is not described there as 'forgiving', which is largely confined to the letting-go function. Incorporating love-given-before into forgiveness seems to be an addition in the English language, and perhaps others. Thus in a Christian context, stories like Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus the tax collector or the parable of the prodigal son are commonly understood to be about forgiveness, because they exemplify love given before and apart from whether the other person has in any way earned or deserved it, although the Bible never uses the word 'forgive' about these situations.

The letting-go strand of forgiveness is in fact a continuum, running from a minimalist end that might be described as forbearance of vengeance to a full and final letting-go that can be called absolution.<sup>7</sup> If both forgiving as letting-go generally and as love-given-before generate some problems, they are as nothing compared with the confusion arising from forgiveness as absolution. In some ways, absolution fits poorly with the meanings of forgiveness that we have been discussing. Forgiving as letting-go and as love-given-before are initiating, risk-taking, pre-emptive strategies for change. Forgiveness as absolution follows rather than initiates, it is a response to change more than a strategy for change. After conflicting parties engaged in repenting and forgiving as letting-go and love-given-before have done all the hard work of being reconciled, absolution is little more than the recognition that reconciliation has occurred.

Two examples will suggest the confusion that can arise because of the radical difference between forgiveness as absolution and forgiveness in its other functions. Theologian Rodney Petersen's account of the terminology and rhetoric surrounding forgiveness shows the kind of conceptual confusion that can arise when discussions of forgiveness slip without acknowledgement between forgiveness as absolution and forgiving in its other capacities. I cite three references from a single page: 'This [self-justification] blocks the process of forgiveness and, consequently, the possibility of restored relationships or reconciliation'.<sup>8</sup> Here forgiveness is part of reconciliation and precedes the possibility of reconciliation. A couple of paragraphs later, however, Petersen writes:

Reconciliation, a restoration or even a transformation toward an intended wholeness that comes with transcendent or human grace, expresses the result of a restored relation in behavior. Forgiveness expresses the acknowledgment and practice of this result. In this sense, *forgiveness* is not so much a middle term as one that includes both justification and reconciliation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to my co-editor, David Tombs, for the long conversations that have helped me to clarify the relationship between love-given-before, letting-go, and absolution.

<sup>8</sup> Rodney L. Petersen, 'A Theology of Forgiveness: Terminology, Rhetoric, and the Dialectic of Interfaith Relationships', *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, 'A Theology of Forgiveness', 13, original emphasis.



These words only make sense if he is talking about forgiveness as absolution, and he correctly points out that in this absolving sense, forgiveness is not so much part of reconciliation, it is a broader term that includes reconciliation. Just three sentences later, however, he goes on to say, 'Reconciliation not only draws upon forgiveness, but also elicits the qualities of truth and justice in the recovery of harmony or peace.'<sup>10</sup> And again he has returned to talking about forgiveness as part of reconciliation. This sliding back and forth, unacknowledged, between forgiveness as absolution and forgiving in its other functions makes a coherent account impossible.

When the legal scholar Martha Minow seeks a way *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* in the aftermath of mass violence, it is primarily forgiveness as premature or unwarranted absolution that she wishes to avoid.<sup>11</sup> Forgiving in its other senses is not without problems, but it can contribute significantly to seeking a way forward in the aftermath of violence. Although in most ways sophisticated and generally satisfying, Minow's argument would be stronger if it explicitly recognised the different meanings of forgiveness – specifically the stark difference between absolution and the initiative-taking forms of forgiveness. Should it become a commonplace that recovery from mass violence requires a way between vengeance and forgiveness, it would be most damaging if all strands of forgiving were carelessly conflated into one, and this one reduced to absolution.

Confusion between forgiveness as absolution and in its other meanings also lies behind the frequent but rarely fruitful debate about whether repentance must precede forgiveness. Once the differences between these aspects of forgiving are recognised, the issue all but resolves itself. Forgiving as letting-go and love-given-before generally precede repentance. They are in their essence initiatives and would be deprived of their possibilities as a form of power for change in the hands of wounded parties were they confined to responding to repentance. Absolution generally follows repentance. It can, of course, precede repentance, and this may in some instances be necessary or wise. But absolution is most naturally a response to repentance. If it easily or frequently precedes repentance, it will soon require the kind of critique represented by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's stinging attack on cheap grace, including 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance'.<sup>12</sup> Of course Bonhoeffer's target here was forgiveness as absolution, not as risk-taking initiative.

In Northern Ireland, this issue of the relationship of forgiveness and repentance causes real existential pain, as wounded parties cry out, 'I would

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<sup>10</sup> Peterson, 'A Theology of Forgiveness', 13.

<sup>11</sup> Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), 14–24.

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, rev. edn 1963 [ET 1948]), 36.

like to forgive him, but I can't, because he hasn't repented.' As with Bonhoeffer, it is forgiveness as absolution they have in mind, but the conflation of all forms of forgiving into one is likely to deprive them of the opportunities for change offered by other forms of forgiveness. Thus in Northern Ireland it is vital to affirm on the basis of empirical observation (that is, listening to a lot of stories) that forgiving and repenting do not relate to each other in any particular order. Either can come first and inspire the other. Forgiving as letting-go and as love-given-before can be undertaken before the other party has repented, if the forgiving party is able, wants to do so, and is willing to risk getting no response in hopes that forgiveness might inspire a response. What cannot be accomplished until the other party has repented is reconciliation; what is likely to be inappropriate until the end of the process is absolution. I suspect that the confusion around this topic is directly related to the tendency to use inflated definitions of forgiveness that make it a synonym for reconciliation and to give too much prominence to forgiveness as absolution.

Conceptual clarity would certainly be served by regarding absolution not as part of forgiveness but as a separate action. That is not going to happen. First, absolution is well entrenched as one of the popular meanings of forgiveness. Second, and conclusively, in one fundamental sense absolution does belong as an integral part of forgiveness, because it is nothing if not a form of letting-go.

Since absolution will remain part of forgiveness, two things are necessary to avoid the kind of confusion that limits the power of forgiveness. One, as suggested, is to distinguish clearly between the various forms of forgiveness. The other is to be quite clear about what absolution should and should not mean in terms of human relations. In a Christian context, this would begin by recognising at least four levels of absolution: God's absolution, the church's absolution as a representative of God, the state's absolution of wrongdoers, and the absolution offered by wronged individuals or groups to other individuals or groups. One implication of absolution shared by all levels is the determination that past wrongdoing will be in some way set aside so that the relationship between the offended party and the perpetrator may be restored. In terms of the last level, human relations, that is the only legitimate meaning of absolution. The absolution offered by God and the church, however, is also a kind of metaphysical transaction that alters the ultimate standing of the sin committed by the sinning party; the state, as a quasi-transcendent entity, might also be seen to offer a parallel quasi-metaphysical absolution. This is absolution offered by the sinless to the sinning, and thus irrelevant to and inappropriate in the realm of ordinary human relationships. The kind of absolution offered here has nothing to do with the ultimate standing of the sinner's sin; its only appropriate concern is the relationship between estranged parties. None the less, in some reluctance to offer forgiveness as

absolution, I see traces or even clear evidence of an arrogant assumption of a God-like status: being parsimonious with forgiveness lest ultimate standards be offended. At least in this one sense, some Jews are right to recoil, I believe, at the Christian assumption of the power to forgive, because in terms of this kind of absolution, truly only God can forgive sins.

## Justice and Truth

In practice, repenting and forgiving need justice-seeking and truth-seeking to keep them honest. Were repenting and forgiving practised with full integrity, we might need to add nothing more to this account of the dynamics of reconciliation, because justice and truth are already built in to these concepts. For repenting, this is obvious: it involves acknowledging and dealing with an injustice; repenting has no meaning outside the concept of justice. But forgiving too is integrally, necessarily connected to justice. Forgiving is always a way of responding to an injustice, and it can also be a stance from which to pursue justice without being overcome by bitterness when that justice is long delayed. This relationship should be a given. In reality, however, when forgiving and repenting go wrong, it is often because justice-seeking and truth-seeking have been neglected or distorted in some way, so these things need to be named. Without justice and truth, forgiveness and repentance will be insipid, partial and cheap.

But neither are justice and truth independent sentinels that stand alone. ‘Any justice which is only justice’, wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘soon degenerates into something that is less than justice. It must be saved by something which is more than justice.’<sup>13</sup> What a justice which is only justice can degenerate into is a polite pseudonym for mere retribution or revenge. What justice requires for its salvation, I propose, is that it be pursued in the larger context of seeking reconciliation. As for truth-seeking, one need not accept all of Michel Foucault’s critique of ‘regimes of truth’<sup>14</sup> to recognise that truth can be debased to serve as a means of domination, so its health too requires that it be understood in the context of seeking reconciliation.

What I have suggested thus far about the relationship of these four actions – forgiving, repenting, justice-seeking and truth-seeking – might be caught up in the metaphor of a web. To function at its greatest strength, each action must be connected to every other, and the resulting criss-crossing strands have collective strength and possibilities that none would have on its own. It may

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<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1960 [1932]), 258.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131.

be possible to move towards reconciliation with one or more of these actions weak or absent (the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was predicated on such a gamble, repenting and even more so justice being the comparatively weak elements) but they work best and most powerfully when working together.

### **Trust, Hope and Confidence**

What follows requires a shift from the organic metaphor of a web to a mechanical one, in which each of these four actions is a meshing cog in a machine. If this reconciliation machine is to run smoothly, it will require a lubricant and fuel. The lubrication comes in the form of certain personal and social virtues, certain characteristics of disposition. In the first instance, these will include at least trust, hope and confidence. People simply cannot choose meaningful, uncoerced change without a certain level of confidence, and they will not change without trust and hope. Thus no reconciling process, whether personal or political, can go anywhere without these qualities, although a well-constructed process might make do with less confidence, trust and hope, or even inspire them. The protracted endgame in the Northern Ireland peace process might fruitfully be analysed in terms of these three categories: why they are so weak, and what is required to nurture them.

A fourth characteristic of inner disposition is harder to name, but still more crucial, and functions as the fuel for reconciliation. In terms of the dynamics of personal reconciliation it is easily named: it is love, in the entirely unsentimental sense of concern and care for another and a willingness to extend oneself for that other. The same applies to social and political reconciliation, but love is not a usable term for such purposes, so I borrow a phrase from Byron Bland, director of the Stanford Center for Conflict and Negotiation. Bland describes reconciliation as driven by the sense that somehow ‘we belong together’: ‘reconciliation’, he says, ‘involves a profound rediscovery that those who have been deeply divided in the past do indeed belong together in the future’.<sup>15</sup> This profound sense may be the result of high idealism or of a kind of revelation or of social analysis or even of grudging realism – that is, unless we have a future together, however distasteful and distressing that notion, we have no future. But whatever the reasons for it, without this sense that ‘we belong together’, reconciliation will not happen.

This simple sketch of the place of forgiveness in the reconciliation process has only opened up some of the main areas that need to be addressed. None

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<sup>15</sup> Byron Bland, unpublished and untitled essay on reconciliation, from the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation Working Papers, 1999.

the less, I hope that it can serve as a pointer towards the kind of account of the dynamics of reconciliation that scholars might develop in order to undergird both sound thinking and sound practice in the pursuit of reconciliation.

# Reconciliation: An Intrinsic Element of Justice

Ada María Isasi-Díaz

‘That they all may be one so that the world may believe’ are words placed on the lips of Jesus by John the evangelist (John 17:21). The context of these words is important: Jesus wants the world to believe that he is one with God and that God has sent him. Jesus knows that his mission, to reveal and begin to establish the kin-dom<sup>1</sup> of God, will be fruitful only if the world believes in him. Furthermore, Jesus knows that whether the world does or does not believe in him and his mission depends on his followers living according to what he has taught them. The world will not believe unless his followers live according to the truths Jesus has taught: unless Christians are indeed one in body and soul, in mind and heart. Matthew 25:31–46 has the clearest explanation of what Jesus meant by being ‘one’. In this parable one finds a stark picture of reality: some are hungry, some have food; some are homeless while others have shelter; some are naked, some have clothing; some are prisoners while others are free; some are sick and others are healthy. There is a rift between different groups in the community. The teaching of the parable is that the rift has to be healed and that only those who work to heal it will belong to the family of God. The healing of what splits humanity, of what separates one from the other, is the true meaning of reconciliation. If what separates us is not bridged, justice will not be able to triumph and the kin-dom of God will not become a reality in our midst.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the many divisions that exist in our world make it obvious that a central element of the Christian understanding of justice and of work on behalf of justice is reconciliation. Justice is not only ‘a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel’,<sup>2</sup> but it is essential to the meaning and mission of the church today. The Bible, as well as a great variety of documents produced by different Christian

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<sup>1</sup> The use of ‘kin-dom’ instead ‘kingdom’ or ‘reign’ stems from the desire to use a metaphor that is much more relevant to our world today. From my perspective as a *mujerista* theologian, the point of reference for kin-dom of God is the concept of family and community that is so central to my Latina culture. There is also the need to move away from ‘kingdom’ and ‘reign’ that are sexist and hierarchical metaphors.

<sup>2</sup> 1971 Synod of Bishops, ‘Justice in the World,’ in Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), 514.

churches in the last forty years, makes it clear that the work of justice is a religious practice. By extension, then, since reconciliation is an element of justice, the work of reconciliation is a religious obligation for all Christians: 'All Christians can agree in saying that reconciliation is an essential mission of the Church, that is, that one cannot be a true Christian if one is not motivated permanently by a preoccupation for reconciliation.'<sup>3</sup>

Very simply said, it is not possible to conceptualise reconciliation apart from justice, and one cannot be a justice-seeking person without an ongoing practice of reconciliation. This is the belief and understanding on which this article is built. In it I seek to articulate an understanding of reconciliation as a social, political and theological virtue within the parameters of justice. My intention is to present a theo-ethics of reconciliation that will contribute to make justice a reality since without justice the kin-dom of God cannot flourish; there can be no fullness of life, no peace.<sup>4</sup>

### **Reconciliation as an Element of Justice**

The mode of divine revelation set forth in the Bible provides the basis for understanding justice as a process. The Bible does not set definitions. It does not offer theories but presents rich narratives about the lived experiences of its people. It is in the midst of their lives that God's revelation happens, that the people of Israel and the followers of Jesus come to understand who God is and the demands God makes on humans. Following this biblical tradition, many systems of Christian ethics and moral theologies today eschew a theoretical approach to justice that focuses on universals apart from any social context or on rational reflections that attempt to demonstrate their validity by being self-enclosed systems. Instead justice is embraced as a process that starts with the experience of those who suffer injustice, and who, therefore, seek to change present oppressive structures. As a process justice does not avoid rationality but rather proposes normative reflections that are historic and contextual. To understand justice as a process is to embrace the fact that all 'normative reflection must begin from historically specific

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<sup>3</sup> René David Roset, 'Para Una Teología y Pastoral de Reconciliación desde Cuba' (unpublished article), (November 1981, revised in 1982), 3. Professor David is an elderly Roman Catholic theologian who has taught for many years at the Catholic seminary in Havana, Cuba with whom I have visited. Originally he is from Canada.

<sup>4</sup> This echoes the well-known quotation of Martin Luther King, 'Without justice, there can be no peace'; see Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Towards Freedom*. This also echoes the thinking of Pope Paul VI that 'If You Want Peace, Work for Justice'; see 'Message of His Holiness Pope Paul VI for the Celebration of the "World Day of Peace"' (1 January 1972). [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mes\\_19711208\\_v-world-day-for-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace_en.html); accessed 19 July 2004.

circumstances because there is nothing but what is, the given, the situated interest in justice from which to start'.<sup>5</sup>

Acknowledging justice as a process, however, does not mean that it is only a matter of describing what is. Justice aims to evaluate the actual experience of people as well as their hopes and expectations. This evaluation is also 'rooted in experience of and reflection on that very society'.<sup>6</sup> It is not a matter of importing from other societies and cultures ideas of 'the good' and 'the just' to evaluate what is. It is a matter, rather, of listening to the cries of the poor and the oppressed in our midst so as to discover how individually and as a society we fail to make it possible for all to become the persons God created us to be. The norms and ideals used to evaluate the presence of justice in any given situation arise, then, from the yearnings of those who suffer oppression and poverty. They arise from those with whom individually and as a community we have not established right-relationships. The desire for right-relationships is not a foreign or an imposed idea but rather arises out of the desire of the people to have in their lives that love of neighbour that the gospel of Jesus turned into a commandment for Christians. This understanding of the basis for and meaning of justice makes it clear that different elements of justice will need to be emphasised at different times. However, no matter what element of justice is being discussed, justice, like any other norm or principle, requires exploration of its various meanings and implications.

In the twenty-first century our considerations about justice must start with the fact that two-thirds of the world lives in poverty and/or is oppressed, lacking what is needed to develop fully. In examining oppression and poverty one discovers some fundamental reasons for these adversities: personal and systemic violence, exploitation, powerlessness, marginalisation and prejudice. These are not only causes but also mechanisms that operate at many different levels in our world. As mechanisms they are interconnected and create personal and societal modes of being and doing that maintain a *status quo* where less than one-third of the world controls, consumes and enjoys most of the natural and humanly developed resources of our world. Justice requires an in-depth examination of the various causes of oppression so that effective strategies can be developed. One of the main reasons for the few positive results of the struggles for justice, despite the goodwill and untiring commitment of many around the world, has been the lack of serious analysis of the causes of oppression and poverty.

How is power understood and used? Who has it and whom does it benefit? An analysis of power is urgently needed if we are to understand the dynamics of oppression in our world. A second area that needs thorough examination is

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.



the distribution of goods, both material goods and other goods such as rights, opportunities, self-respect, participation in decision making and the power to 'define' the symbols, images, meanings, behaviours and myths that give character to the different societies. A third area in which much work is needed concerns our notions of diversity and differences. It is precisely our present understanding of differences as what separates, excludes and places persons in opposition to each other that is at the core of all modes of oppression,<sup>7</sup> causing divisions and brokenness. Such an understanding leads to conceptualising those who are different as outsiders, with those who have power deciding what is normative – themselves – and what is deviant – others. As long as this is the prevalent understanding there is no possibility of having right-relationships, and it will be impossible to create just societal structures that are inclusive instead of exclusive.

Identifying similarity and difference seems to be one way people make sense of their 'perceptions, experiences, identities, and human obligations'.<sup>8</sup> However, this does not necessarily have to lead one to assign consequences to differences and to positioning one group in relation to another. In other words, usually the way differences are understood and dealt with includes making moral judgements about them, deciding without much reflection that because some are different they are better or worse, never just different. Society has capitalised on 'categories of difference that manifest social prejudice and misunderstanding',<sup>9</sup> and has ignored ongoing relationships among people that are based on similarities. Society understands boundaries as keeping people away from each other instead of highlighting that 'the whole concept of a boundary depends on relationships: relationships between the two sides drawn by the boundary, and relationships among the people who recognize and affirm the boundary'.<sup>10</sup> This means that because boundaries do not exist outside connections among people, if we are to bring about a paradigm shift in how we understand differences, we need to emphasise the role of differences in relationships rather than relating them only to what separates.

How can this be done and, more importantly, why should it be done? The fact is that unless one recognises differences and deals with them in a way contrary to the present mode, there is no possibility to heal the rifts that exist – there is no real possibility of solidarity among people. True solidarity insists on genuine mutuality which can be reached only by recognising the common interests that bind humanity. Unless we embrace differences and diversity as constituents of relationships instead of seeing them as separating and opposing elements, we will not be able to heal what divides us. We will not be

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<sup>7</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 10.

able to be reconcilers. In other words, the work of reconciliation is intrinsic to changing the paradigms that have governed the understanding of differences. The work of reconciliation is a key process in the struggle to create communities of solidarity committed to building a future together. Therefore, reconciliation and solidarity are key elements in our work for justice, for a just future, one where no one is excluded.

### **Reconciliation as a Moral Choice**

The work of reconciliation is a humble process, a road to be travelled together, one step at a time, by those seeking to be reconciled. Reconciliation does not consist in unveiling preconceived answers to a given situation. Instead, the work of reconciliation projects itself into the future, opening up and concentrating on possibilities. It is not a matter of repeating or of limiting oneself to the past. Reconciliation understands that there is a plurality of truths and that this plurality is precisely what creates possibilities, what roots human freedom and makes choices possible. These rich possibilities propose and demand options that make reconciliation a moral virtue, a way of being and acting that requires responsible choice. Responsible choice is not about working to control situations. It is not a matter of being absolutely certain, before any steps are taken, that what one chooses is the most effective possible choice or one that guarantees success. Responsible choice recognises that what one chooses is but one way to proceed, that it is the best possible way to proceed given the present situation and the understanding one has.

Reconciliation makes it all the more obvious that moral responsibility has to focus on responding to others and establishing and maintaining mutuality and that this in turn redefines the concepts of autonomy, self-reliance and self-definition. The work of reconciliation focuses on responsibility as

participation in a communal work, laying the groundwork for the creative response of people in the present and the future. Responsible action means changing what can be altered in the present even though a problem is not completely resolved. Responsible action focuses on and respects partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions ... [by ourselves] and by others.<sup>11</sup>

The work of reconciliation must recognise that those who have been apart and opposed to each other need to move together, one step at a time, willing to accept that risk, ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the process. The work of reconciliation asks above all for a commitment to mutuality, to opening possibilities together even if one might never see them become a reality – this

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<sup>11</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethics of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 68.

over and above a desire for tangible changes. Reconciliation must be guided by a sense that the results of much work and commitment may be only a list of shared desires and possibilities, but even such a minimal outcome is the result of mature ethical commitment and work that allows and obliges one to sustain a reconciling attitude and behaviour.

Reconciliation is a moral choice because it makes one remember that all persons have themselves been, at some point in their lives, oppressors and exploiters. This makes one understand that good intentions are not enough. Moral action requires the risk of taking steps together, of being accountable to each other, of participating in a process that concentrates on the future precisely by working to alter the present. Reconciliation as moral action makes it clear that healing the rifts that divide people cannot be incidental to one's life. Reconciliation is essential to being a human being, a responsible person, a person fully alive.

Reconciliation for any community that is divided – and as long as there is injustice divisions among people will exist – is the only just way to proceed. It is the only way to embrace the responsibility we all have for our communities and for the country in which we live. The only way to participate effectively, to contribute effectively to the future of our world, is to be reconciling people willing to suggest and explore possibilities together with those we have oppressed or who have oppressed us. Reconciliation is the only way to proceed with all sides recognising that reality always transcends what is and that the future cannot be a slavish repetition of the present or of the past. Reconciliation is the only way we will all come together to create possibilities for a common, inclusive future that is life-giving for all. Such is the moral responsibility of all those who call themselves Christians. Such is our vocation as a religious people who, while acknowledging our potential for self-deception,<sup>12</sup> believe in eternal possibilities because we believe in an ever-abiding divine presence among us.

### **Reconciliation: Biblical Basis**

The way reconciliation is understood is greatly influenced by the process and elements the churches have historically considered necessary for what some earlier called 'the sacrament of penance' or 'confession', and is now called 'the sacrament of reconciliation'. For many, from a religious perspective, reconciliation requires interior repentance, an attitude that rejects wrongs freely done in the past and at the same time accepts responsibility for them. Interior repentance also requires a firm purpose of amendment: in other

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1977), 82–98.

words, a staunch resolution not to repeat the errors of the past. The sacrament of reconciliation also entails confessing one's sins to God or to a priest as well as offering satisfaction or reparation for the wrong done. This satisfaction or reparation is not made only to God, whom the sinner has offended, but also to the persons who have been 'injured by sin, for example, as reparation for injured love, for damage to reputation or property'.<sup>13</sup> Only once all these requirements are fulfilled is forgiveness granted.<sup>14</sup>

If we begin to conceive reconciliation, however, as an intrinsic element of justice and ground it in the biblical understanding of the absolute need to heal divisions as described in the parable in Matthew 25, reconciliation becomes different from how it has been traditionally conceived. Reconciliation as an element of justice is an essential way of knowing and healing brokenness in the world. Three requisites need to be fulfilled before one can come to know the reality of brokenness. First, to know brokenness one must be in the midst of brokenness, one has to be touched by it and have one's life impacted by it; second, one must take responsibility for it, understanding one's role in it; third, one must do something to heal it.<sup>15</sup> To heal brokenness – the work of reconciliation – begins the minute one enters into this threefold process of knowing its reality. To take responsibility for and start to work to heal the divisions that exist in any one given situation is already to become involved in the process of reconciliation. We simply cannot defer healing. Reconciliation begins to unfold even though only one side is willing to start working to make it happen. It cannot be postponed until those on the other side of the rift are willing to enter into this process. It cannot be postponed until reparation and restitution are made. Reconciliation should not be withheld or postponed for any reason whatsoever.

Perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in the early church's understanding of reconciliation reflected in the epistles of Colossians, in 2 Corinthians and in 1 John. The early followers of Jesus understood God's love and reconciliation to be something freely given, something that invited them to respond but was not conditioned by or dependent upon an expected response. The author

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, 'Satisfaction', in *Dictionary of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 462. See also articles on 'Penance', 'Penance, Sacrament of', 'Contrition', 'Metanoia', and 'Penalties of Sin'.

<sup>14</sup> The way these different elements are embodied depends of the different church traditions. For example, in the Roman Catholic tradition, confession of one's sins is to a priest while in the Protestant traditions, confession is to God.

<sup>15</sup> I am applying here Ignacio Ellacuría's understanding of the process of knowing reality to knowing the reality of brokenness and the need for reconciliation. There is a fuller explanation of this process in the article, '*Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology*', in Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 92–106. See Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Hacia una fundamentación del método teológico latinoamericano', *Estudios centroamericanos* 30, Nos 322–3 (agosto–septiembre, 1975), 419.

of 1 John says it succinctly: ‘We are to love, then, because God loved us first’ (1 John 4:19). God loves first and unconditionally and we should respond by loving others in the same manner and not setting conditions to our love. In Colossians the author talks about Christ’s reconciling act which does not depend on who is being reconciled or demands reparations but which indeed calls for a response. Reconciliation is presented as a one-sided process on God’s part. God knows the reality of brokenness because the rift between God and those created to share in the divine ‘affects’ God, if in no other way than by disrupting God’s plans. In 2 Corinthians two ideas about reconciliation become all the more clear. First, ‘It is all God’s work’ (2 Cor. 5:18). Second, reconciliation happens because God does not hold the faults of humanity against us (v. 19). Nowhere in this text does it say that humanity must change for reconciliation to happen. It says precisely the contrary: humanity changes because of the reconciliation God freely bestows.

Reconciliation was for the early church an intrinsic part of its mission, and mission was considered a constitutive element of the church. The church was to appeal to all to be reconciled to God but this reconciliation was only a second step. The first step has already been given by God: God already has carried out the work of reconciliation. God’s love comes first. The church knew that it could not preach what it did not live so it had to be a reconciling church, offering reconciliation freely, placing no conditions on it. The church knew that God appealed to all through the church’s preaching and, particularly, through its behaviour. That appeal was precisely an appeal to reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20).

Based on these gleanings from Scripture, reconciliation must be considered an element in the justice-seeking process that focuses on the future – a future that starts with the present and takes into consideration the past. In this sense reconciliation is a prophetic action: it has to do with healing people who suffer brokenness and divisions, and it looks for ways to make their hopes and expectations a reality in our world. Reconciliation is a prophetic action because it is about a preferred future of justice for all.

### **Reconciliation as a Religious, Social and Civic Virtue**

From an ethical perspective reconciliation is a virtue. As such, reconciliation is not only a value but also a praxis: a way of acting in a conscious and reflective way. One has to work at it in order to become a good practitioner of reconciliation. Virtues are not themes to be elaborated in eloquent speeches but rather a way of living. To be good at the virtue of reconciliation one has not only to understand what it is but also to practice it. Virtues involve the disposition and actual competence to accomplish moral good: the virtue of reconciliation leads to actual reconciling behaviour. From an ethical

perspective, to practise the virtue of reconciliation one must work in a concrete and effective way to build bridges over the rifts created by prejudices or by diversity of experiences, world-views or values. The virtue of reconciliation, like any other virtue, requires working at it so it can become a habit, the regular way of relating to others. In turn, because reconciliation becomes a regular way of relating, it also becomes a stable disposition of the person. This means that one cannot say one is in favour of reconciliation and at the same time believe it is enough to work at developing formulas for reconciliation so complex that they are not achievable, or think, for whatever reason, of whole groups of people that are to be excluded from the process of reconciliation. One has to find effective ways of working at reconciliation even if the results are only limited, even if it involves only a few people, even if all it accomplishes is to strengthen one's resolve and provide new perspectives regarding the work of reconciliation. It is obvious, then, that reconciliation does not exist unless one is in the process of reconciling oneself to others, unless one is working to reconcile oneself and others with those from whom we are estranged.

Reconciliation is a religious virtue because, for Christians, the main motive for it is precisely the Gospel message. It is a religious virtue because Christians believe that this is the kind of behaviour that Jesus demands from his followers. The biblical passages presented above make it clear that reconciliation is an important element in the manner the God of Jesus 'behaves', a behaviour self-communicated by God in a way that makes it possible for human beings to embrace it. As a religious virtue, then, reconciliation is a specific form of love. It is a specific form of grace. This means that reconciliation is one of the means God uses to enable human beings not only to relate to the God-self but to participate in divine nature itself.<sup>16</sup> Finally, from a religious perspective, reconciliation, as mentioned above, is not only a matter of personal behaviour but is a matter of the mission and very nature of the church.<sup>17</sup>

Reconciliation is also a social virtue. Human beings are social beings called to be in relationship and called to live as members of various communities – family, workplace, neighbourhood – that come together to form societies. Unfortunately, if it is true that human beings are social beings, it is also true that we fail repeatedly to be in right-relationships, that mistakes are made, that enmities are created. In this sense human beings live in tension between depending on others and being responsible to them while at the same

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<sup>16</sup> Though the language I use here is the traditional Roman Catholic theological language, this understanding is also embraced by the Protestant tradition, though different terminology is used. See Rahner and Vorgrimler, 'Grace', in *Dictionary of Theology*, 196–200.

<sup>17</sup> This point is clear in 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. This is also one of the points René David makes so clear in his 1981 article.

time wanting to be self-sufficient even to the point of becoming selfish and turning against others. Reconciliation as a social virtue imposes the duty to overcome what separates human beings, what turns one against another, in order to be able to live the sociability that is an intrinsic characteristic of humanity. Not to do so, not to work at overcoming what creates rifts among human beings, is a betrayal of what is a fundamental human characteristic. To create or maintain divisions among persons and peoples is detrimental to all of humanity. This is precisely why reconciliation is a much-needed social virtue.

Finally, in the specific case of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when this country has waged wars or armed conflict as the aggressor, reconciliation is a civic virtue. It is a disposition and a practice that committed and faithful citizens of the US must embrace if they believe in the absolute need for justice in order for this country to flourish. A true commitment to reconciliation will bring about a revival or the creation of a moral commitment on the part of this country to respect differences. The 'American way of life' – that is, the way the US is politically, economically and socially organised, its mores and core values, both secular and religious that constitute the organising principle of the nation – may be the preferred way for the US but it is not the only way of life that is good. It is not, therefore, the way of life that must be chosen by other nations and other peoples in our world. Reconciliation as a civic virtue in the US at the beginning of the twenty-first century must necessarily start with sobering humility. The US must recognise that it needs the rest of the world. It must search its soul and candidly disclose that it needs others, that it must build common interests with nations and peoples around the world. This country must recognize that without authentic mutual solidarity with other nations the 'American way of life' is condemned to disappear. Reconciliation as a civic virtue obliges the people of the US to recognize that the richness and privileges they enjoy have been obtained and are maintained, to a great extent, at the expense of others. The exploitation that makes possible the riches and privileges enjoyed in the US is what has created the rift between the US and other countries and peoples. The need to heal that rift for the sake of the future of the world – that is what reconciliation as a civic virtue aims to accomplish.

### **Reconciliation: Building a Common Future for All**

Reconciliation necessitates that people come together and agree on the future of our world. True reconciliation necessarily will arouse shared feelings and lead to joint action. Reconciliation involves building a common programmatic vision about our world, and this cannot be done outside a process of dialogue. In authentic dialogue the parties involved seek not to

convince one another or to move the other to one's own perspective. They seek instead to move all those involved to a point of view and a programme of action that has been forged together. For the kind of dialogue needed for reconciliation to happen, we must embrace a way of understanding differences, as explained above, that does not focus on what separates, excludes and sets us in opposition, but rather recognises that differences presume boundaries that enable people to make connections and come together. Dialogue cannot happen unless we recognise differences and diversity not necessarily as what separates us but as what we each bring to the table, as the resources from which each of us involved in the process of reconciliation can draw to conceptualise the future and begin to create it.

Such an understanding raises a question: what about our values? A call to true dialogue and reconciliation is not a call to betray one's values. However, all those who engage in dialogue need to understand there are different values and/or that the same values can be actualised differently in diverse circumstances. Sometimes through the process of dialogue one comes to know that what originally were thought to be values contrary to ours are simply values different from ours, not necessarily values opposed to ours. It often happens that personal insecurity makes us incapable of seeing what we could well consider positive in the values held by others. Of course there are values and counter-values. Some values directly oppose or work to diminish the ones we hold. This is important and should not be minimised. However, there are more areas of similarities than of dissimilarities among the values that people hold. Commitment to dialogue makes us become experts in finding these similarities, these areas of agreement, joint understandings, common visions about the future of our world, our future as a people and a nation.

Understanding, appreciating and learning from realities, experiences and world-views of people who might be quite different from us is essential to the process of dialogue and reconciliation. We are linked to others no matter how dissimilar we might be, for in our world today no country can consider itself isolated, apart from others, not interconnected with others. Common interests exist in our world. We do not need to invent them. We do need, however, to recognise consciously those common interests, to embrace the infinite number of ways in which we are interconnected with people who live far away as much as with people who are nearby.

The first realisation in this part of dialogue is indeed the acceptance that we all, out of our experiences, have something to contribute to a common future. Secondly, we are called to learn to see reality from the point of view of others. We are called to decentralise ourselves and not only understand the perspective of others but also learn to see what is positive in their understandings, how their understandings can enrich us. Of course this is not an easy process. We are talking about building a programmatic world-view



that uses a shared understanding of history, the experiences of the everyday life of people who live in very different circumstances, and our own dreams and expectations about our world. A programmatic world-view must remain open to developments because it is not about an absolute future but about a historical future. It must remain open to developments for it must not impose an ideology but rather respond to the needs of the people and be intentional about being open to different possibilities.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, no matter where we live, we need to realise that getting to know each other and learning about the many interconnections that exist among people all over the world is a viable and important first step in the process of reconciliation. We are all the poorer when we forget how we need each other, how we are related to each other. When we do not understand that who we are and what we are about is closely linked to the rest of the world, we are dehumanised because life becomes poorer when it is deprived of what gives all human beings meaning: friendship, love, relationships.<sup>19</sup> Without a strong sense of interdependence we lose in part what is precisely characteristic of the human species: sociability.

This will not happen easily. Often it seems almost impossible even to get those with whom we seek to be reconciled to come to the table. And, though the gratuitousness of God's reconciliation demands of us to be reconciling persons, the process of reconciliation involves more than one party. This means that those with whom we are trying to be reconciled must recognise that reconciliation is needed. Perhaps the key is to make those we need to be reconciled with understand that what one seeks is not to convince them that they are wrong or to win them to one's side. What we seek is true dialogue that will move us jointly to a place we have created together. What all involved need to understand is that reconciliation is a process and that the dialogue that is central to this process must start as soon as possible, at whatever level is possible, in whatever circumstances exist. Dialogue in this situation becomes a practice of reconciliation which needs to be sustained and enriched by the common experiences of coming together, of getting to know each other and understanding each other for the sake of a common future.

### **Reconciliation: Dealing with the Past, Rooted in the Present, in View of the Future**

The process of becoming acquainted in new and better ways and of building together a programmatic world-view is but one of the elements of

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<sup>18</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 24–31.

<sup>19</sup> See Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), particularly Chapter 10.

reconciliation. Undoubtedly and necessarily we also must deal with the wrongs that have been committed on all sides causing pain and suffering to many. This makes the process of reconciliation all the more taxing and difficult, all the more demanding and urgent. Suffering is not the prerogative of any one side. There has been and there is suffering on all sides. There is no easy way through this rough and dangerous part of the path to reconciliation. However, even when it comes to wrongs committed and suffering inflicted we have to keep in mind that reconciliation is first of all about the future, and not about the past. We always have to keep in mind, when looking at the past, that the passing of time makes retrieving it impossible, that who we are today is different from who we were in the past, who we were even in the recent past, even yesterday. This is why 'any return is not a return: it is coming into a new place.'<sup>20</sup> This is why looking at the past only makes sense if it is part of constructing the future.

The second thing to keep in mind is that, in the process of reconciliation, dealing with the past, dealing with the wrongs we have done and the pain we have caused each other, cannot be in any way related to a sense of revenge.<sup>21</sup> Revenge is a destructive force that becomes a never-ending and widening spiral of violence. Revenge is a stagnating force that makes future-oriented movement impossible. It is antithetical to reconciliation because it capitalises on what separates us; it insists on payment for what simply cannot be paid for.<sup>22</sup> Revenge refuses to recognise that wrongs have been committed and suffering has been caused on all sides. Revenge does not make right what was wrong or restore the value of what was lost. Most often revenge stems from attempts to assuage guilt for what we did or allowed to happen, guilt we feel but will not admit. Revenge promotes a self-centredness that makes any attempt to build common interests and actions impossible.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation – Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 11.

<sup>21</sup> The violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians rages on while I write this article. Yesterday a Palestinian woman who lives in a border town in Gaza spoke in her broken English with a US television reporter. 'The people who want revenge have a little heart,' she said gesturing with her hand to show the tiniest of space between her two fingers. Behind her one could see her children playing with their little friends.

<sup>22</sup> The importance of giving up any desire for revenge is striking in the following event. In 1996 the Cuban Air Force shot down two small civilian airplanes belonging to a Cuban exile group, 'Brothers to the Rescue'. Though the families of the four men killed have pursued action against the Cuban government in the US courts, one of the families has taken the position of not asking for nor accepting any monetary compensation for the death of their son. In part their reason might be not to 'put a price' on the life of their dead relative. But part has also to do with the desire not to seek revenge.

<sup>23</sup> In the history of my own country, Cuba, there is an important example of the need not to seek revenge. The 'Manifiesto de Montecristi', Cuba's declaration of independence from Spain, written by José Martí, 'the father of the country', on 25 March 1895, twice speaks against vengeance. The document insists that those declaring war have been cleansed of hatred

In dealing with the past we often talk about restitution and retribution. When we claim retribution for those who suffered and are no longer with us, is it not our own needs and expectations that motivate us? Just as we say that the dead demand restitution and retribution, we could say that they pardon those who harmed them and that their memory pleads for reconciliation. Those of us living now are the ones who decide how to appropriate and use what has happened in the past. We do indeed choose how to read into the present and future the sufferings of the past. Those who are alive today, not those who have died, are the ones who will benefit from any restitution and retribution. Therefore, those who are alive today can also move beyond restitution and retribution that focuses on the past and embrace reconciliation with their eyes fixed in the future.<sup>24</sup>

What can we say about those who are still alive who have been personally wronged, who have endured pain and suffering, who can point to specific individuals who have exploited and abused them? This is a most delicate and personal matter but not a private one. Personal forgiveness or non-forgiveness is something in which we all are involved. Any attempt to hide or to ignore the pain and suffering inflicted on some will be devastating for the creation of a common future. But how we deal with that pain and suffering cannot be left in the hands of individuals, for what they do becomes part of how we all make possible or impede reconciliation. Though we need to acknowledge and give a public hearing to the voices of those who have suffered, reconciliation must prevail instead of the demand for retribution or the decision not to forgive.<sup>25</sup>

We must recognise that if we do not make public the memories of those who suffered personally, individual and national healing will not be possible. However, we also must embrace the fact that without reconciliation we cannot move on to build together the future.<sup>26</sup> As a people we must understand that those who have suffered need to tell their stories, to have others witness to the horror that has been inflicted on them, in order to have their memories respected, to find a way of dealing with what they have endured, to regain their dignity and wholeness as human beings. Unless those who have suffered can be healed, the nation will suffer by not being able to

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and have a sense of indulgence regarding Cubans who are timid or who are mistaken. It also mentions that during the war and once it is over they will be merciful with those who repent. See Carlos Ripoll, *José Martí – Antología Mayor* (New York: Editorial Dos Ríos, 1995), 59–61.

<sup>24</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 257–82.

<sup>25</sup> I heard Sister Helen Prejean, a nun who works with persons on Death Row and who opposes capital punishment, make this point in a public lecture a few years ago. See, Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking – An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the USA* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> This is the understanding of Archbishop Tutu which has become entrenched in large areas of South African society and which has guided the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

benefit from what they can contribute to the building of our common future. Yet the process of personal healing must happen within the national process of reconciliation and in no way can it militate against it.<sup>27</sup> Those who for many reasons find it difficult to embrace reconciliation, given what they have personally suffered, might do well to take seriously the many who have been at each other's throat, who have been enemies, and yet have chosen to struggle to live together in peace.<sup>28</sup>

### **A Spirituality, a Culture, a Mystique of Reconciliation**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century I believe the future of the US as a nation and of the whole world depends on our ability to develop a spirituality, a culture and a mystique of reconciliation that will make it possible for us to practice reconciliation as a religious, social and civic virtue. To embrace a spirituality of reconciliation is to understand that for Christians there can be no possibility of relating to God unless we have a reconciling attitude and a reconciling practice towards each other. Because our relationship with God is intrinsically linked to the way we relate to each other, a reconciling God cannot but ask of those who believe to have a reconciling attitude towards each other. To relate to God is not something apart from how we live our daily lives. Therefore, our response to a reconciling God has to be a reconciling day-to-day living without exception and without conditions.

Culture includes all that we humans have cultivated and dreamed, all that we have created to deal with the world: tools, customs, societal structures,

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<sup>27</sup> The *Sunday Times* of Capetown, South Africa (6 December 1998) carried an article entitled, 'Forgive the torturer, not the torture', written by Wilhelm Verwoerd, lecturer in political philosophy and applied ethics at Stellenbosch University. The article talks about Ashley Forbes, a black South African, tortured by Jeffrey Benzien, who before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of that country had 'publicly demonstrated his notorious "wet-bag" torture technique'. The article says that it was 'Forbes's choice to put aside legitimate feelings of anger and humiliation and thus, "get on with the rest of my life"'. The article goes on: 'Sometimes victims are asked to forgive for the sake of perpetrators, to release the wrongdoers from their burden of guilt. That is an important part of forgiveness, but not the whole story ... Forbes shows that forgiveness should be encouraged, perhaps in the first place, as an antidote to the poison of unresolved bitterness and repressed resentment, as a call to those violated to liberate themselves from the prison of victimhood – for the sake of themselves, their children and the rest of society ... A powerful emotional reason for resisting forgiveness is because it is seen as diminishing the seriousness of violations. Forgiveness becomes a sign of disrespect to those who have been violated ... Archbishop Desmond Tutu ... is requesting nobody to forgive the gross human-rights violations of the past. It is a call to recognise the humanity of "perpetrators" even if their humanity is hidden behind a wet-bag ... Those who suffered and continue to suffer are given the moral first place they deserve. The truth commission process flows from that commitment.'

<sup>28</sup> See Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 23–5.

ideas about reality, and representations of ideas. A culture of reconciliation, therefore, requires us not only to counter in every way possible enmity, opposition and alienation, but actually to nurture and foster openness, dialogue and a dynamic understanding of differences not based on exclusion and confrontation. A culture of reconciliation is key in this whole process because all nations have a cultural origin before they have a political one. A culture of reconciliation is important for the US because the way it has dealt and still deals with many nations and peoples around the globe has resulted in deep-seated mistrust, enmity, war. Given the primacy of culture in all national identification, reconciliation has to be an option that those of us who live in the US make for ourselves, a practice that we implement in every aspect of our lives.

Finally, we need a mystique of reconciliation. A mystique is an intangible force that enables those who embrace it to face all reality. It refers to an understanding that provides a social cohesion, enabling participants to do what they have not been able to do alone but what becomes possible when one participates in a shared experience.<sup>29</sup> A mystique of reconciliation, therefore, makes it possible for us, even in the most adverse of circumstances, to practise the virtue of reconciliation as a way – the most needed way – to be truly Christian, to be truly patriotic. A mystique of reconciliation provides the strength that we might not have individually to struggle against the conviction that we have nothing to repent about, that as a country our motives always are liberty, freedom and democracy. A mystique of reconciliation will make it possible for us to be open to the dreams and the hopes of people all over the world, particularly the poor and oppressed. It will allow us to welcome other ways of understanding reality and of organising societies, economies, governments different from those in the US. Only then will we have a solid base on which to build peace and justice. Only a mystique of reconciliation will help us create a world in which the main preoccupation is how to stand together as one, how to recognise the common interests that bind us, how to be inclusive societies that take into consideration the well-being of all peoples.

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<sup>29</sup> Renny Golden, *The Hour of the Poor, the Hour of the Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 17.

# The Theology of Reconciliation and the Recovery of Memory Project in Guatemala

David Tombs

Political theology emerges out of a readiness to see God's presence in the political world, and a willingness to think through the implications of this from a faith perspective and for a faith perspective. As such, political theology requires a two-way engagement with political issues. As a first step, it means learning about politics and the realities of the political world. As a second step, it involves an openness to rethinking theological doctrines in ways that will sustain Christian concern for peace, justice and reconciliation. It is the willingness to rethink theology in the light of concrete political experience that gives political theology much of its creativity and relevance. It reformulates the understanding of Christian doctrines in the light of practical experience.

In this way, a theological perspective can help to deepen an understanding of the thorny issues raised in the processes of political reconciliation, including transitional justice, truth-recovery, political forgiveness, social healing, apologies and reparations.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the theological challenges raised by these reconciliation processes – like the relationship between truth and freedom, reconciliation and healing, forgiveness and apology, and amnesty and amnesia – can be important resources for understanding and critiquing how these dynamics operate in Christian doctrines.

For this reason, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–98) has been the focus of particular theological interest. The involvement of prominent church leaders in the commission, and the implicit

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<sup>1</sup> For good overviews on the dynamics of political reconciliation, see especially David Bloomfield et al., *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook* (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003); Neil J. Kritz (ed.), *Transitional Justice* (3 vols; Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995); Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Rigby, *Justice and Reconciliation: After the Violence* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998); Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice After Civil Conflict* (Georgetown, SC: Georgetown University Press, rev. edn 2003 [2001]); on truth commissions, see especially Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

– and at times quite explicit – Christian ‘theology of reconciliation’ that developed in the commission’s work, give it an obvious theological significance.<sup>2</sup>

Desmond Tutu repeatedly emphasised his faith in the healing power of truth-telling, captured in the banners ‘Revealing is Healing’ at commission hearings, and personally urged those involved to forgive in a spirit of reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> Tutu was a charismatic and inspiring example for many South Africans, but some critics questioned whether it was legitimate to include prayers and hymns at public hearings and orientate the commission so much around confessional convictions. It seemed that Christian morality had too prominent a place and Christian notions of forgiveness were being giving precedence over the victims’ rights to justice.<sup>4</sup>

In comparison with South Africa, the religious elements in Latin American truth-recovery processes have had a much lower profile. Yet the Latin American commission are still important resources for grounding a theology of reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> It is unfortunate that so little has been written about them from a theological perspective.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The commission’s final report has been published as Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRCSA), *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (5 vols; Cape Town: Juta and Co., 1998; London: Macmillan, 1999), hereafter *TRC Report*. On the work of the commission, see Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Piet Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission: A Journey Through the Past and Present into the Future of South Africa* (Vanderjipark, SA: Carpe Diem Books, 1999); Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998; New York: Times Books, 1999); Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and R. Suresh Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid’s Criminal Governance* (New York: St Martin’s Press, rev. edn 1997 [1996]); Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (eds), *Looking Back and Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press; London: Zed Books, 2000). For some of the theological issues arising in relation to the commission, see H. Russel Botman and Robin M. Petersen (eds), *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Desmond Tutu, ‘Foreword by Chairperson’, in *TRC Report*, Vol. 1, 1–23. For his own autobiographical account of the experience, see Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday; London: Rider, 1999). On the theology of ubuntu underlying Tutu’s calls for forgiveness and reconciliation, see Michal Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997); John De Gruchy, *Reconciliation* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> This is even more notable in view of the fact that the South African commission was in many ways an innovative experiment and its adoption of ‘selective amnesty’ makes it the exception rather than the rule.

<sup>6</sup> A partial exception to this is Walter Wink, *When the Powers Fail: Reconciliation in the Healing of the Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1988), 33–48.

For those interested in how the debates might look rather different when related to the Latin American context, the recent Guatemalan truth commissions, which deal with roughly the same period as the South African commission, offer an interesting comparison. In terms of Christian involvement in the issues, the Guatemalan experience is also particularly relevant because the official UN commission ‘Guatemala: Memory of Silence’ (1997–99) was accompanied by a church initiative entitled ‘The Recovery of Memory Project’ (1995–98) motivated by an explicitly theological concern.<sup>7</sup>

The church initiative (usually known by its Spanish acronym as the REMHI project) illustrates how the church can be practically involved in a positive way in the truth-seeking process, and demonstrates the significance this has for reconciliation. REMHI is an inspiring testimony to the social ministry of the Catholic Church in Guatemala. Its commitment to truth as a path of reconciliation deserves much wider public awareness and recognition. However, despite the success of the REMHI project as a truth-recovery process, the Guatemalan experience is also a clear illustration of the wider problems that often remain. Nowhere is this more clear than in Guatemala’s weak judicial system and the high levels of impunity that the Guatemalan military continues to enjoy.

The elusiveness of justice in Guatemala highlights the limitations of any reconciliation initiative when perpetrators remain unrepentant and unaccountable. For those committed to peace-building and reconciliation this poses an unavoidable dilemma. On the one hand there is an ethical and theological requirement that justice and reconciliation should always go together; yet on the other hand in many situations this seems to be an impossible hope. Those who work for reconciliation do not want to accept that in such situations nothing can be done; but nor can they accept that justice be left out of the discussion. Ways have to be found for the integrity of the reconciliation process to be preserved even when external constraints seem to undermine the foundation of justice on which it should be built. This is not just a political challenge; it is also an ethical and theological issue that goes to the heart of the credibility of a political theology of reconciliation.

### **Truth and Memory in the REMHI Project**

Guatemala has experienced high levels of political repression ever since the Spanish conquest (1524–34). However, its recent history has included three

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<sup>7</sup> This is also significant because much of the theological debate around truth commissions has centred around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by a Protestant outlook. The REMHI project offers an opportunity for engagement with a distinctively Catholic theological perspective.



particularly brutal periods of political violence: first in 1954, after the US-sponsored coup against the reformist government; then again in 1967–71, when organised right-wing paramilitaries first emerged and death squads started to kill and ‘disappear’ people; and finally in 1978–85, the period which is often referred to simply as ‘*La Violencia*’.<sup>8</sup>

The UN Historical Clarification Commission had been agreed in 1994 as part of the peace negotiations and began its work in 1997 after the final peace agreements in 1996.<sup>9</sup> It was to study the period 1962–94 and recommend measures to promote peace and reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> The Recovery of Historical Memory project (known as the REMHI project) was an interdiocesan initiative of the Catholic Church established in 1995 to support and supplement the UN commission in dealing with this painful chapter in Guatemalan history.<sup>11</sup> The REMHI project compiled 5465 testimonies documenting 52,467 victims of human rights violations.<sup>12</sup> It identified the Guatemalan military and associated paramilitaries as responsible for nearly 90 per cent of the abuses, whilst attributing less than 5 per cent to the guerrillas.<sup>13</sup> The worst of the violence took place between 1980 and 1983 – under the military regimes of General Lucas García (1978–82),

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<sup>8</sup> Of the extensive literature on the Guatemalan conflict, see especially Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads and U.S. Power* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); for an extensive bibliography, see Ralph L. Woodward, *Guatemala* (Oxford: Clío, rev. edn 1992 [1981]).

<sup>9</sup> The commission is usually known by its Spanish acronym as the CEH (*Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*). Whilst it is commonly referred to as a ‘truth commission’, the Guatemalan military insisted that the commission did not have the word ‘truth’ in its official title, which was ‘The Commission to Clarify Past Human Rights Violations and Acts of Violence that have caused the Guatemalan Population to Suffer’. The final twelve-volume report was presented in February 1999, and published four months later as CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio* (Guatemala: United Nations, 1999) available on CD-ROM (published April 2000), or at <<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh>>. An English translation of the Prologue, Conclusions (including statistical appendices) and Recommendations, has been published as: United Nations Commission for Historical Memory, *Guatemala Memory of Silence: Summary* (New York: United Nations, 1999), and is available at <<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english>>. On similarities and differences between the CEH and the South African TRC, see Joanna R. Quinn, ‘Lessons Learned: Practical Lessons Gleaned from Inside the Truth Commissions of Guatemala and South Africa’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 25.4 (November 2003), 1117–49.

<sup>10</sup> Most commentators refer to the ‘thirty-six-year war’, dating this period as 1960–96. For background to the REMHI report and its objectives, see M. López Levy, ‘Recovery: The Uses of Memory and History in the Guatemalan Church’s REMHI Project’ in M.A. Hayes and D. Tombs (eds), *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 103–17; Kathy Ogle, ‘Guatemala’s REMHI Project: Memory from Below’, *NACLA* 32.2 (1998), 33–4.

<sup>11</sup> REMHI is the Spanish acronym for ‘Recuperación de la memoria histórica’.

<sup>12</sup> REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 289.

<sup>13</sup> REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 290.

General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83), and General Oscar Mejía Víctores – which accounted for nearly 80 per cent of the victims recorded by REMHI.<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on the REMHI statistics and combining them with its own investigations and other sources, the UN CEH report estimated that in total 200,000 people had been killed or disappeared, as well as 200,000 children orphaned and 40,000 women widowed during the conflict.<sup>15</sup>

The conviction that documenting the truth of what happened in these years would make an important contribution to long-term healing at both an individual and a political level guided the REMHI project from start to finish. Chaired by Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was Auxiliary Bishop for Guatemala City and Head of the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office (ODHAG), the REMHI organisers made a careful study of how their work might be of most help to the victims and survivors of the violence.<sup>16</sup> This makes the project one of the most significant and creative examples of the work of the church in Latin America for human rights.<sup>17</sup> After three years of work the four-volume report *Guatemala: Nunca Mas!* was presented on 24 April 1998.<sup>18</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 290.

<sup>15</sup> The CEH registered a total of 42,275 victims (including men, women and children) and noted that 83 per cent of identified victims were members of indigenous communities; CEH, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Conclusions*, §1. It also confirmed REMHI's verdict that the Guatemalan military were responsible for the overwhelming majority of these, estimating that state forces and associated paramilitaries were responsible for 93 per cent of the violations, *Conclusions*, §80. Furthermore, after a careful study, the CEH confirmed that the military's scorched-earth offensive in the highlands (1981–83), should be classified as an act of genocide; *Conclusions*, §§108–23. On the statistics relating to the conflict, see especially Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak and Herbert F. Spierer, *State Violence in Guatemala: 1960–1996: A Quantitative Reflection* (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1999); Patrick Ball, 'Exploring the Implications of Source Selection in the the Case of Gautemalan State Terror, 1977–1995', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46.3 (June 2002), 427–50.

<sup>16</sup> On Gerardi's life, work and untimely death, see especially Scott Wright, 'Oscar Romero and Juan Gerardi: Truth, Memory and Hope' in M.A. Hayes and D. Tombs (eds), *Truth and Memory*, 11–43.

<sup>17</sup> As a ground-breaking church initiative in human rights work, REMHI stands in continuity with the remarkable *Nunca Mais* report compiled by the Archdiocese of São Paulo in the previous decade; *Torture in Brazil: A Shocking Report on the Pervasive Use of Military Torture by the Brazilian Governments 1964–79, Secretly Prepared by the Archdiocese of São Paulo* (trans. Jaime Wright; ed. Joan Dassin; New York: Vintage Books, 1986 [Portuguese orig. 1985]). On the compilation of the *Nunca Mais* report, see Lawrence Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, rev. edn 1998 [1990]).

<sup>18</sup> REMHI, *Guatemala Nunca Más* (Informe proyecto interdiocesano de recuperación de la memoria histórica; 4 vols; Guatemala: and Oficina del Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala [ODHAG], 1998), it is available online via <<http://www.odhag.org.gt>>.

following year an abridged version was published in English as *Guatemala: Never Again!*<sup>19</sup>

As Thomas Quigley of the US Catholic Conference notes in his Foreword to the English edition, *Guatemala: Never Again!* is more than a truth commission report: it should also be considered as a theological work and part of the church's pastoral mission for reconciliation and healing.<sup>20</sup> Christians are called to this work in the faith that this mission is not just ethical but truly 'theological'; it deepens the understanding of God's painful love for the world.

From a Christian perspective, there is an important biblical principle behind the truth-seeking of investigative commissions. Bishop Gerardi made this explicit in his REMHI presentation speech in the Cathedral in Guatemala City, when he pointed to the promise made in John 8:32: 'For you will know the truth and the truth will set you free'. As Gerardi observed, REMHI sought to give practical expression to Christian faith in the power of truth:

The essential objective behind the REMHI project during its three years of work has been to know the truth that will make us all free (John 8.32). Reflecting on the Historical Clarification Accord, we, as people of faith, discovered a call from God for our mission as church – that truth should be the vocation of all humanity.<sup>21</sup>

Picking up on the words of the preceding verse, 'If you continue in my work, you are truly my disciples' (John 8:31), Gerardi explained:

If we orient ourselves according to the Word of God, we cannot hide or cover up reality. We cannot distort history, nor should we silence the truth ... To open ourselves to truth and to face our personal and collective reality are not options that can be accepted or rejected. They are indispensable requirements for all people and societies that seek to humanize themselves and to be free. They make us face our most essential human condition: that we are sons and daughters of God, called to participate in our Father's freedom.<sup>22</sup>

The Greek word for truth – *aletheia* – which literally means 'uncovered' (*aletheia*), is an apt expression for truth-telling as 'discovery'. To discover what has hitherto been hidden and bring it out into the open may involve new pain, but it can also help society and individuals to deal with the past and discover new paths for the future.

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<sup>19</sup> REMHI/ODHAG, *Guatemala: Never Again!* (The Official Report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala; trans. G. Tovar Siebentritt; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; London: Catholic Institute for International Relations and Latin America Bureau, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Quigley, 'Foreword to the English Edition' in *Guatemala: Never Again!*, xv.

<sup>21</sup> Juan Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', in REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, xxiii–xxv (xxiv).

<sup>22</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxiv–xxv.

As Gerardi commented:

It is a liberating and humanizing truth that makes it possible for all men and women to come to terms with themselves and their life stories. It is a truth that challenges each one of us to recognise our individual and collective responsibility and to commit ourselves to action so that those abominable acts never happen again ... Discovering the truth is painful, but it is without doubt a healthy and liberating action.<sup>23</sup>

Gerardi therefore explicitly linked the REMHI project's search for truth with the church's pastoral ministry of reconciliation, saying that 'We are called to reconciliation. Christ's mission is one of reconciliation. His presence calls us to be agents of reconciliation in this broken society and to try and to place the victims and perpetrators within the framework of justice.'<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, the actual process of investigation and testimony can be as important as the publication of the findings. In testifying to a commission, survivors document their story. Sometimes this is the first time that they have been able to record it officially. To have their testimony formally acknowledged in this way often provides a strong sense of vindication, especially if it follows years of systematic denial by the authorities and wider society, and even their own self-denial. In presenting the REMHI report, Gerardi recognised that recovering the memory of past abuses would create new pain for many of the survivors. He was aware that 'It is a painful truth, full of memories of the country's deep and bloody wounds.'<sup>25</sup> For some victims, testifying to the truth about atrocities might at first seem to be an additional punishment rather than an affirmation of their dignity. None the less, the REMHI project was founded on the belief that despite the pain, for many people facing up to the memory of past atrocities was an essential step in the healing process. As Gerardi put it: 'To open ourselves to truth and to face our personal and collective reality are not options that can be accepted or rejected. They are indispensable requirements for all people and societies that seek to humanize themselves and to be free.'<sup>26</sup>

Many interviewees testified to the significance of breaking the silence as the starting point for healing. For those able to face it, recalling the abuse and re-experiencing its pain ultimately had positive consequences. One testimony affirmed: 'To make things bearable we have to bring them to light. That's the only way the wounds will be healed.'<sup>27</sup>

Opening the scars in order to help wounds that never properly healed is the central principle behind therapeutic work for a wide range of traumas. As trauma expert Judith Herman puts it: 'Atrocities ... refuse to be buried.

<sup>23</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxv.

<sup>24</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxv.

<sup>26</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxiv-xxv.

<sup>27</sup> Case 0569 Cobán (September 1981); cited Carlos M. Beristain, 'Guatemala: Nunca Más', *Forced Migration Review*, 3 (December 1998), 23-6 (25).

Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work ... Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.<sup>28</sup>

The experience of many torture victims shows that it is naïve to think that healing can occur in some magical way as soon as the truth becomes known. State terror is likely to leave deep scars.<sup>29</sup> The scale of the violence, the different ways in which it is experienced (often in combination), its continuance over time, its communal element and the fact that it is legitimated by the state multiplies the experience of trauma. Survivors often need long-term help and support in rebuilding their personal identities and their social confidence. Yet therapists who have worked with Latin American torture victims support the view that the past usually needs to be confronted in order to make new futures possible. One group of therapists who have specialised in this work in Chile comment:

... the more victims try to forget and leave their terrible experience in the past, the more they tend to reproduce it in the present in the form of emotional illness. But once they begin to confront the past directly, the past, present, and future can be adequately discriminated. To achieve this, we have found that the person or the family needs to recount the traumatic experience in detail, and express the emotions it produced.<sup>30</sup>

The South African Commission also cautioned against over-optimistic visions of storytelling as healing. They note that the dynamics involved are often much more complex than simple formulas suggest.<sup>31</sup> Whilst there were a number of well-publicised examples of victims finding healing, and other cases in which victims and perpetrators experienced meaningful reconciliation, there were also cases which seemed to be made worse rather than better. In some cases victims were retraumatised by the very experience of giving testimony, in others they felt an initial sense of healing but then suffered anti-climax and frustration.<sup>32</sup> Alongside the cases of reconciliation there were many cases where victims and perpetrators remained estranged.

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<sup>28</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, rev. edn 2001 [orig. 1992]).

<sup>29</sup> See Dianna Ortiz, *The Blindfold's Eye: My Journey from Torture to Truth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> D. Becker et al., 'Therapy with the Victims of Political Repression in Chile: The Challenge of Social Reparation', *Journal of Social Issues* 46.3 (1990), 133–49 (142); see also Nancy C. Hollander, *Love in a Time of Hate: Liberation Psychology in Latin America* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> For a careful discussion, see B. Hamber, 'Does the Truth Heal? A Psychological Perspective on Political Strategies for Dealing with the Legacy of Political Violence', in N. Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 131–48 (esp. 133–8).

<sup>32</sup> Feelings of frustration were exacerbated by the long delay over remuneration, especially in contrast to the relatively quick progress on amnesties.

Truth-recovery processes will not affect everyone the same way. Each individual is different and will react in his or her own individual way. Thus whilst there are good arguments in support of individual and political healing through truth, there are obvious problems with any simplistic 'formula approach' to truth-telling as healing.<sup>33</sup> A universal expectation of healing through truth is unrealistic. Equally unrealistic is a belief that truth on its own can heal every social injustice or transform political power. Other structural and social changes are needed alongside the recovery of the truth if political and economic institutions are to be changed for the better. 'Healing through truth' is not a universal law, nor is it a simple mechanical process. Likewise, truth-recovery is not a sufficient condition or a guaranteed means of political reconciliation. None the less, the recovery and official acknowledgment of truth will often be a critical early step in the complex process of individual healing, political reconciliation and social justice.<sup>34</sup>

Aware of the complexity of truth-telling and memory-recovery, the organizers of the REMHI project deliberately sought to reconstruct their history as a process of healing. To gather this history REMHI interviewers went out to the communities rather than expecting the communities to come to them. Carlos Beristain, a coordinator of the project, notes that when interviewers were asked why reconstructing this history was so important, they would answer, 'to understand the truth, to dignify the dead, to recover the power of speech and of social initiative, and to instil the value of memory in future generations'.<sup>35</sup> To be sensitive to local needs, REMHI trained more than 800 local interviewers who would be aware of local customs. The interviews did more than ask for the bare facts; they sought to get to the heart of the experience. They explored people's subjective experience, examined the social impact that the violence had, and asked about how it was interpreted by those who suffered it most.<sup>36</sup> The seven questions used in collecting testimonies were: What happened? When? Where? Who were the people responsible? What effect did this have on people's lives? What did they do to face up to the situation? Why did they think it happened?<sup>37</sup>

In this way, the project was important for the process as well as for the product. For many Guatemalans it was the first chance for their painful experiences to be acknowledged and their stories to be shared with others.

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<sup>33</sup> As the South African Commission points out, the context in which truth-telling takes place is very important. The healing potential of storytelling is much likelier when it is for an official body and in front of a respectful audience; *TRC Report*, Vol. V, 351.

<sup>34</sup> See Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Carlos M. Beristain, 'The Value of Memory', *Forced Migration Review* 2 (August 1998), 24–6 (25).

<sup>36</sup> Beristain, 'The Value of Memory', 25.

<sup>37</sup> Beristain, 'The Value of Memory', 24–5.

Alongside the gathering of information, the project also helped to organise follow-up activities, including community discussions and celebrations.

When Gerardi presented the findings of this work to the people of Guatemala at a special ceremony at the Cathedral on 24 April 1996 he spoke in a moving way of why the project was so important. He warned, 'We are collecting the people's memories because we want to contribute to the construction of a different country. This path was and continues to be full of risks, but the construction of the Kingdom of God entails risks, and only those who have strength to confront those risks can be its builders.'<sup>38</sup>

The truth of this warning was illustrated two days later when Gerardi was bludgeoned to death in the garage of his house on 26 April 1998.<sup>39</sup> In a callous reference to Gerardi's comments in his address two days earlier, when he mentioned the Suffering Servant disfigured beyond human semblance (Is. 52.13–53.4), the assassins used a concrete block to beat Gerardi's face beyond recognition.<sup>40</sup>

Gerardi's murder was both a savage reprisal against someone who had dared to make the truth known, and a warning to others that Guatemala had not changed so much. It sent the clear message that the violence did not just belong in the past and remained an ominous threat in the present. Gerardi's standing as a bishop gave him as much informal protection as any individual might have in Guatemala and his murder showed that that nobody was safe from the violence. It reminded others that thinking and speaking for justice in Guatemala could be a matter of life and death. This was seen as an assertion of military impunity. It was intended as a symbolic message that little in the country had changed. That even with truth there would not be justice.

## The Struggle for Justice in Guatemala

Many critics of truth commissions have pointed to the difficulties in achieving justice as one of the most significant limitations of truth commissions. A Christian theology of reconciliation needs to take these concerns seriously.<sup>41</sup> An important legacy from liberation theologies in Latin America and

<sup>38</sup> Gerardi, 'Speech on Presentation of the REMHI Report', xxiii–xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> On the bizarre intrigues of the investigation into his murder, see Francisco Goldman, 'Murder Comes for the Bishop', in *The New Yorker* (15 March 1999), 60–77; Judith Escribano, 'The Cook, the Dog, the Priest and His Lover: The Murder of Bishop Gerardi', in Hayes and Tombs (eds), *Truth and Memory*, 59–80.

<sup>40</sup> This may also have been a reference to the cover of the REMHI report, which has four panels showing an indigenous figure. First with his mouth covered, then with his eyes covered, then with his ears covered and only in the last panel with his mouth, eyes and ears open and finally shouting out a message.

<sup>41</sup> On the Latin American challenges, see Iain Maclean (ed.), *Reconciliation: Nations and Churches in Latin America* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

elsewhere is the recognition that in any situation where the power relations between oppressors and the oppressed are not addressed then calls to peace will ring hollow.<sup>42</sup> There is a need to see beyond pious language to look at concrete realities. Reconciliation means nothing if it means ignoring justice; without justice, neither true peace nor real reconciliation are possible.<sup>43</sup>

This is one of the most important practical challenges for any Christian theology of reconciliation. In many situations, the political constraints on justice are so intractable that calls for perpetrators to be held accountable seem doomed to frustration. Most of the major Latin American transitions, including Brazil, Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala, involved *de jure* blanket amnesties. Even when there was no formal amnesty law there was rarely the political commitment to prosecute, and political opposition to prosecutions usually amounted to a *de facto* amnesty. Even in rare cases like Argentina, where the commission's investigations were able to support prosecutions, the political difficulties of actually accomplishing this made it very hard. The top military leadership was successfully prosecuted but it was much harder to pursue cases against other military perpetrators and even the earlier convictions were eventually undermined by the early release of those convicted.

In Guatemala, investigation and prosecution of Gerardi's murderers was beset by the endemic problems of a weak criminal justice system. On 8 June 2001, after a protracted period of investigation and many delays in the trial, three officers from the Military High Command (Colonel Lima Estrada, his son Captain Lima Oliva, and former military adviser Sergeant Obdulio Villanueva) were convicted for Gerardi's murder.<sup>44</sup> Mario Orantes, a priest who shared the house with Gerardi, was also convicted as their accomplice.<sup>45</sup> Yet on 8 October 2002 an appeal court overruled the sentences and ordered a retrial on the pretext of unreliable evidence. After further appeals, the Supreme Court reinstated the sentences on 12 February 2003. However, on

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<sup>42</sup> For this reason progressive and politically orientated theologians in Latin America have tended to focus on liberation rather than reconciliation in their work. Although there is no reason in principle that concern for reconciliation should mean a lack of regard for justice, in Latin America this has invariably been the case. For a Latin American approach to reconciliation that seeks to take justice seriously, see José Comblin, 'The Theme of Reconciliation and Theology in Latin America', in Iain Maclean (ed.), *Reconciliation: Nations and Churches in Latin America*. Originally published in *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, 46 (June 1986), 272–314.

<sup>43</sup> Paul F. Seils, 'Reconciliation in Guatemala: The Role of Intelligent Justice', *Race and Class* 44.1 (2002), 33–60.

<sup>44</sup> The first judge appointed to the case resigned after accusations of incompetence; the second resigned when he received death threats; the third resigned after over accusations of bias in favour of the accused; see Escribano, 'The Cook, the Dog, the Priest and His Lover', 80.

<sup>45</sup> Margarita López (the housekeeper who was also charged with being an accomplice) was acquitted.



the same day, Obdulio Villanueva was decapitated during a violent riot at the prison where he was being held.<sup>46</sup>

The Gerardi case is only the tip of the iceberg for the inadequacies of Guatemala's judicial system. Whilst the REMHI project and CEH commission have successfully documented and acknowledged much of what happened, few perpetrators are ever likely to be brought to justice. As elsewhere in Latin America, the high level of impunity that the guilty enjoy severely limits meaningful social reconciliation.

The South African approach to a selective amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of crimes to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission raises a different but equally difficult set of questions. Some form of amnesty was required under the political agreement reached between the African National Congress and the National Party to allow the transition from apartheid to democracy without widespread bloodshed. Without the amnesty arrangement the transition would have been much more difficult. However, because the commission took on the amnesty process as part of its official work, some have argued that it compromised its own ethical foundations from the start.

Assessment of this aspect of the South African commission needs to recognise both the moral principles and the practical issues involved. At the level of moral principles, concessions over criminal justice need to be addressed in terms of other equally important moral principles.<sup>47</sup> They cannot be morally justified simply by an appeal to practical circumstances. It is therefore helpful to distinguish different types of justice, including restorative justice, so that this debate is between genuinely moral principles and not between morality and pragmatism. At a practical level, part of the issue is whether a truth and reconciliation commission (which integrates the work of reconciliation with truth-recovery) is preferable to a truth commission (which sees these as two separate and usually sequential processes). In terms of truth, integrating the amnesty process into the commission's work opened up a new way for the commissioners to work at uncovering the truth. In terms of reconciliation, the amnesty hearings also produced some memorable moments when victims were reconciled with perpetrators in public. However, these dramatic reconciliations could also have their drawbacks. Well-

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<sup>46</sup> The circumstances around Villanueva's death remain unclear, but his murder meant that he could not try to plea bargain any further information he had on the involvement of others in exchange for a reduction in the newly enforced sentence. However, church lawyers remained suspicious that former president Alvaro Arzu was involved in the murder in some way. See Sergio De Leon, 'Six Killed in Guatemala Prison Riot', *Associated Press* (13 February 2003); Escribano, 'The Cook, the Dog, the Priest and His Lover', 80.

<sup>47</sup> See especially Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, 'The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions', in Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (eds), *Truth V. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22–44.

publicised examples of reconciliation between perpetrator and victims in public hearings put unfair pressure on others who felt unable to do this and distorted the wider political objectives of the commission into individual transactions.

The issues are always more complicated than a simple polarity of ‘truth versus justice’ allows. There are different types of justice that a society needs. Alongside retributive justice there is often a need for restorative justice.<sup>48</sup> If the challenges of reconciliation are to be adequately conceptualised in Christian theology, and properly engaged with, then its relationship to both truth and justice will be priority tasks. Despite the strengths of the REMHI report in terms of reconciliation and truth, it has done relatively little to link these to justice, repentance and forgiveness. Unpacking the complexity of the issues in terms of the Latin American transitions remains an avenue to be explored.

For this to happen, attention needs to go beyond the personal and sacramental focus found in most official Catholic teaching on reconciliation, such as John Paul II’s *Reconciliation and Penance* (2 December 1984). The personal and sacramental dimensions of reconciliation need to be integrated into an approach that opens new avenues for a more holistic theology of reconciliation.<sup>49</sup> The political, existential and theological levels of reconciliation need to be held together. There is much to learn here from liberation theology, and especially from Gustavo Gutiérrez’s insistence in his foundational work, *A Theology of Liberation*, that these three levels all be held together in any adequate account of liberation as salvation.<sup>50</sup> These same three levels – and possibly others as well – also need to be held together in any holistic theology of reconciliation. Furthermore, the distinctive methodology developed by liberation theologians in Latin America is well suited to taking this work forward, through careful reflection on political praxis in the light of the word of God.<sup>51</sup> Yet thus far, Latin American liberation theologians have given little attention to elaborating the different dimensions of reconciliation. During the 1970s and 1980s, when the liberation theology movement enjoyed its heyday in Latin America, many liberationists saw reconciliation as a compromise that distracted from true liberation.

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<sup>48</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was much better as an exercise in restorative justice than critics of the selective amnesty usually acknowledge.

<sup>49</sup> See especially Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); *idem*, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (trans. and ed. C. Inda and J. Eagleson; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1988 [English trans., 1973; Spanish orig. 1971]), 24–5.

<sup>51</sup> For more on the historical and theological development of liberation theology in Latin America, see David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Boston, MA and Leiden: Brill, 2002).

A similar debate also arose around black theology in the US. The emphasis on liberation in the work of James Cone and others stressed the importance of justice, and led to a suspicion of any talk of reconciliation. At the time, there was good reason for both black and liberation theologians to put the emphasis on liberation and justice. Yet as James Deotis Roberts noted, liberation and reconciliation are not alternatives, they are integrally related: ‘We must be liberated – Christ is the liberator. But the liberating Christ is also the reconciling Christ. The one who liberates reconciles, and the one who reconciles liberates.’<sup>52</sup> Liberation and reconciliation are interdependent on each other, and must both be underpinned by justice.

## Conclusion

Guatemala’s Recovery of Memory project was a practical exercise in the political theology of reconciliation undertaken in courageous hope. It showed the importance of breaking a culture of denial, the need to confront the truth as honestly as possible, and the importance of acknowledging the suffering of victims if there is to be real healing for those who have suffered and for society as a whole. As part of the social ministry of the church, it shows how the gospel can be incarnated into a contemporary and prophetic mission. Yet the brutal murder of Gerardi just two days after presenting the final report is also a stark reminder of the limitations that projects of this type face in situations where justice is routinely set aside.

For Christian theologians and ethicists, the REMHI project is an inspiring example of a commitment to truth and truth-recovery and how this can contribute to reconciliation. Yet at the same time, REMHI highlights both the need for justice and the seemingly insurmountable barriers there can be to this.

For political theologians influenced by the emphasis on social justice during the last third of the twentieth century – especially in the prophetic witness of Latin American, black and feminist liberation theologies – this is likely to give a serious sense of unease. How can a truth-recovery process be meaningful if it does not lead to justice? Reconciliation is not an alternative to justice; it must be built on justice. Where justice is denied, full reconciliation will not be possible.

A theology that is to be of use for the real world – and in the real world – cannot ignore this dilemma and the challenges that it creates. Theologians will need to grapple with how political reconciliation can have political, ethical and theological integrity that recognises both the demands of justice

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<sup>52</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, rev. edn 1994 [1971]), 20.

and the constraints to justice. This is a crucial task for political theology. A richer and more complex understanding of reconciliation and its relationship to truth and justice is required if further progress is to be made. There will be no easy answers, but exploring this challenge in conversation with the REMHI project and similar bodies in Latin America and elsewhere will keep such explorations grounded in the real world.



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PART III  
THE ONGOING CHALLENGES  
OF RECONCILIATION



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# Towards Inclusive Remembrance after the ‘Troubles’: A Philosophical Perspective from within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>1</sup>

Wilhelm Verwoerd

It was a few years ago on a cold, windy midsummer’s evening in Cork city, Ireland, at the junction of Grand Parade and South Mall, when I stumbled upon these chilling words: ‘If I could grasp the fires of hell in my hands, I would hurl them in the face of my country’s enemies.’

This embittered cry for the wrath of hell to be visited on his beloved country’s enemies came from a Mr John Mitchell, one of the ‘gallant men of 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867 who fought and died in the wars of Ireland to recover her sovereign independence’.

I could identify with the desire for political freedom underlying Mitchell’s vengeful curse: as a young, white Afrikaner nationalist in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s my political consciousness was deeply influenced by the thousands of women and children who died in British concentration camps during the ‘Anglo Boer War’ (1899–1902), as well as the subsequent struggle of ‘my people’ to overcome English political and economic domination. During the 1970s and early 1980s my political and moral vision was further blinkered by the tragically successful systematic separation of different racial groups, universally known as the system of apartheid: a separation that was deepened by a pervasive cultivation of fear that our Afrikaners’ hard-won freedom would be lost if the ‘Communist-inspired’ black liberation movement achieved its goal.<sup>2</sup>

To some extent I could also relate to Mitchell’s call for vengeance. My recent work with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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<sup>1</sup> Revised from material originally presented as John Whyte Memorial Lecture, University College Dublin (20 November 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of my personal struggle to overcome a blinkered apartheid upbringing, see Wilhelm Verwoerd, *My Winds of Change* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1997). See also David Goodman, ‘The Odyssey of the Verwoerds’, in *idem, Fault Lines: Journeys into the new South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).



(TRC)<sup>3</sup> has taught me to respect the legitimate demand for vindication behind (some) victims' desire for vengeance.<sup>4</sup>

Still, I was deeply disturbed. I was alarmed by the fact that Mitchell's statement was inscribed on a 'National Monument' erected through the efforts of the Cork Young Ireland Society, not only to 'perpetuate the memory' of past heroes but also 'to inspire the youth of our country to follow in their patriotic footsteps'. How deep must the anger, the sense of historical injustice be when an image of utter destruction of 'the enemy' is used to inspire the youth? How can 'the youth of our country' gather the fires of hell without burning their own hands to the bone? And will these young warriors *and* their children be able to put out the fires that continue to smoulder underground, long after the wars of liberation are over, if they have forgotten to see the face of their former enemies?

As I struggled to sleep that night, these questions mingled with vivid memories of 'enemies of the people' being 'necklaced' during the dark days of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. I saw again the nauseating images of another *impimpi* (suspected informer) or black policeman dying a horrible, slow death, with a burning tyre around his neck and a group of young people cheering as the ring of fire consumed his face.<sup>5</sup> And I was haunted again by the testimony of former security police captain Dirk Coetzee before the TRC amnesty committee. He confessed how he and his colleagues in the security police would burn the body of an activist they had killed, and while they waited for the fire to destroy 'the enemy', would drink beer and have a barbecue.<sup>6</sup>

Implicit in all these violent images of the fiery destruction of political enemies is a disturbing forgetfulness, a moral forgetfulness which undermines

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<sup>3</sup> The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, no. 34 of 1995, mandated the TRC to (a) get as 'complete a picture as possible' of the 'nature, causes and extent' of politically motivated gross human rights violations (that is, acts of torture, killing, abduction and severe ill-treatment) which occurred during the period of 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994, (b) help restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are victims, (c) grant amnesty to those individuals giving 'full disclosure' of politically motivated crimes during this period of resistance to and defence of the apartheid system, and (d) make recommendations to the President and Parliament on reparation and rehabilitation measures to be taken, including measures in order to prevent the future commission of human rights violations. Under the chairpersonship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, these tasks included making findings on more than 36,000 alleged gross violations of human rights contained in 20,300 statements taken from victims or survivors of these violations. A comprehensive report was handed to the President on 28 October 1998; see *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Juta, 1998). The above tasks were divided between three statutory committees, the Human Rights Violations, Amnesty, and Reparation and Rehabilitation Committees, which, in turn, were supported by an Investigation Unit and a Research Department. The amnesty part of the process was only completed in late 2001, with two additional volumes added to the TRC Report in April 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See *TRC Report*, Vol. II, 387–9.

<sup>6</sup> See Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), 60–61.

individual or collective efforts to respond constructively to gross injustices or being deeply harmed. To appreciate the destructive potential of this moral forgetfulness and to highlight the creative potential of its opposite, which might be termed inclusive moral remembrance, I want to reflect here on an underlying moral dynamic of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While my emphasis will be on the South African TRC process, I do believe that a clarification of the moral 'genre'<sup>7</sup> of this process will be of some relevance to current debates in Northern Ireland on these islands about appropriate, creative responses to the hurt and harming associated with the 'troubles'.

### **Towards Remembering the Hurt and Harming on all Sides<sup>8</sup>**

To appreciate the kind of moral remembrance promoted by the TRC I find it very useful to compare this process with the life and legacy of what has been described as the 'first Truth and Reconciliation Commission'<sup>9</sup> on South African soil. In 1998, as I completed my time in the TRC, preparations were under way to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the 'Anglo Boer War' in 1899, a war which saw 26,000 Afrikaner women and children (amongst others) die in British concentration camps.

Many people remember Emily Hobhouse for her passionate condemnation of the British government for abuses committed during the 'Anglo Boer War', especially against Boer women. She is widely respected for the selfless relief work she undertook in the concentration camps. It is a less well-known fact that after this war she organised food, clothing, ploughing and harvesting for the Boer families returning to their farms, which had been devastated by Kitchener's scorched-earth policy. Hobhouse went further than these concrete reparation measures and thus,

on her own started the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. She collected sworn statements by survivors, and had them published, first in *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell* in 1902, and then again in *War Without Glamour, or Women's War Experiences Written by Themselves, 1899–1902* in 1924. Her aim was to impress on the British public the need for some form of requital or at least some compensation for the survivors and a public condemnation of the colonial officials and military officers who were responsible for these transgressions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On the importance of this kind of clarification, see Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'Towards the Recognition of Our Injustices', in Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (eds), *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (London: Zed Books, 2000), 156–7.

<sup>8</sup> In this section I am drawing on Verwoerd, 'Towards the Recognition of Our Injustices'.

<sup>9</sup> Johan Snyman, 'Interpretation and the Politics of Memory', *Acta Juridica* (1998), 327.

<sup>10</sup> Snyman, 'Interpretation and the Politics of Memory', 327–8, 334.

The vital point highlighted by Snyman is that for Hobhouse the human suffering of these Boer women had a universal significance beyond narrow ethnic borders. Her speech at the 1913 inauguration ceremony of the Women's Memorial in Bloemfontein contained these words:

Your visible monument will serve to this great end – becoming an inspiration to all South Africans and to the women in particular ... For remember, these dead women were not great as the world count greatness; some of them were quite poor women who had laboured much. Yet they have become a moral force in your land ... And their influence will travel further. They have shown the world that never again can it be said that women deserves no rights as Citizen because she takes no part in war. This statue stands as a denial of that assertion ...<sup>11</sup>

For Hobhouse the suffering of these Boer women formed part of a world-wide struggle for recognition; their sacrifices contributed 'towards a greater solidarity of humankind against the indifference to suffering'. It is this message – speaking across the political divides between Boer and British and between white and black – that gave the suffering of the Boer women and children such moral force. It was this message that was literally censored in subsequent decades as Afrikaner nationalists increasingly monopolised the meaning of the suffering of the 'Boer War' for themselves. This selective remembrance is vividly illustrated by the following omissions from Hobhouse's prophetic speech in later commemorative issues (censored passages are in italics):

In your hands and those of your children lie the power and freedom won; you must not merely maintain but increase the sacred gift. Be merciful towards the weak, the downtrodden, the stranger. Do not open your gates to the worst foes of freedom – tyranny and selfishness. *Are not these the withholding from others in your control, the very liberties and rights which you have valued and won for yourselves?...*

*We in England are ourselves still but dunces in the great world-school, our leaders still struggling with the unlearned lesson, that liberty is the equal right and heritage of man, without distinction of race, class or sex. A community that lacks the courage to found its citizenship on this broad base becomes a 'city divided against itself, which cannot stand'.*

*... Does not justice bid us remember today how many thousands of the dark race perished also in the Concentration Camps in a quarrel which was not theirs? Did they not thus redeem the past? Was it not an instance of that community of interest, which binding all in one, roots out all animosity?*<sup>12</sup>

It was, of course, not only Emily Hobhouse's speech that was censored. None of the many Afrikaans books on the war I read as a child, nor any of my history books at school contained any reference to the 13,315 Africans that,

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<sup>11</sup> Emily Hobhouse, *Boer War Letters* (ed. Rykie Van Reenen; Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1984), 406–7; quoted in Snyman, 329.

<sup>12</sup> Hobhouse, *Boer War Letters*, 406–7; quoted in Snyman, 'Interpretation and the Politics of Memory', 329.

according to official figures, also died in concentration camps.<sup>13</sup> Never did I learn about atrocities committed by the Boers themselves. I grew up with a perception of myself as a member of a minority 'victimised' by 'British imperialism'. I was only reminded of the horror done *to* people I saw as 'my people'. Infused with this narrow, exclusivist remembrance it became more difficult to see the many horrors done *by* 'my people' – during what is more appropriately known as the South African War (1899–1902), but especially during the apartheid years.

This moral forgetfulness of Afrikaners, induced by a selective, ethnic remembrance of past suffering, highlights the nature and significance of the TRC process. This institution was the outcome of an extensive, democratic process, receiving its mandate from the legislative arm of the new state, representing in a real sense the 'people of South Africa'. This highly public and transparent TRC was not the lonely effort of a single woman, struggling to get her government's attention. Furthermore, given the remarkable inclusivity of this TRC process, it has a much better chance of getting the kind of message across advocated long ago by Emily Hobhouse. Anyone who attended a victim hearing, or read transcripts of these hearings, or read the report, will attest to the fact that the violated from all sides of the conflicts of the past were included in the process, with more than 20,000 of them making use of the opportunity 'to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the amnesty part of the process has succeeded in drawing out those directly involved from all parties to the conflict. The violent actions of white agents of the apartheid state, and racist AWB supporters, as well as the suffering of those who bore the brunt of the brutality of the 'Boers', indeed featured prominently in the TRC process. But the actions of many MK operatives, SDU and SPU members, APLA cadres, Askaris, IFP activists, UDF supporters, homeland security forces, and black policemen also came under the spotlight.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the series of special hearings – looking specifically at, for example, the experiences of women, children and white male conscripts – as well as sector or institutional hearings which focused, amongst other things,

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<sup>13</sup> S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics, January 1900–May 1902* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> TRC Act, 3(1)(c); see *TRC Report*, Vol. I.

<sup>15</sup> See *TRC Report*, Vols II and III. The following are descriptions for the series of acronyms used in this paragraph: AWB – *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (Afrikaner Resistance Movement); MK – *mKhonto we Siswe*, military wing of the African National Congress (ANC); SDU – Self Defence Units, ANC-aligned youth vigilantes; SPU – Self Protection Units, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)-aligned youth vigilantes; APLA – Azanian People's Liberation Army, military wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC); Askaris – members of liberation movements turned state informers; UDF – United Democratic Front.

on the mostly indirect contributions to past violations by the media, the health and business sectors, faith communities, the judiciary, all allowed the commission to throw its net of remembrance wider than any previous truth commission in other parts of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, there remains much to be criticised about these aspects of the TRC process, and the relative inclusivity is no guarantee that the temptation to, or existence of, selective remembering has been entirely overcome or will be avoided in future. The point is that this TRC has been a vast improvement on the 'first TRC' nearly a hundred years ago. It will now, and in future, be much more difficult for certain groups to monopolise the meaning of past suffering to the detriment of all the people in South Africa.

### **Towards Remembering the Horrible, the Human and the Heroic**

There is a further, less obvious layer to the inclusivity of the moral remembrance promoted by the TRC. To help me articulate this layer I want to focus briefly on one of the most painful and inspiring amnesty hearings during my time in the TRC.

On 25 August 1993, Amy Biehl, an American exchange student who was deeply committed to the struggle against apartheid, was dropping off a friend in Gugulethu township. She was seen by a group of young men who were returning from a political rally, during a time of intense political unrest, where they had been encouraged to see all whites as settlers who took away their land and who deserved to be killed. She was wrongfully identified as a settler and became the tragic victim of a mob attack. Four of her killers were convicted of murder and imprisoned during 1994. In June 1998 they were granted amnesty by the TRC.

Amy's political commitment and her South African friends helped her parents to understand the context within which their daughter was killed. They decided not to oppose amnesty being granted and managed to transform their sadness and deep loss into a whole range of grass-roots projects in Gugulethu and other townships, sponsored and facilitated by the Amy Biehl Foundation.

'I never personalised Amy's so-called killers. As the information came to me in the beginning it was a mob,' said Linda Biehl in a recent interview.<sup>17</sup> 'A mob without faces.' During the trial she struggled 'to put faces to their deeds ... I didn't feel anything ...'.

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<sup>16</sup> See *TRC Report*, Vol. IV.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewed by Paul Haupt, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 27 March 2001.

In May 1999, almost a year after the four applicants were granted amnesty, Peter Biehl was contacted – through a trusted intermediary – by two of them: Ntobeko Penni and Easy Nofemela. They wanted to set up a youth group in the name of Amy Biehl.

This was the start of a gradual process of reconciliation that involved Ntobeko and Easy first joining a training programme in making bricks and construction, run by the Amy Biehl Foundation. They then became deeply involved in the bakery started by the Foundation.

According to the late Peter Biehl it was

... very gratifying to see Easy and Ntimbeko really serving in our bakery business in important ways. They have pride in what they bring to the party and what they bring is very, very significant. It is great to see them be able to be aspiring, natural human beings. And yet we know that what they carry with them is more than any of us can know because none of us has been involved in the taking of life. That has got to be very, very difficult. They are still tormented about how they are perceived in the community. But somehow they seem able to rise above all this.

Peter believed 'they can do it because they feel purposeful, because they feel that they are serving their community and because we seem to relate to one another on a very human level'.<sup>18</sup>

Personally, I still find it impossible to forget the horrifying detail of her merciless killing that was vividly recalled on that day in the amnesty hearing room in Cape Town: 'She was running across the street, blood streaming from her face. Stones were thrown and then Manqina tripped her. I had a knife and with seven or eight others we stabbed at Amy.' But mixed with this disturbing memory, is a growing wonder at what a newspaper heading described as the 'amazing grace of Amy's parents'.<sup>19</sup> And I feel a sense of hope inspired by a racist, brutal murder's legacy of reconciliation.

What is one to make of this heady, uneasy mixture of the horrific and humanness?<sup>20</sup> To start with I find it useful to recall the following statement by Paul Ricoeur:

We have learned from the Greek storytellers and historians that the admirable deeds of the heroes needed to be remembered and thus called for narration. We learn from a Jewish storyteller like [Elie] Wiesel that the horrible – the inverted image of the admirable – needs to be rescued still more from forgetfulness by the means of memory and narration.<sup>21</sup>

It seems to me that the Biehl amnesty hearing provides us with a story in which both these lessons are contained. We are reminded of the horrible, but

<sup>18</sup> Interviewed by Paul Haupt.

<sup>19</sup> *Sunday Independent* (30 August 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Many of the recent South African discussions of humanity have recognised the value of the Xhosa word 'ubuntu' (humanity) for emphasising the significance of social relations.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press 1995), 290.

also of truly admirable deeds; we are prompted to recognise the human potential to commit horrific deeds, but while doing so, to hold on to our potential to transcend the horrible.

It is this kind of inclusive moral remembrance that the TRC also promoted with its facilitation of the telling, translation and recording of many stories – accounts by those termed ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ of gross violations of human rights, but also testimonies by those who can better be described as victors over these violations.

## Remembering the Horrible

To explain more fully this layer of inclusive remembrance, in which the horrible *and* the heroic is remembered, let us begin by taking a closer look at the TRC’s attempt to help rescue the horrible from forgetfulness. This rescue attempt was described as follows by Antjie Krog: ‘For me the Truth Commission microphone with its little red light was the ultimate symbol of the whole process: here the marginalized voice speaks to the public ear, the unspeakable is spoken – and translated – the personal story brought from the innermost of the individual bind us anew to the collective.’<sup>22</sup>

Krog referred to the so-called victim hearings where the trauma of survivors of specified categories of gross human rights violations were given centre stage. But her description can also be applied to the public hearings of the Amnesty Committee, where the little red light continued to flicker much longer and probably more loudly, where often the unspeakable was spoken, translated and recorded, as was the case on that day in Cape Town at the hearing of ‘Amy’s killers’. By providing a table, chairs, a microphone and a translator to, for example, Mongesi Manqina, Vuzumzi Ntamo, Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Penni, the TRC contributed to ‘establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights’ that occurred within the mandate period.<sup>23</sup>

There were obvious and important historical, legal and psychological dimensions to this truth-seeking activity. Some of the facts and the findings emerging from these ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ hearings have already and will continue to be challenged by lawyers and historians. Given the higher standards of evidence they should work with (under fewer time and resource constraints), one would expect some of these criticisms to help us move closer to more reliable factual and historical truth about particular aspects of the period covered by the TRC mandate.

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<sup>22</sup> Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> See TRC Act, 3(1)(a).

However, the limitations of the TRC's search for factual truth should not obscure the vital moral truths gathered by this process – truths about past injustices, about gross human rights violations. If evil is roughly understood as 'denying someone his or her right to be fully human',<sup>24</sup> then the TRC's facilitation of thousands of oral and written testimonies of those whose dignity was grossly violated can also be interpreted as a remembrance of many individual and institutionalised expressions of evil.

Why was it important that the TRC thus helped to rescue some of the horrible aspects of the recent South African past from forgetfulness? I share the position of Ricoeur, Wiesel, Todorov and others that this kind of moral remembering is not about a macabre fascination with 'the horrible', *per se*. An important way to remember moral evil is to allow those who were dehumanised to tell their stories, or if the victims are no longer alive, to continue to tell and retell what happened to them. In doing so, we prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice; in a 'tiny way' we thus 'repay the debt we owe to the victims';<sup>25</sup> we help to 'restore the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims'.<sup>26</sup>

But rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness is not only about helping to restore the dignity of those against whom the horrible was committed; this respectful remembrance of evil is not only about ensuring that at least the memory of *past* victims live on. This remembrance is also of potential significance for *future* victims.

For by highlighting the plight of those who were killed, abducted, tortured and severely ill-treated, the TRC process promoted a 'morality of the depths', a sensitivity to 'the line beneath which no one is [should be] allowed to sink'.<sup>27</sup> Through a sustained public focus on gross violations of human rights the TRC process stressed minimum protections for human dignity and underscored minimum standards of decency.<sup>28</sup> By giving a prominent public space to what happens if human rights are not respected, the TRC process thus gave South Africans, amongst others, some of the tools to build probably the most effective bulwark against future violations.<sup>29</sup> That is, the TRC

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<sup>24</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999), 289.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 290.

<sup>26</sup> TRC Act, 3(1)(c).

<sup>27</sup> Henry Shue, *Basic Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 18–19.

<sup>28</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, 'The Moral Justification of Truth Commissions', in Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd (eds), *Looking Back, Reaching Forward*, 60–67.

<sup>29</sup> I concur with Susan Mendus' interpretation of human rights as primarily 'bulwarks against evil' and not 'harbingers of goods', and agree that 'the political impetus for human rights comes from the recognition of evil as a permanent threat in the world'; Susan Mendus, 'Human Rights in Political Theory', in David Beecham (ed.), *Politics and Human Rights* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 23–4.



window on some grievous wrongs of the past provided us with invaluable raw material for nurturing a culture of human rights.<sup>30</sup>

An important component of this raw material is the humility that accompanies an honest facing of the horrible, a humble recognition of the ongoing need to counter the forces of dehumanisation, given the potential for inhumanity inside all of us. As former president Mandela put it in a response to the work of the TRC: ‘All of us, as a nation that has newly found itself, share in the shame at the capacity of human beings of any race or language group to be inhumane to other human beings. We should all share in the commitment to a South Africa in which that will never happen again.’<sup>31</sup>

## Remembering the Human

However, for this commitment against inhumanity to be realised, for the TRC’s rescue attempt to fulfil its potential, it is important to be aware of the tensions that accompanied its remembering of the horrible.

One of these tensions is graphically alluded to in the following cartoon by South Africa’s most famous political cartoonist, Zapiro.<sup>32</sup> This cartoon powerfully portrays a tension between moral remembering and forgetting: when one is engaged in rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness, it is tempting to refrain from remembering the humanity of those responsible for the horrible; when faced with the gravity of the inhumane, it becomes rather difficult to rise above a sea of victims’ skulls. If a heavenly parent seems to be in two minds whether the culprits retain their status as God’s ‘children’, how are ordinary mortals suppose to remember their shared parentage with ‘the people who did this’?

In this regard, the TRC Report expressed a concern about the apparent inability of ‘ordinary South Africans’ to follow Mandela’s lead in recognising

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<sup>30</sup> See Jonathan Allen, ‘Balancing Justice and Social Unity: Political Theory and the Idea of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, *University of Toronto Law Journal* 49 (1999), 315–53.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *TRC Report*, Vol. I, 134. In other words, an important *goal* of rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness is to help restore the dignity of past victims, but remembering the stories of past victims’ suffering is also a *means* of public education, awareness raising and human rights training. Using past victims’ stories as a means is consistent with the goal of dignity restoration because (a) survivors of past violations and the loved ones of those who did not survive are included in the category of (potential) future victims, and (b) to the extent that past victims’ suffering contributes to the prevention of future violations, their suffering was not in vain, that is, highlighting a connection between remembrance and prevention can be a source of healing for past victims and their loved ones, and may assist the restoration of their dignity.

<sup>32</sup> Zapiro, *Mail & Guardian*; reprinted Wilhelm Verwoerd and Mahlubi ‘Chief’ Mabizela (eds), *Truths Drawn in Jest: Commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through Cartoons* (Claremont, SA: David Philip, 2000), 12.



those who committed inhuman acts as 'one of us', as fellow human beings. The Report acknowledged that

... the greater part of the Commission's focus has been on what could be regarded as the exceptional – on gross violations of human rights rather than the more mundane but nonetheless traumatising dimensions of apartheid life that effected every single black South African. The killers of Vlakplaas have horrified the nation.<sup>[33]</sup> The stories of a chain of shallow graves across the country, containing the remains of abducted activists who were brutalised, tortured and ultimately killed, have left many South Africans deeply shocked. The media has understandably focussed on these events – labelling Eugene de Kock, the Vlakplaas commander, 'Prime Evil'.<sup>34</sup>

It then went on to state:

This focus on the outrageous has drawn the nation's attention away from the more commonplace violations. The result is that ordinary South Africans do not see themselves as represented by those the Commission defines as perpetrators, failing to recognise the 'little perpetrator' in each one of us. To understand the source of evil is not to condone it. It is only by recognising the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> 'Vlakplaas' – the name of a farm outside Pretoria, used as a covert base and torture centre by the security police.

<sup>34</sup> *TRC Report*, Vol. I, 133.

<sup>35</sup> *TRC Report*, Vol. I, 133.

The Report suggests that this inclusive recognition of the potential for evil, and the hoped-for, accompanying sense of shared responsibility, can be enhanced by giving more attention to the ‘mundane but nonetheless traumatising dimensions of apartheid life’, to, in the words of Hannah Arendt, the ‘banality of evil’ beyond the actions of a ‘Prime Evil’.<sup>36</sup> I agree that this wider focus provides a promising route to bridging the moral gap between ordinary South Africans and those who ‘horrified the nation’, between those who became publicly known as perpetrators and the often elusive ‘little perpetrator in each one of us’. The TRC itself attempted to counter a focus on the outrageous through its wide range of institutional/sector hearings.<sup>37</sup> By highlighting the various ways in which faith communities, the media, the judiciary, the health sector, the business sector – through acts of commission and omission – contributed to a climate in which violations took place, the TRC process challenged a convenient criminalisation of those engaged in political violence: it exposed the temptation to shirk various levels of shared responsibility by scapegoating those who directly bloodied their hands in the course of political conflict. In this regard it is also worth stressing the rather disconcerting message of an important chapter on the social psychology of gross human rights violations in the TRC Report. The main thrust of this chapter is that we should move away from individual pathology as the explanation for why people commit these gross violations, and give much more weight to social identity and ‘situationalism’, thus appreciating the power of various binding and blinding forces that enable an ordinary person to kill or torture another human being.<sup>38</sup>

Inclusive moral remembrance thus involves the recognition of a certain moral equality, a constant guarding against the denial of the potential for evil in each one of us. Despite the Report’s shortcomings, I agree with the following assessment of its promotion of this difficult, painful kind of remembrance:

The final report could be described as the founding document of the new South Africa ... The term ‘founding document’ is more commonly used to describe a country’s Constitution. And there are grounds for pride in the South African Constitution ... But, for all that, the Constitution is a theoretical exercise, in large part the product of intellectual effort in the ivory towers of academia. The final report, in a very real and immediate way, defines us. With all its horrors, it is the earthly product of the blood and tears attendant on a difficult birth. It is a testament to the equality of man, if more in the disregard for the tenets of humanity than the observance of them.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Eichman in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

<sup>37</sup> See *TRC Report*, Vol. IV.

<sup>38</sup> See *TRC Report*, Vol. V, 259–303.

<sup>39</sup> *Mail & Guardian* (6–12 November 1998).

## Remembering the Heroic

With all this talk about remembering evil and 'the horrible', one may well ask: what about the inspiring human potential for goodness? What about remembering 'the admirable deeds of the heroes'? Indeed, for some critics there was not enough room for Greek-style storytelling within the TRC process. For example, appearing under the heading 'Tutu's Report Tells the Truth but not the Whole Truth', anti-apartheid veteran Jeremy Cronin criticised the report for focusing too much on 'the little perpetrator' inside each of us. He is concerned that not enough room was given to celebrate the struggle, the "'little freedom fighter", the collective self-emancipator that we all could be'.<sup>40</sup>

It is true that neither the Report, nor, more broadly, the TRC process, allowed much space for a conventional, Greek-style celebration of 'the struggle', in the sense of allowing heroes to tell stories of bravery and victory, of risking life and liberty on the battlefields of past conflicts. But given the limitations imposed by its mandate, I am not sure that the TRC can fairly be criticised for this omission. Furthermore, there are obvious risks involved in the insensitive glorification of military (masculine?) heroism which might downplay the human costs of these actions.

In this regard it is significant that Cronin expanded on his concern about the TRC Report's apparent over-emphasis on 'the potential for evil in each one of us', by asking why the Report did not give more attention to 'the "humanist", ubuntu-filled ways of crossing the bridge' from past injustices to a truly democratic South Africa.

While there is some truth in Cronin's criticism as far as the Report is concerned – most of it is indeed devoted to a historical and statistical overview of violations within different regions, by different parties – his question in fact draws attention to a further aspect of the inclusive moral remembrance within the TRC process, namely its emphasis on the potential for goodness in each of us. It is important, however, to be clear about which way(s) the TRC process exhibited this potential and/or encouraged its realisation.

A lengthy chapter in the Report (V:350–435), highlights some of the many examples from the TRC process where individuals and communities provided concrete evidence of the human potential for goodness. One might see this chapter, entitled 'Reconciliation', as a celebration of admirable deeds – showing the potential of those harmed to move beyond victim-hood, and even survivor-hood, to becoming victors over evil. The above-mentioned chapter also includes a range of examples where individuals and institutions were brave enough to acknowledge responsibility for wrongdoing or harm

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<sup>40</sup> *Sunday Independent* (15 November 1998).

and to express remorse or moral sensitivity towards those they violated – thus demonstrating the human potential for moral transformation.

But do these examples really provide evidence of the potential for goodness inside each of us? The Biehls and many others might not be conventional military heroes, but are they not exceptional moral heroes? After all, how many of us ‘ordinary people’ would be able to embody an ‘amazing grace’ which helped parents to treat as grandchildren some of those who mercilessly murdered their daughter? Unless this concern about the representative quality of the examples mentioned above is addressed, the TRC and I myself remain open to the criticism that, by using these examples to promote inclusive moral remembrance, we are exerting unrealistic and inappropriate moral pressure on, amongst others, ordinary South Africans.

I would concede that the examples of understanding, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation highlighted by the TRC process have an extraordinary quality to them. However, this extraordinariness is compatible with the promotion of inclusive remembrance of the admirable for the following reasons. First, though the Biehls’ grace was ‘amazing’, they and many others were ‘ordinary people’, unlike say a Nelson Mandela. Very few of them are the kind of people that would be expected to adorn the front pages of newspapers or make headline news; they are moderately successful businesspeople like the Biehls, a junior officer in the prison service like Irene Crouse, an administrative officer at a gold mine like Zenam Papiyana, a university teacher like Ginn Fourie, or a political activist turned administrator like Ashley Forbes.

It is true that some of these people received more media attention than others, the Biehls being the obvious example. The fact that they are Californians, coupled with the dramatic, archetypal features of the tragedy that befell their activist daughter – an attractive, young, white woman being brutally murdered by a group of black men – certainly encouraged a lot of media interest and even sensationalism. These factors also influenced my interest in the case. However, I do not accept that because the Biehls come from a white, middle-class, liberal, American background, that their mercy towards and friendship with some of those who killed their daughter therefore have little to say to other people. Lyndi Fourie, a beautiful, young, white woman was also killed by a group of black men, and her mother, a middle-class, English-speaking South African woman, was willing to engage in a unilateral forgiveness initiative. Irene Crouse, a white, working-class, conservative, Afrikaner woman also showed mercy, and the examples in the Report represent a range of people from different racial, cultural, class and gender backgrounds. All these people exhibited an ability and willingness to forgive and/or show mercy. The point is that there is not a simplistic causal relationship between background and a propensity towards creative, healing responses towards profound hurt. I therefore see no reason, apart from a

media-induced false sense of exceptionality, why the American background of the Biehls should disqualify their admirable actions from being interpreted, carefully, as pointers to a widespread human potential to show mercy or to forgive, even when faced with an extremely difficult situation.

The difficulties of the situations confronted by the people mentioned above draws attention to a second reason why their extraordinary deeds may legitimately be used to articulate and promote inclusive remembrance of the admirable post-apartheid South Africa. This reason emerges from the extraordinary moral challenges posed by this transitional context to all citizens: a time for the establishment and consolidation of a stable, sustainable democracy after many years of apartheid.

Tzvetan Todorov formulated the moral challenge I have in mind as follows:

While it is true that ordinary virtue can be found everywhere and that we must rejoice in this fact and speak it loud for all to hear, there can come a time in the life of a society, as in that of the individual, when ordinary virtue is not enough. In such moments of anguish and despair ... the heroic virtues, courage and generosity, become as necessary as the ordinary ones.<sup>41</sup>

Todorov drew this conclusion from his reflections on the moral behaviour of people faced with the extreme conditions of concentration camps. While people like the Biehls were not faced with the desperate conditions of concentration camp inmates, they were certainly confronted with a time of deep anguish when faced with the brutal death of a beloved child. With the Report, I rejoice in their display of courage in not succumbing to anguish or bitterness, and their generosity in showing mercy. And given the deep wounds we as a South African society carried over from the past, and the vulnerability of trust in goodness after the 1994 election, I would argue that it was indeed an urgent necessity for the TRC process and Report to name out loud, for all to hear, some of the examples where ordinary people displayed those 'heroic virtues'.

The TRC's facilitation of the telling, recording and remembering of admirable deeds by ordinary people thus needs to be located in its extraordinary context: a transitional time which demanded and still requires the courageous and generous kind of deed, which the Biehls and others demonstrated to be possible.

This emphasis on the courage and generosity that helped to make those acts of forgiveness and mercy possible draws attention to a third way in which one may bridge the apparent gap between extraordinary examples and inclusive remembrance of the admirable. In explaining what he means by these heroic virtues in less extreme conditions than the camps, Todorov acknowledges with sadness that 'the just, those righteous men and

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<sup>41</sup> Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 295.

women who combine' courage and generosity with ordinary kindness 'are few in number', but he continues to hope that people can at least, when the moment comes, take the risk to 'meet the gaze' of the stranger in need.<sup>42</sup> A number of ordinary heroes within the TRC process were willing to take the considerable risk of 'meeting the gaze' of a stranger who was not only in need, but who also killed a loved one; many of them went further and were prepared to forgive, or show mercy; some even engaged in a process of deep, interpersonal reconciliation. But the point is that the willingness to look beyond the boundaries of family and tribe and, in effect, remember that strangers (former political enemies) are fellow human beings, lies at the root of what these heroes did. Even if the rest of what they did is too much to swallow, at least the minimal 'meeting' advocated by Todorov could and should be pursued by all those that need to learn to live together, peacefully. Put differently, admiring the actions of the Biehls does not imply that everyone should blindly follow in all their steps. But it does mean that everyone should at least follow them in their sensitive seeing of 'strangers'.

### **War-thinking Versus Tension-filled Balancing Acts**

The preceding discussion of the inclusive moral remembrance underlying the TRC process demonstrates that while trying to 'rescue the horrific from forgetfulness',<sup>43</sup> we dare not forget the humanity of those responsible for the horrible. For if we do not rescue this moral remembering from forgetfulness, we may well be accused of joining their deeds in the moral gutter. If we demonise or animalise 'perpetrators', then we also become guilty of a dehumanisation, which typically was a crucial step in making it possible for them to commit the horrible against faceless victims. If the horrible, and the suffering arising from the horrible, blind us to the faces of the 'perpetrators', then we fail to promote that respect for human life and dignity which is so desperately needed after decades, if not centuries, of systematic dehumanisation in South Africa.

Instead of contributing to a spiral of dehumanisation, the TRC process challenges us, in the words of Cynthia Ngewu, another mother who lost a child, 'to demonstrate a humanness [ubuntu] towards [perpetrators], so that [it] in turn may restore their own humanity'.<sup>44</sup> The potential of this humanising dialectic is illuminated by Ntobeko Penni's response to the Biehls' mercy – their respect for his humanity has not only helped to restore

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<sup>42</sup> Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 295–6.

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*.

<sup>44</sup> *TRC Report*, Vol. V, 366.

his own humanity, he has also embarked on a process of seeing Amy Biehl's humanity. On that fateful day in 1993 she was a faceless white 'settler'. Now 'he wants to know more about her,' related Linda Biehl. 'Amy's spirit really has a grip on him. Recently he spent an hour just chatting with Amy's older sister, Kim. At the end of that Kim came in the office and she just grabbed me and started to cry. It was as if Ntobeko was planning Amy's week this year on his own and he wanted to know who Amy was.'<sup>45</sup>

The preceding discussion furthermore makes it clear that promoting inclusive moral remembrance should not be confused with striving after tension-free unity, with a romantic hankering after heavenly harmony. The TRC process included many difficult balancing acts – between moral accountability and equitable amnesty, between the rights of victims and the well-being of perpetrators, between respect for past victims and the protection of future victims.

The focus here has been on the further challenge of balancing 'shame at the capacity of human beings of any race or language group to be inhumane to other human beings'<sup>46</sup> with pride in the potential we all have to be humane to other human beings.

If there is too much remembering of the horrible, individuals and/or communities run the risk of getting bogged down in badness; if the encouragement of mercy and forgiveness receives too much attention, this promotion may easily come across as insensitivity to the consequences of dehumanisation. Looking the reality of evil in the eye may blind one to the faces of those behind the evil, thus continuing the cycle of dehumanisation; making too much room for the humanity of perpetrators downplays the horrific and may undermine the restoration of victims' dignity through vindication.

Recognising the various tension-filled balancing acts that are involved in the TRC process not only militates against a monistic desire to absolve all tensions and conflicts in a dangerous conception of 'unity'.<sup>47</sup> The moral inclusivity that underlies the remembrance promoted by the TRC also stands in opposition to a Manichean attraction to moral 'apartheid' and the accompanying discomfort with ambiguity. Within an apartheid mindset, to put it crudely, 'blacks' were typically seen as bad, and 'whites' as wonderful, while within an anti-apartheid mindset it sometimes became tempting to just reverse the roles – black became beautiful and whites were often branded as 'Boers'. The lure of adopting a sharp dichotomy between pure black 'victims' and polluted white 'perpetrators' seems to be particularly strong in a

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<sup>45</sup> Haupt interview.

<sup>46</sup> Mandela, quoted in *TRC Report*, Vol. I, 134.

<sup>47</sup> On the dangers associated with illiberal 'monism', see Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *idem*, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 167–72.



post-apartheid context, as demonstrated by the relative neglect of equity regarding amnesty applicants. In this regard I am reminded of Paul Russell's vital insight: 'If truth is the main casualty in war, then ambiguity is another ... One of the legacies of war is a habit of simple distinction, simplification and opposition ... which continues to do much of our thinking for us.'<sup>48</sup>

Through its promotion of inclusive moral remembrance the TRC process provided us with invaluable raw material and role models for the formidable, ongoing task of challenging 'war-thinking', of uprooting the seductive 'habit of simple distinction, simplification and opposition'. A striking feature of, for example, the Biehl amnesty hearing was that 'Amy's killers' did not 'conform to the familiar plot-lines of Hollywood films such as Richard Attenborough's *Dry White Season* [or *Cry Freedom*], where the police figure as evil-looking Nazis with thick Afrikaans accents'.<sup>49</sup> Neither was the person killed a black victim of those 'Boers'.

By recognising the victimhood of (many) perpetrators, amongst other mitigating factors, a commitment to equity helps to paint a more complex picture of those granted amnesty within the TRC process. By acknowledging the "'little perpetrator" in each one of us', and recognising how interchangeable the roles of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' often are, it becomes more difficult to adopt an exclusive, morally superior, counter-productive position of victimhood. Thus, mutuality in terms of mercy and forgiveness and understanding are encouraged.<sup>50</sup>

More generally, the notion of inclusive moral remembrance gives a deeper meaning to the official language of 'Truth and Reconciliation' – with 'truth' standing also for the need to remember the horrible, while the linkage with 'reconciliation' beckoning us to move creatively beyond evil. And in thinking about 'national unity and reconciliation', the tensions between 'truth' and 'reconciliation' brought to the fore by the TRC process prepare one not to expect easy, warm embraces, but an ongoing, difficult series of balancing acts. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission might not have been very successful in bringing large numbers of individual 'victims' and 'perpetrators' closer together, but at least a careful reading of the process

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<sup>48</sup> Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 99.

<sup>49</sup> *Cape Times* (6–7 August 1997).

<sup>50</sup> See Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'Taking Wrongs Seriously: A Qualified Defence of Public Apologies', *Saskatchewan Law Review* 65 (2002), 153–5, on some of the pitfalls of mutuality/mutual forgiveness. In particular it should be stressed that the mutuality and humility arising from a more complex picture of hurt and harming in apartheid South Africa does not amount to a moral equation of those who fought against and those who defended a crime against humanity. See the chapter on 'Amnesty and Equity' in Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'Equity, Forgiveness, Mercy: Interpreting Amnesty within the SA TRC' (PhD diss., Johannesburg, 2003).

allows one to better appreciate the nature of the challenge described as 'promoting national unity and reconciliation'.

An important part of this challenge is coming to terms with the painful truth that not only amnesty within the TRC process, but 'national reconciliation' itself involve an ongoing series of difficult balancing acts. It is, however, important not to overstate the unavailability of tensions associated with inclusive moral remembrance and national reconciliation.

Take, for example, the difficult balancing act between the rights of victims and the well-being of perpetrators, or, put differently, between justice and mercy. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that much of the agony could have been taken out of this balancing act by a different institutional design of the TRC, such as giving the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee more power to implement tangible reparation, giving the Human Rights Violations Committee more resources for immediate therapeutic support, or by timing the release from prison of those granted amnesty to coincide better with tangible recognition of victims' suffering.

Or take the general tension between the two arms of inclusive moral remembrance – between remembering the horrible and remembering the admirable, between 'truth' and 'reconciliation'. If a separate committee, or even subcommittee, was given the time and resources to promote the kind of actions brought together in the Reconciliation chapter, then the Commission would better have lived up to its name of being a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, instead of mostly being described as the Truth Commission. Furthermore, I know from personal experience that many admirable actions that took place within the TRC process failed to be recorded due to a lack of time and resources. If more than one researcher was given the opportunity and support to focus on recording creative responses to evil within the TRC, we could easily have ended up with a full volume, instead of one chapter, devoted to Reconciliation, thus providing a better balance in the Report between remembering our potential for evil and celebrating, carefully, our potential for goodness.

### **Conclusion: Towards Humanising Remembrance**

The destructive consequences of the moral forgetfulness encouraged by and supporting the system of apartheid loudly proclaim the vital importance of a remembering that looks beyond the skulls of those harmed, without overlooking the gravity of the harm; an ability to see the inherent dignity of the harmers, despite what they have done; a willingness to recognise the humanity of the bystanders and beneficiaries, despite what they have not done, and the courage and generosity to resist the reduction of fellow human beings to 'enemies' that deserve to be burnt to ashes.

Nurturing this kind of remembrance is central to the sustainability of peace in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>51</sup> Although it might not be my place to say this, I therefore wish that Archbishop Tutu's prayer in the Zapiro cartoon, Linda Biehl and her now-deceased husband's vision, as well as the moral sensitivity of a Ntobeko Penni, could be added to a different kind of national monument than the one standing at the junction of Grand Parade and South Mall in Cork City. I hope that soon there will be a national monument – in an agreed island of Ireland, in South Africa and in other societies struggling to overcome deep divisions – that will inspire our youth to honour their often neglected moral heroes from the past, and to acknowledge respectfully the suffering of survivors, including those victims on the 'other side'. And last but not least, may this monument also help us and our children to remember that our enemies are also 'children of God'. A 'God' who lives in the clouds might have the luxury to doubt the need for this inclusive remembrance. Few of us sharing the same island or planet have this choice – we simply must learn, at least figuratively, to see our 'enemies' face to face.

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<sup>51</sup> I am, of course, not suggesting that inclusive, humanising moral remembrance will provide a sufficient basis for sustainable peace. Elsewhere I have addressed additional requirements, such as more tangible, practical reparations and creative socio-economic redistribution – see Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33.1 (2002), 67–82; Wilhelm Verwoerd, 'Individual and/or Social Justice after Apartheid? The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *European Journal of Development Research* 11.2 (1999), 115–40.

# Between Embrace and Exclusion<sup>1</sup>

Cecelia Clegg

## Introduction

In what follows I put forward three interrelated theses. The first is that Christian churches and faith communities have largely left out of account the social dimension of a theology of reconciliation, preferring to concentrate on the personal dimension.<sup>2</sup> This has had two effects. First, it renders the concept of limited use in situations of intergroup conflict or division. Secondly, and more importantly, it denies to the Christian community a vision of creation and salvation, and a description of the mission of the church, which speaks directly to the fragmented state of societies and of the world.

My second thesis is that the personal and social dimensions of a theology of reconciliation entail a holistic understanding of human being as both conscious and unconscious. Such an understanding is significantly lacking in Christian theology, which tends to be dominated by a vision of human personhood as largely conscious and rational. In consequence, Christian churches struggle and often fail to educate both clergy and church members in ways that will promote and help them to sustain the peaceful, life-giving relationships, at the heart of any process of reconciliation.

My third thesis is that processes of ecumenical engagement, at all levels, over the last ninety-plus years, whilst achieving some laudable positive movements in relationships and in reflection, are seriously flawed. They have in many ways failed to equip and inspire Christian churches to live more

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an edited version of a paper that was presented first in the *Margaret Beaufort Lecture Series*, Cambridge University, England, November 2002, and subsequently published as 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', *New Blackfriars* 85 (January 2004), 83–96.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I talk about 'churches', 'Christian groups' and 'Christian faith communities'. I do so to acknowledge the many different ways of living out Christian faith commitment in community, which are growing up alongside traditional church denominations, and whose members would not consider themselves as forming a 'church'. We have a significant number of these faith communities in Northern Ireland. When I use the word 'church', then, I am referring primarily to the four larger denominations in Ireland: Roman Catholic, Methodist, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian. I make no apology for the Northern Irish orientation of this chapter, it is the context of my ministry, and it is one part of these islands which both desperately needs the gift of reconciliation and has, I believe, much to teach others about processes of surviving and healing deeply antagonised religious and political divisions.

congruently the mission of the church as reconciliation in their relationships with one another, and as a counter-witness to increasing religious-ethnic conflicts around the globe. The balance of this chapter explores a more psychosocial vision of reconciliation and its implications for church renewal and ecumenical relationships.

I begin with some semi-biographical reflections that describe practical reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, which has shaped my thought. In the second section, I will look at a psychosocial view of a theology of reconciliation through the lens of 'embrace', a category which I have borrowed from the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, whose writings have significantly influenced my work in recent years.<sup>3</sup> The final part of this chapter will reflect on the relationships of the churches, issues of exclusion and some of the questions these pose.

### Theory Meets Practice

It is a scary experience for any theologian who, fresh from the exertion of completing doctoral work on the theme of human development and reconciliation, is offered a job in which she is asked to test out her theories in practice, especially in the cauldron that was Northern Ireland in the mid-1990s. Such was my situation when the Irish School of Ecumenics employed me, along with my colleague, Dr Joseph Liechty, on a six-year research project called 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism'.<sup>4</sup> We were tasked with what the late Dr Eric Gallagher termed 'speaking the truth in love to the churches',<sup>5</sup> about their responsibility for creating, for maintaining, and their resources for moving beyond sectarianism. So within weeks of defending my thesis, I found myself living in Belfast, spending a lot of time sitting in parish halls, libraries and community centres around Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Armagh and Omagh listening to stories: stories of unspeakable pain, of terrifying hatred, and of breathtaking courage, faith and resilience.

My work within the project was to bring together groups of church-affiliated Catholics and Protestants, of various denominations, in areas marked by violence to discuss, sometimes for the first time in an inter-tradition setting, issues of identity and sectarianism. The conversations were seldom dull, often humorous and illuminating, sometimes heart-breaking and

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<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The project ran from January 1995 to June 2000. The report of the research is available in Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> From the unpublished address with which the late Revd Dr Eric Gallagher launched the Moving Beyond Sectarianism project in Belfast on 3 April 1995.

occasionally so heated that I had to step between male members as they 'squared up' to one another across a room. The people who took part in those groups, at times under physical threat as they made their way to and from meetings, and the many others I encountered in different ways, taught me slowly but surely about the harsh social realities facing any cosy religious notion of reconciliation I might have entertained. I was given the privilege of experiencing the depth of their pain, of realising the enormity of the tasks of both forgiveness and repentance, the delicacy of achieving any kind of justice, especially where lives have been taken or irrevocably destroyed, and perhaps most of all the complexity of understanding the 'truth' about any event or process. It was a truly de-centring experience for me personally.

Gradually, as I regained my balance, I found myself replaying parts of group conversations and wondering what it would take to bring people even close to a state of sustainable, positive relationship, let alone to a state of reconciliation, such was the gulf between them. A gulf that lurked not in the conversation itself, which was often conducted with candour and flashes of Northern humour, but in the silences and in the inevitable retreat into myths, fear, prejudice or well-worn patterns of antagonised division almost every time an external event, such as a bombing or shooting, occurred. My questioning arose partly because the people who attended the group work were not extremists; they were not, on the whole, bigots; they were not young, or indeed not so young, hotheads, though they did express themselves passionately. They were, largely, committed, church-going, middle-aged to older members of various denominations. These were the people who cared enough and were open enough to be engaged in a process that they hoped would help to develop peaceful relationships in their neighbourhood. These are people who believe in peace and reconciliation and pray for it earnestly.

I want to let two of their voices give you a flavour of the conversations and the issues concerning reconciliation and ecumenism that they raised for me. The first voice is Bill, a Protestant man, middle-aged, professional, who when he heard the story of sectarian abuse suffered by one of his own congregation said, 'I have worshipped with you for thirty years in this church and I never knew that had happened to your family.' Such ignorance is not uncommon in Northern Ireland. Its roots are many. It could be a defence mechanism which leads to studied avoidance of what is under people's noses because to admit it would be too traumatic or might impel a person to risky action. It could be the silence of victims, who until the last few years did not feel that they had the right to speak or that anyone would listen to them if they did voice their stories. Or it could be a combination of those factors. What was most sobering for me in this example was the fact that these men could live, worship and socialise in a small Christian community, which is in a flashpoint area of Belfast, and after thirty years still not have shared some of the dominant events of their lives. Seamus Heaney's famous line 'whatever you say, say

nothing',<sup>6</sup> echoes through this whole conversation and through the lives of people who have lived terrible suffering whilst locked into stifling silence even within the Christian community.

The second voice is that of a Roman Catholic woman, Catherine, in North Belfast. This woman is a grandmother, active in her parish, and committed to inter-church work. She was a faithful and active member of one of my groups through a terrible period in North Belfast, when young Roman Catholic men were being shot almost daily in reprisal for the murder of Loyalist Volunteer Force leader Billy Wright in the Maze prison. At a meeting in a week when three Roman Catholic men had been shot dead in the locality of the group, we were talking about the situation and she suddenly said with utter conviction, 'What we need is the "Ra" back on the streets, they are the only ones who will protect us.' The 'Ra' being the provisional IRA, who were, at that time, two-and-a-half years into their ceasefire. The other Roman Catholics in the group nodded in silence, whilst the Protestant members sat looking totally stunned. The most shocking aspect of this example for me was the seemingly reflex resort to the threat of violence as a means of solving the problem by a woman who considers herself, and would be regarded in the Christian community, as committed to peace.

As I pondered these and other incidents I was well aware that the Christian churches through their steady preaching of forgiveness, and their pastoral work in communities had prevented the violence becoming worse than it did. But I found myself asking: what has Christian theology to say to these situations? One of the striking characteristics among the people who attended my groups was that they did not seem to have Christian categories for reflecting about their situation that did not revolve around concepts of individual salvation. It is a line of thinking that suggests that as long as I don't do anyone any harm and I live, as far as possible, an individually blameless life, I will get to heaven. But of course, it was obvious as we progressed in the conversations that the collectivity of their individually blameless lives was not significantly influencing events in their society or their local area. Had the Christian churches developed no coherent, cooperative strategy of response to this long and bloody conflict? It seemed not.

In our work and especially in our book *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, Joe Liechty and I sought to expose the ways in which the systemic nature of sectarianism uses the ignorant complicity and inaction of good, religious people to fuel itself. For Christians in Northern Ireland, therefore, doing nothing is not an option. The questions are: What to do? How to do it? With whom to do it? Informed by what theological understanding? It is to that theological understanding that I turn to now.

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<sup>6</sup> 'And whatever you say, say nothing', Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber 1975).

## Embrace: Created for Reconciliation and Wholeness

In his article ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale University, argues persuasively that the ‘social agenda of the church has been isolated from the message of reconciliation’, with the result that Christians have difficulty in fostering reconciliation and in avoiding being drawn into conflict.<sup>7</sup> Volf points to the fact that the church has focused on the reconciliation of an individual with God without taking into account the wider social scene which is riven by conflict.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in the face of radical injustice, the church has adopted a ‘justice first’ agenda, regarding reconciliation as possible only after justice or liberation has been attained. In a detailed exegesis of Paul’s use of the notion of reconciliation, Volf contends that Paul’s vision was one of social reconciliation and that central to it is the fact that God reconciles human beings to Godself, not vice versa. Therefore, he argues, there is a pre-eminence of grace over justice.<sup>9</sup> He relocates the struggle for justice as ‘a dimension of the pursuit of reconciliation whose ultimate goal is a community of love’.<sup>10</sup> His overarching framework, then, is reconciliation.

Volf eloquently makes the case for there being inherent social dimensions to a theology of reconciliation and not simply social implications that can be drawn from it. He uses the powerful metaphor of ‘embrace’, opening arms, waiting, closing arms and opening them again, to elucidate the reconciling encounter between two parties in their otherness. Embrace, whilst it suffers the limitations of being drawn primarily from the world of individual relationships (unless you are systematically into group hugs!), nevertheless encapsulates an encounter which allows for fluidity of identities, a non-symmetrical relationship between participants, and through its gentle, non-invasive nature an openness about outcomes and change following an encounter.<sup>11</sup> Embrace, as I will argue below, is a powerful symbol of God’s relationship to the world in both creation and salvation.

The vision of reconciliation that informs Volf’s position is ‘the creation of dynamic harmony in a world ravaged by life-impairing strife’.<sup>12</sup> This vision seems to me to be too limited and too focused on the establishment of harmony in the place of strife. Human relationships entail a measure of conflict and struggle, if only in the differentiation of identities. Such conflict and struggle can be both necessary and positive. In our book, Joe Liechty and I define

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<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, *Interpretation*, Vol. 2 No. 54 (April 2000), 162–3.

<sup>8</sup> Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, 162–3.

<sup>9</sup> Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, 164–9.

<sup>10</sup> Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, 165–7.

<sup>12</sup> Volf, ‘The Social Meaning of Reconciliation’, 167–8.



Christian reconciliation as ‘the processes and structures necessary to bring all the elements of the cosmos into positive and life-giving relationship with God and with one another’.<sup>13</sup> I understand reconciliation as both an ongoing process, which because it is human requires structures, and which because it is a movement of God’s grace, is also an eschatological event. In this vision, the inherent social meaning of reconciliation, for which Volf argues, is expanded beyond the interpersonal, and beyond the ecological into the cosmic dimension. I am positing reconciliation as both the *telos* of creation, including, therefore, rational and non-rational aspects of being, and as the process of salvation.

### Reconciliation as the *Telos* of Creation

Much theological reflection about human personhood gives primacy, explicitly or tacitly, to conscious rational thought and regards the process of hominisation as the pinnacle of creation.<sup>14</sup> Even Wolfhart Pannenberg who develops his anthropology in dialogue with the depth psychology of Sigmund Freud, and who regards the self as an unconscious psychological structure, tends to concentrate on the rational dimension of personhood in which the ego, as the centre of consciousness, plays a dominant role.<sup>15</sup> These approaches suggest an evolution of consciousness in creation from the primordial towards the development of the capacity for human rational thought. The creation which always sang the glory of God now becomes conscious of itself in the act. They, however, leave out of account the intrapsychic, unconscious, non-rational level of human being. Yet it is precisely in the psychological processes of integration of the rational and non-rational in human consciousness that human beings experience reconciliation at its most immediate, reconciliation with the ever-present, unconscious ‘otherness’ of self. The development of human beings towards wholeness is an ongoing process of integrating aspects of the self, in such a way that the person’s being and presence in the world becomes more and more positive, and open to her or himself, to others, to the created order, and to God. At the core of human

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<sup>13</sup> Liechty and Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, 292.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Jürgen Moltmann’s Trinitarian theology, which is posited on socially co-constituted, and therefore conscious, rational personhood, in Jürgen Moltmann, ‘The Social Doctrine of the Trinity’, in James M. Byrne (ed.), *The Christian Understanding of God Today* (Theological Colloquium on the Occasion of the 400th Anniversary of the Foundation of Trinity College, Dublin; Dublin: Columba Press, 1993); Alistair McFadyen’s notion of personhood as socially co-constituted through communication in Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in a Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990).

development, then, is a fundamental drive to integration, which, according to both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, is carried on in dreams even when people's consciousness is suspended in sleep.<sup>16</sup>

We do not yet know whether this process, which is still ongoing, will result in another stage of evolution into what might be a type of 'super-consciousness' in creation. Nor do we know what the contours of such 'super-consciousness' might look like, since it will entail both rational and non-rational elements.<sup>17</sup> What is clear is that at the heart of God's creative activity in human beings is a structure of development that is driven by a movement of reconciliation between rational and non-rational aspects of being. This reconciliation, as both process and event, when lived fully in relationship with self, others, the earth and God, can be considered wholeness.

If we now examine God's act of creation through the metaphor of 'embrace' it is possible to say that in this continuous dance of creation God reaches out to reconcile the cosmos to Godself, waits, enfolds those who and that which responds, and releasing them reaches out once again. Within this framework, the event of the incarnation arrives as simultaneously God's reaching out to reconcile the cosmos and the cosmos, through humanities' conscious and unconscious being, and reaching back to be reconciled, to be both enfolded by and then released by God. In the faithful life and innocent death of the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, one complete cycle of embrace comes into being. It is in this limited sense that I would describe Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of creation. He is the first of many and opens the way for the grace of God, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, to inspire further response to the offer of embrace. Reconciliation, then, understood as the structures and processes necessary to bring all elements of the cosmos into positive life-giving relationship with God and one another, is indeed the *telos* of creation. It is at this point that the orders of creation and redemption overlap. In the life, death and especially in the resurrection of the God-man, the fulfilment of creation is revealed as, at the same time, the offer of salvation.

### Reconciliation as the Process of Salvation

Paul asserts, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself',<sup>18</sup> and behind Paul's simple statement lies the complex interplay of processes of

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<sup>16</sup> See Carl Jung's notion of the 'transcendent function', Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works* (ed. W. Maguire; trans. R.F.C. Hull; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-79), Vol. 8; and Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (trans. J. Strachey; London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. IV (I) (1900).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Russell, *The Brain Book* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor. 5:19.

creation and salvation. For me, the salvific role of Jesus Christ is best viewed in two distinct but inseparable stages: Jesus of Nazareth as provisional salvation – that is, reconciliation or embrace present, but not yet achieved – and Jesus, the risen Christ, as salvation – that is, reconciliation or embrace achieved but not yet fulfilled. In Jesus of Nazareth, the reconciling embrace of God has been offered and is in process of response. The embrace, however, is not yet achieved because the response depends upon the total ‘yes’ of Jesus throughout the duration of his earthly life, and this yes is by no means certain. It is reasonable to assume that if Jesus was truly human he must have had the same structure of conscious and unconscious being as every one else. He must have experienced, therefore, natural positive and negative movements at both the conscious, rational and unconscious, non-rational level and the drive towards integration and development. He must have faced also the choice of self-contradiction, of choosing against love, against God, through sin.

Jesus is, nevertheless, attested in Scripture as a person capable of living love and positivity to the extent that it literally radiated from his body and healed those around him.<sup>19</sup> Such an image suggests a man who was achieving a high degree of reconciliation between the conscious and unconscious levels in his being. In this state of integration, he would have been increasingly conscious of the strong positive and negative movements which were active in him, and he was clearly able to choose consistently to live in a way consonant with love and reconciliation, whatever it cost him in terms of suffering.<sup>20</sup>

In this way of understanding Jesus, I am arguing that he differed from other human beings in that at the unconscious level, the archetype of self, that is, the God-image of human being, corresponded completely to God because Jesus was divine.<sup>21</sup> In the depth of himself and unconsciously he must, therefore, have experienced himself as one with God in a way that other people do not; they experience themselves as other than God. This position appears to entail the logical contradiction that Jesus was whole by virtue of his identity with God, but not whole as a human being. The contradiction is more apparent than real because the wholeness of Jesus through the archetype of self was precisely only archetypal, that is, an inherent possibility, and had yet to come to actual realisation in and through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jairus’ daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage in Mark 5:21–43 and Matt. 9:18–26.

<sup>20</sup> For example his consistently loving choices in the temptations Matt. 4:1–11, and in the agony in Gethsemane Mark 14:32–42.

<sup>21</sup> For the concept of archetypes, see Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 264.

<sup>22</sup> Jung believed archetypes to be inherited possibilities: ‘In the pre-natal phase archetypal images appear no longer connected with the individual’s memories but belonging to the stock of inherited possibilities of representation that are born anew in every individual’; Jung, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 264.

The pivotal event of salvation is the final triumph of Jesus' total 'yes' in his death on the cross and in his resurrection. This fulcrum point of salvation has two aspects. From the perspective of his death, the faithful human life of reconciliation expressed in loving self, others and God becomes reconciliation achieved. In other words, salvation as a punctiliar event happens in Jesus Christ. It is a complete response to the embrace of God, a movement into the enfolding arms of God. It is not, however, fulfilled because the participation of the rest of the cosmos in this salvation has yet to occur.

From the perspective of his resurrection, the faithful, reconciling life of Jesus of Nazareth is validated. Through this validation, the definitive wholeness of human being, possible only in reconciled relationship with God, becomes present in the cosmos. In the final sequence of the embrace, the reciprocal movement of opening arms between Jesus and the Father releases the power of the Holy Spirit into the cosmos. The grace that initially was offered by God, who might be perceived as distant and other, comes to the cosmos in Christ Jesus as the power of the reconciling wholeness of human being, which while still other, is no longer distant but near. With theologians such as Karl Rahner, I would affirm that whilst in principle God might have created the cosmos without the gift of grace, it was given, in fact, always, from the beginning, in view of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God reaches out anew to embrace the cosmos and to offer the possibility of fulfilling salvation. Such a process of coming to fulfilment depends upon the free historical choices of human beings for or against reconciliation and wholeness. The event of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, however, has introduced a new level of being, a new level of consciousness, into creation. This consciousness since it is a new perception of reconciliation and wholeness must be present both consciously and unconsciously in humankind. It is present consciously in the oral and scriptural witness to Jesus. It is present unconsciously though an alteration in the archetype of Self. In other words, the reconciliation and wholeness of human being made present in the resurrected Christ alters the archetype of self to reflect the possibility of reconciliation and wholeness as a reality that has come about for at least one human being.<sup>24</sup> It still remains a fact that human beings can choose self-contradiction, and my argument is in no way intended to limit human freedom. I am, however, implying that through the salvific action of Jesus Christ, humankind has been offered the possibility of radical transformation and given the enabling power to choose this transformation.

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (trans. E. Quinn; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), Vol. 18, 189–210.

<sup>24</sup> This proposition depends upon Carl Jung's concept of the 'Collective Unconscious'. Jung's elucidation of this complex concept is scattered through his writings. For an overview, Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, Vols 5 and 8.

## Reconciliation as the Mission of the Church

This view of reconciliation as both the culmination of creation and the process and event of salvation resonates with the understanding in the World Council of Churches study of the nature of the church, that the church is God's instrument to 'bring humanity and all of creation into communion'<sup>25</sup> – and it goes beyond it. If reconciliation has inherent personal *and* social dimensions, then churches are called to live, worship, socialise and evangelise in ways that promote positive human relationships, individually and corporately, and to promote ecologically sound living, not just outside the boundaries of their congregation but also within them. If reconciliation is the mission of the church, then Christians are called to work to ensure that all church structures and actions, corporately as well as individually, internally as well as externally, reflect the loving, boundary-crossing, truth-seeking, right-relating, work of Jesus Christ. If this social vision of reconciliation had informed the communities in which Bill and Catherine, about whom I spoke at the start of this lecture, live, their situations would have been unlikely to occur.

Reconciliation as salvation has some important implications for Christian life and mission, individually and corporately. Individually and within a church or community, it first implies that part of the discipline for Christians, of all ages, and especially for those in teaching and leadership roles, should be to work actively at developing their personal consciousness and human integration. In other words, they are to be actively engaged in learning to embrace the otherness within. This in turn requires that Christian communities create the conditions, in terms of structures, worship and teaching, which are conducive to fostering such personal growth. The often dry, verbal, rational form of so much Christian worship simply will not do. Its lack of symbolism, colour and movement fails to address and engage the whole human person, conscious and unconscious.

Second, it means that actively fostering a social culture of peace and reconciliation within Christian communities is a priority for mission. In other words, learning to live in reconciliation within a church community and between Christian communities is a means of being congruent with the gospel preached and a living witness to the reconciling embrace of God in Christ. Third, it requires that theology and Christian education take seriously the insights of psychology with regard to the structure of consciousness of human being, and adapt content and methodologies to reflect these insights.

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement', Faith and Order Paper No 181 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), section 26.

The vision of reconciliation that I am sketching here demands the recognition that the gift of grace engages Christians in a collaborative project with one another and with Christ not only to overcome conflict and division but also to establish relationships of embrace towards otherness in themselves, other people, the natural world and God. An individually blameless life is less than half the story, and the fact that we, as churches, in Northern Ireland have often taught little more than that is a cause of deep regret and repentance. It is particularly so because it has given space for exclusion, the opposite of embrace, in the form of separation, destructive denial and contradiction, to flourish.

### **Exclusion: Separation, Destructive Denial and Contradiction**

Building on an understanding of creation as both ‘separating and binding’, Miroslav Volf describes exclusion as transgressing against both elements in the form of disconnection which destroys binding, and assimilation, which nullifies separation. Assimilation is the absorption of the other who is regarded as inferior.<sup>26</sup> Disconnection, on the other hand, pushes the other away either as an enemy or as a non-entity.<sup>27</sup> Since 1910, through the ecumenical movement, positive relationships between Christian churches have developed and the types and prevalence of exclusion have diminished – but not disappeared.

Separation is still very much evident and takes a number of forms, with varying degrees of actual separation. Within Roman Catholicism, since the Second Vatican Council, there is an apparent openness to Protestant churches, though the closed communion table enforces a separation at the heart of its sacramental celebration of unity that is stark, and attitudes evident, for example, in the circulation of the document *Dominus Iesus* seem to belie a real intent to embrace.<sup>28</sup> Within Protestantism, an anti-Catholic form of separation entails adherents refusing joint worship and sometimes even contact with Roman Catholics on the grounds that they are not Christian. But Protestant churches also have internal anti-liberal, anti-evangelical and anti-charismatic forms of exclusion. As a Roman Catholic living in North Belfast I still find it mesmerising that in Christian Unity week a pulpit exchange between Protestant churches is sometimes the height of the relationships we can risk or achieve. But this is the reality of a situation of antagonised

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<sup>26</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the controversy surrounding the text which accompanied this document and stated that Protestant churches were not to be regarded as ‘sister’ churches; *Declaration Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, September 2000).

religious and political difference that has endured for decades and cost thousands of lives. What is most striking is that these forms of exclusion are not reserved to small fringe groups or churches but are alive and well in the very heart of the larger denominations which are, formally at least, committed to ecumenical relations.

Each one of these forms of separation, Roman Catholic and Protestant, whilst being destructive in themselves, can lead to pressure on ecumenically minded ministers and members to refrain from developing positive relationships with the other for fear of splitting their congregation, parish or church. This, in my view, is a particularly pernicious face of exclusion, which, because it is not overt, is sometimes underestimated.

A second form of exclusion is destructive denial. I use the adjective 'destructive' to qualify denial because I have learned that there can be a blessed type of amnesia, which is a form of denial, but is sometimes, at least initially, the only way for severely traumatised people to move beyond their trauma into positive relationships. This amnesia is not the type of denial I have in mind here; rather it is the destructive denial of both difference and commonality between traditions and denominations.

The tendency to minimise difference is, in my experience in Northern Ireland, a particular temptation for Roman Catholics, though it is not exclusively Roman Catholic. There is a universalising and inclusive dynamic that characterises a typical Roman Catholic approach and which in inter-church settings can lead to a premature and therefore destructive assertion of commonality. One of the counter-balances for this is an appropriate concern for the Faith and Order issues that divide the churches, without allowing them to become stumbling blocks to developing authentic relationships in a locality.

On the other hand, the tendency to maximise difference is a particular, but not exclusive, temptation for different types of Protestants. There is a profoundly individualistic and differentiating dynamic, which characterises typical Protestant approaches and which in inter-church settings can lead to a persistent focus on, and therefore destructive assertion of, difference. One constructive way of balancing this tendency is to encourage people to express their different denominational identities in strong, positive terms, to give them space to be themselves, and an affirmation that their identity is respected, before attempting to make any connections of commonality. People need to be standing in a secure place in terms of their own identity before they can risk making space for meaningful connection with the other.

## Conclusion

There is, however, one question that has lurked just below the surface all the way through this chapter: if reconciliation is the *telos* of creation, the process

of salvation and the mission of the church, why is it not more fully advanced between the Christian churches? This question is particularly pointed in a situation like Northern Ireland, where religious-political division has led to such carnage and distress. It is not sufficient to point to the lack of doctrinal consensus. The fifty years of conversations which led to the Lima document in 1982,<sup>29</sup> and the subsequent significant bilateral conversations, such as the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), Roman Catholic-Lutheran, and Church of Ireland-Methodist, are concrete evidence that many, though not all, of those obstacles are, largely, behind us.

We in the Christian churches must face the question of the place of memory, history, power and wealth in our failure to live in congruence with the gospel of reconciliation that we preach. We have the mission, we have many of the resources, but we seem to lack the will to embrace one another in any sustained way. And so we linger between embrace and exclusion. What is needed, in my view, is an option for reconciliation in much the same way as the option for the poor was adopted by some churches a number of years ago. The events of 11 September, the emergence of global religious ethnic violence, indicate that we have reached a crossing place, in Irish, 'Trasna', and we have a choice. So let me end with a reflection on this crossing place, by Sr Raphael Consedine, a Presentation Sister.

Trasna

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones  
 In the mountain gap.  
 Behind them stretched the roadway they had travelled,  
 Ahead, mist hid the track.  
 Unspoken the question hovered:  
 Why go on? Is life not short enough?  
 Why seek to pierce its mystery?  
 Why venture further on strange paths, risking all?  
 Surely that is a gamble for fools ... or lovers.  
 Why not return quietly by the known road?  
 Why be a pilgrim still?  
 A voice they knew called to them, saying:  
 This is Trasna, the crossing place.  
 Choose! Go back if you must,  
 You will find your way easily by yesterday's road,  
 You can pitch your tent by yesterday's fires,  
 There may be life in the embers yet.  
 If that is not your deep desire,  
 Stand still. Lay down your load.  
 Take your life firmly in your two hands,  
 (Gently ... you are trusted with something precious),

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<sup>29</sup> See 'Report of Faith and Order Commission WCC, Lima, Peru 1982', in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (eds), *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).



While you search your heart's yearnings:  
What am I seeking? What is my quest?  
When your star rises deep within,  
Trust yourself to its leading.  
You will have light for your first steps.  
This is Trasná, the crossing place.  
Choose!  
This is Trasná, the crossing place.  
Come!

# Respecting Boundaries and Bonds: Journeys of Identity and Beyond<sup>1</sup>

Geraldine Smyth OP

## Strangers and Guests: The Call to Cross the Jordan

There are those who ‘cross the Jordan’ and seek out truth through a different experience from the one they are born to, and theirs is the greatest struggle. To move from one cultural ethos into another, as I did, and emerge embracing them both demands more ... than any armed struggle. For here is the real conflict by which we move into ... maturity ... Those who struggle through turbulent Jordan waters have gone beyond the glib definitions of politics and religion. The rest remain standing on either bank firing guns at one another. I had had enough of gunfire, the rhetoric of hate and redundant ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

These words of Brian Keenan, Belfast man and former Beirut hostage, from the opening pages of his memoir, reflect a wise insight on the ambivalence of identity. Here he is recalling his farewell walk through Belfast before taking off for a teaching post in the Middle East. His eyes fix on the dividing walls and their atavistic murals that staked out territory and tribe, and functioned through their violent mythological imagery to reassure or intimidate. It was as if people were drinking of a sectarian poison, out of a sense of frustration, of fear, of a raging thirst for identity and purpose. Shrinking even then from labels like Protestant, Loyalist or British, Keenan both values his place and knows it is time for him to make the mythic leap across the Jordan. He senses that the boundaries that strengthen a sense of identity must be opened up and transcended. If he is to come home to himself, there must be the possibility of encounter with the stranger from the other shore. Keenan was not then to know that he would soon be drawn into another rage for identity as intractable as any witnessed on the streets of Belfast. A teacher of English literature, Keenan was not beyond conjuring up the shade of James Joyce as prototype of his refusal to be bound by his background and its shibboleths, as he prepared for his own ‘mythic leap across the Jordan’. The author looks back as one who has travelled an infinite distance from the point of first starting out. We note, however, that his purpose was not to reject his own cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a reworking of the paper originally offered as the formal response to Marc Gopin’s Keynote Address at the Irish School of Ecumenics’ ‘Boundaries and Bonds’ Conference, Belfast, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 16.

ethos in favour of another, but to emerge, ‘embracing them both’. The imagery and the holding of contrasts in tension associate themselves with Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan initiating him into a ministry that crossed ancient divisions of imperial politics and local religion.

The different human ways of hiding behind, negotiating or reaching across boundaries are a key symbol in Keenan’s story. But his story is also about the way boundaries can be structured to intensify both the bonds of oppression and the bonds of love. And Keenan maps his story between the extremes of hatred and love: on the one hand, ‘How men misdirected their anger and aggression onto one another, and mutual support turned into mutual dislike and seething silence’;<sup>3</sup> and on the other, a disclosure of the power of love between his fellow-hostage John McCarthy and himself. This bond plumbs the depth of shared despair, intimacy and defiance. In the ‘bonding of our innermost selves’, Keenan touches into the mystery of redemption as an ‘act of transformation and transcendence [which] could be seen as a metaphor for the times we live in’.<sup>4</sup>

Keenan’s story brings us into that magnetic field of ‘identity politics’ and ‘identity religion’, now all too familiar whether in Beirut or Belfast, and through analytic insight, such as that of Charles Taylor, Michael Ignatieff or Julia Kristeva. Thus, the general and particular conflicts among persons, groups and cultures, in that magnetic field where ethnicity, politics, culture and religion oppose one another, are viewed increasingly as configured around the boundaries and bonds of identity and relationship with those whom we have come to regard as the stranger.

In the particular context of Northern Ireland, the negotiation of personal and social identity has been deterred by the presence in a contested space of a majority group and a sizeable minority group. Compounding this, the reality is rendered more complex by being enmeshed in differing, and even oppositional, self-understandings of Christian identity, linking back historically and in folk memory to post-Reformation and Plantation conflicts, with their religio-cultural reservoirs of bitterness, distrust and bloodshed, and the attendant legacy of respective particularist self-identity on the ‘Protestant-Unionist’ side, as God’s divinely appointed people sent into the land to be the City on the Hill, besieged on all sides but never defeated. On the Catholic-Nationalist side, the palm of martyrdom, whether as a result of famine, brutally suppressed rebellion or hunger strike, was prized as a badge of religious superiority and bearing the promise of victory to come. To each cultural group, ironically, God was on the side of their irreproachable cause. It is not difficult to see how such conflictive political history and antagonistic self-understanding would look for biblical assurance. One can relate this

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<sup>3</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, xiv.

struggle to that in the Hebrew Bible between the election of Israel as God's chosen people (linked with the Mosaic covenant), and the universal covenant with Abraham and Sarah and through them with all the nations, though with scant attention to the latter strand in the tradition, and to the prophetic impulses running cross-grain within it. The challenge of Jesus' teaching and example in welcoming outsiders and reaching out to enemies, it would seem, is curiously easy to set aside. The understanding of the cross as costly forgiveness and salvation for all is easily disremembered. The meaning of the resurrection of Jesus as new hope sprung in the midst of the apostles' betrayal and loss, and then as the 'irruption of the utterly gratuitous other' is too incredible to grasp<sup>5</sup> – once it is a matter of those beyond the boundaries of one's own cultural tribe or religious flock. Sectarianism, as we have already noted, has its narrow geography, as well as its preferred versions of history. The effect of hedging one's political boundaries with the sharp rhetoric of sectarian exclusivism has achieved its dire effect of mutual separation, exclusiveness and enmity, even whilst mantling these with a transcendent aura of self-legitimacy and the justification of violence.<sup>6</sup>

Frank Wright classified Northern Ireland as 'an ethnic frontier society', in which relationships are structurally antagonistic.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the border, which delineates the Northern Ireland state as part of the United Kingdom, evoked opposing attitudes to its legitimacy from the Unionist-Protestant and Nationalist-Catholic population, the former looking for support to Britain and the latter to the Republic of Ireland. Thus, even since the declaration of ceasefires in 1994, the traditional antagonistic stances of trust and distrust have maintained themselves, whether *vis-à-vis* the unstable political arrangements, the judicial system, structures of economic access or civic equality. Each group continues to draw comfort from the relatively powerful position of its respective church or political leadership. Social relationships have continued to be governed by the threat of repeating outbreaks of violence, and, at times, by a religious sanction for violence.<sup>8</sup> Even in the post-ceasefire era, there is no reason to doubt the persisting relevance of Wright's analysis of the social system as one secured by a 'tranquillity of mutual deterrence', and where, on a frequent basis, old rivalries spill out in spates of violence and counter-violence executed by rival paramilitary groups. During recent decades, we have continued to see a systemically contested interpretation of past history and contemporary events framed in this paradigm of mutual deterrence – from the Civil Rights Campaign of the late

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1993), 9–18.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Geraldine Smyth, 'Sectarianism – Theology Gone Wrong?', in Alan Falconer and Trevor Williams (eds), *Sectarianism* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1995), 52–76.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), 20ff.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 112–16.

1960s to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of the mid-1980s, to the Good Friday agreement of the mid-1990s, to the breakdown of political structures of power-sharing in the first decade of the new century.

The seeds of an alternative possibility have been sown but have not easily taken root. For the ‘tranquillity of mutual deterrence’ to give way to other patterns of interrelationship would demand the exposure of its dependence on a rivalry that is indeed mimetic. This is no mean task, because each group has accommodated its identity to this pattern and tends to see violence as a necessary evil. Walter Wink’s observations on the ‘myth of violence as redemptive’ are *à propos* here,<sup>9</sup> Wink, like Wright, drawing upon the insights of René Girard on the interplay of religion and power (through a cycle of mimetic rivalry, demonising, scapegoating, exclusion and sacrificial violence as a way of restoring of the uneasy tranquillity of the *status quo ante* – though only on a temporary basis).<sup>10</sup> According to such analysis, within such a paradigm, religion becomes the transcendent legitimisation and fuelling power of the cycle of deterrence and violence. Influenced also by their Christian faith, both writers point to the need to demythologise and unmask this claim to violence as redemptive, as fundamentally and repeatedly destructive. One can also infer from their writing that no solution to violence can be found within the old paradigm – for it is driven and fed by violence. Other authors, writing from different conceptual bases, posit not dissimilar conclusions. Julia Kristeva, for example, from a Jewish and psychoanalytic perspective, treats of oppositional relationships between foreigners and natives: ‘The rooted one who is deaf to the conflict and the wanderer walled in by his conflict thus stand firmly facing each other. It is a seemingly peaceful co-existence that hides the abyss: and abysmal world, the end of the world.’<sup>11</sup>

A shared weakness of Girardean and psychoanalytic probing alike is that they operate mainly from a negative moral stance, saying next to nothing about positive responsibility *vis-à-vis* the creative demands of truth, the role of rituals of repentance, or formation for peace and reconciliation. We shall look at this later particularly in relation to the churches. Suffice to note here that while the churches do indeed need to reflect on their collusion in violence and living too comfortably in its penumbra, the gospel also calls them to recognise the needs of strangers and to work with others to generate relationships of trust and charity, and in collaborating with others to sustain cultural and social bonds, attempt to create an alternative paradigm premised on peace and shared life. For this to succeed, the churches must be

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 133ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 17.

among the agents of change who are themselves renewed by their inner symbolic ritual and practice that lead towards forgiveness and reconciliation. As well as exposing and seeking to disarm the myth of redemptive violence, all who are concerned for peace must tap into the symbolic wellsprings of peace, understood, for example, in such regenerative symbol structures as *Shalom*, Jubilee, the Reign of God, or the Eschatological Banquet. Overcoming hostility is not simply a matter of breaking down the enmity, but of offering hospitality and enabling one another to flourish and have life to the full.

### **Beyond ‘Single Identity’**

By the same token, I would argue, one must entertain a certain suspicion of the current enshrining in the Northern peace process of the notion of ‘single identity’. One often now hears the claim – posited not simply as justifiable but as desirable – that members of a particular ethnic group, before moving to engage in dialogue and encounter with the group across the boundary, must first intensify a sense of their own identity. Difficulties arise when attachment to ‘single identity’ becomes an end, and behind talk of necessary ‘self-confidence in one’s own culture’ lurks an undisguised ideology, which precludes any truck or traffic with those beyond the boundary.

W.R. Rodgers suggests that we discover ourselves only by going out of ourselves, and, just like the three Magi, we may have to travel a far distance and discover the paradox that encounter with what is most different and strange will bring home to us a fuller sense of self-knowledge:

Strange that, in lands, and countries quite unknown,  
We find, not others’ strangeness, but our own;  
That is one use of journeys; if one delves,  
Differently, one’s sure to find oneself.<sup>12</sup>

The journey into self-understanding requires that we ‘delve differently’. To see ourselves in depth, we need somehow to stand outside ourselves. Rodgers, like fellow-Ulsterman Keenan, marvels that identity is intrinsically plural, that it is disclosed in journeying far from home, and that in order to become itself, it must encounter what is deemed wildly different. So too, the poet’s diction intimates the need to be active and concretely located if we are to attain increased self-understanding. To be confronted with another’s

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<sup>12</sup> W.R. Rodgers, ‘The Journey of the Magi’, in Michael Longley (ed.), *W.R. Rodgers: Poems* (Oldcastle, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1993), 59–63 (60, 61). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992), 181–2.

strangeness evokes an impulse to protect ourselves by strengthening the boundaries – the Freudian *dictum* of fight or flight. Northern Ireland has its own versions of these in the twin impulses for sectarian attack or sectarian withdrawal.

In the context of the current quest for peace and reconciliation between conflicting cultural groups, the current vogue for ‘single identity work’, as it is called, is a contradiction in terms and also lends false legitimacy to a staged segregation, in some bid to bolster the self-confidence and self-consciousness of traditionally segregated cultures. I would argue that this current penchant for ‘single identity work’ is ill conceived. This is not to disclaim the relative value in certain situations for particular cultural groups to withdraw in order to reflect on themselves and on their own internal narrative and desired direction. What must be challenged is a continuous practice wherein the group’s withdrawal reinforces a deliberately self-referential scheme that is thus put beyond question. In such cases, the group is more likely to harden the boundaries of its political or religious identity rather than take a discriminating pride in its own cultural distinction and potential contribution to society at large. Unless it keeps the other in view, the process falls into solipsism. Furthermore, modern psychology, both developmental and social, demonstrates that a self, nation or culture defines itself in relationship, both negatively and positively, to some significant others.<sup>13</sup> For the very rift that separates is a bond in which each is alter ego to the other. It is also evident that persons in society share in a range of overlapping identities and communities of belonging. We inhabit each other’s memory and histories. We are implicated across a rift that is a bond structured and weathered by conflicts, intimacies and interests.<sup>14</sup> The vision of another kind of bond needs to be nurtured and encouraged. The grittiness of differences can serve to unite us across the boundary, even at such times when a church or civic group finds it salutary to stand back from the other in a step of critical distance, to reflect on what it can bring to the relationship or to some collaborative undertaking. As inter-church and inter-cultural groups discover through encounter that their identity is irreducibly relational, members often attest to the paradoxical experience of increased self-awareness and confidence in their own self-understanding.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 170, 181–3, and *passim*. See also John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 86–105, on the necessary rhythm in all relationship of ‘withdrawal and return’, where the withdrawal is always for the sake of the return: ‘My withdrawal from the Other is itself a phase of my relation to the Other. The isolation of the self does not annul the relation; it refuses it ... to annul the relation is to annul oneself’ (92).

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 183–4, on Freud’s concept of the ‘alien double’, with the ‘compulsion to repeat’.

<sup>15</sup> One can also adduce a narrative hermeneutic here. Students at the Irish School of Ecumenics, who study alongside others from church traditions, year by year, testify to

## The Double Drive for Freedom and Security

With the bi-polar need for freedom and security, a common human temptation is to reject the inherent tension.<sup>16</sup> Repeatedly in history, the dynamics of political and religious worlds can be construed as in the grip of these oppositional drives which find their origin in irreducible instincts and needs – for freedom and for security. At a deeper level they correlate with aspirations to integrity and solidarity. When such instincts are frustrated, they may convert to rage, and a grasping after ‘more of the same’, whereas what each really needs is ‘more of the other’. Thus, instincts for security/order/certainty (often salient in the landscape of a politics of identity) tend to throw a fog of suspicion over what is strange, interpreting it as threatening, and intensifying the clinging to settled assumptions of the other as hostile.

Conversely, the drive for unrestrained social freedom, spatial power and independent thought involves a distortion of human need, prompting denial of limits and rejection of any external principle of accountability. At this extremity drive turns to rage. Both represent a refusal of the mutuality that is the condition for self-realisation, each mirroring its opposite, issuing in self-destructive behaviour and a refusal to recognise the *otherness* of the other, the refusal of the other’s boundaries and of tentative possibilities of bonds across boundaries. Acutely aware of this fateful interplay, Marc Gopin has argued that recognition of self-limits and the limits in one’s surrounding world is the condition of self-fulfilment and indeed of the survival of the planet: ‘Where there is no boundary there is no recognition of anything but the self. Where there is nothing but the self there is only demonic destruction and putrid self-worship. The human failure to live within limits may well turn out to be not only the aboriginal failure (Gen. 3) but also the ultimate disaster.’<sup>17</sup>

Julia Kristeva suggests that the foreigner lives within us as ‘the hidden face of our identity’ and that the challenge is not so much to live with others as to live *as* others.<sup>18</sup> Also probing the Jewish understanding of the foreigner as ‘ger’,<sup>19</sup> she warns against objective and subjective pressures of assimilation, preferring the more precise ‘ger-tochav’ (resident alien) as intimating the need

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achieving a new depth of understanding of their own church doctrines and practice as a result of broader base of study, exposure and reflection than had been possible while reflecting within their own denominational family.

<sup>16</sup> Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> Gopin, ‘The Heart of the Stranger’, lecture delivered at ‘Boundaries and Bonds’ Conference, Irish School of Ecumenics, Belfast, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> See also Gopin, *From Eden to Armageddon*, 6–7; and Gopin’s chapter ‘Embracing the Stranger’, above.



to safeguard the tension and underlining the importance of refraining from co-opting the foreigner – respecting and welcoming without the demand for conformity.<sup>20</sup> Kristeva's words hark back to those cited above of Presbyterian poet, W.R. Rodgers, with their reverberation in the Ulster psyche, as in other situations of sectarian conflict. She claims that 'The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigner, unamenable to bonds and communities.'<sup>21</sup>

Making much play of the fact that, through the narrative of Ruth the Moabitess, foreignness is inserted into the very heart of Jewish identity, Kristeva notes the perennially disturbing truth that through her, 'foreignness and incest were ... at the foundations of David's sovereignty'.<sup>22</sup> She underlines the ironic reality that what one most treasures as distinctive in one's identity is prototypically constituted in the face of otherness and involves a *transgression* from royal sovereignty and indeed self-sovereignty:

Ruth, the foreigner, is there to remind those unable to read that the divine revelation often requires a lapse, the acceptance of radical otherness, the recognition of a foreignness that one might have tended at the very first to consider the most degraded ... Perhaps damaged, worried at any rate, that sovereignty opens up – through the foreignness that founds it – to the dynamics of a constant, inquisitive, and hospitable questioning, eager for the other and for the self as other.<sup>23</sup>

In settings of contesting identities, and settled views of purity of origin, of who is in, who out, such tantalising ironies need to be pondered.

### **The Politics of Identity in Contexts of Ethnic Conflict**

In reflecting upon the dynamic of boundaries and bonds in the concrete context of Northern Ireland – marked by the relative stability of ceasefires, yet without having attained to a political settlement – one can fruitfully adduce the interdisciplinary discourse which has in recent decades conceptualised the notion of ethnic boundaries and cultural bonds in some precise and inflected fashion.

It was Frederick Barth, the Norwegian anthropologist, who coined the term 'ethnic boundary' in 1969 – the date usually ascribed to the start of the recent phase of the 'Irish Troubles'.<sup>24</sup> One central thematic in Barth's challenge to

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<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 67–76. Ruth, the Moabite is, of course, the classical and exemplary *ger-tochav*.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Barth, 'Introduction', in *idem* (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969).

earlier notions of fixed identity and his assertion that ethnic identities are forged through transactional encounters both positive and negative is the distinction between the 'ethnic boundaries' and 'ethnic contents'. For Barth, ethnic boundaries have more to do with subjective identity *perception* (us vs them) than with objective cultural *substance* (contents/practices *within* the boundary), and as such, ethnic boundaries are less amenable to modification in the formation and maintenance of group identity. There is an obvious hazard here, however unintended by Barth (who sought to release the notion of cultural identity from the more common belief of cast-iron typological fixities and ancestral ascriptions), of tipping the scales in favour of invisible psychological dynamics and of constructivist influences on boundary fluidity, which can serve to minimise the actual significance of ethnic culture in the forming and sustaining of identity. One also must guard against the kind of romantic heroicising of culture, which history has often shown serves to institutionalise cultural exclusion as a hindrance to social and political transformation.<sup>25</sup>

In the past quarter of a century, the notion of the boundary has been further theorised across a range of disciplines – in anthropology, psychology, social theory, human geography, religious studies and political science, for example, issuing in a fertile interdisciplinary field of discourse.<sup>26</sup> In linking ethnic identity, ethnic culture and violent nationalisms, some generalised comments can be noted: the increasingly recognized importance of *intra-* (alongside *inter-*) relationships in ethnic and political identity patterns; a growth in anti-essentialist views of identity with a corresponding emphasis on spatial, relational, constructivist and strategic factors in identity formation and boundary intensification; a postmodern revalorisation of difference, pluralism and multiculturalism and a complex ambivalence towards cultural homogenisation and political assimilation and secularisation.<sup>27</sup> It can also be asserted that because ethnicity is defined by boundaries, even when and

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<sup>25</sup> One thinks of Nationalist Socialism in 1930s Germany with its sports and fitness culture harnessed to the ideology of Aryan purity of race; or *Voortrekker* cultural re-enactments of the Great Trek in South Africa; closer to home, certain sectarian aspects of the Parades culture or graveside commemoration rhetoric also come to mind. In subsequent writings, Frederick Barth warned against any tendency to falsely dichotomise 'ethnic boundary' and 'ethnic contents' and argued rather for a focus on the functioning of the boundary in mutual influence with the cultural contents enclosed within it. Cf. Frederick Barth, 'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers (eds), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 17ff.

<sup>26</sup> For a brief overview, see Daniele Conversi, 'Nationalism, Boundaries, and Violence', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999), 555–9.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), with illustrative reference to the fraught but evolving relationship of Russia and Estonia (215–18).

although the internal cultural ‘contents’ of a group may indeed adapt and shift, it is the maintaining of the boundary controls and mechanisms which are increasingly relied upon to delineate the group’s self-identity. According to John Bell Armstrong (writing on nationalism), ‘groups tend to define themselves ... by exclusion, that is, by the comparison to strangers’.<sup>28</sup>

### Boundaries in Belfast

It is the boundary, rather than what lies behind it, that is seen as the indicator of ethnic endurance, one constantly reinscribed with symbolic or mythic significance. So, in Northern Ireland, the delimiting defiant functions of flag-flying, kerbstone painting and murals on interface boundaries tell less about the reality of territorial control or cultural experience *within* the boundary, than about insatiable need to keep the boundary ‘hot’, to keep reinvesting it with intensity of feeling, asserting distinctiveness or territorial hegemony, provoking fear of others, warning outsiders against trespass. Territorial demarcation and self-delineation are two sides of the same coin. Notably, however, there is little visible *content* of cultural life, little vital sign of ethnic distinctiveness beyond the crude slogans and image.

Seen thus, the claims and counter-claims to boundary-space in terms of the right to ‘distinctive culture’ have a certain hollow ring. The right to parade down a particular route, the counter-right not to have to be subjected to this, assertions of entitlement to bi-lingual street names and public signs (Irish or Ulster-Scots) in predominantly mono-lingual settings – these betray an actual confusion of ethnicity and culture, and manifest a fixation with strengthening the ethnic boundary rather than developing cultural ‘thickness’. Clearly, some theoretical and practical distinctions need to be teased out. Here I adduce Conversi’s comprehensive analysis, making my own points of interpretation and extrapolation into the Northern Ireland scene.

Conversi, building on Barth’s distinction between ‘ethnic boundary’ (as subjectively fixed, exclusionary and closed identity marker, based primarily on *perception*), and ‘cultural contents’ (understood in more substantive terms associated with such objective variables as language, heritage, putative ancestry), marshals a range of cross-disciplinary analysis to corroborate and extend this basic insight.<sup>29</sup> Culture or ‘ethnic contents’ is in this understanding more open and accessible to outsiders, having an inviting communicative quality: thus a language can be learned; musical or literary traditions fruitfully cross-fertilise, with an effect of cooling the boundaries

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<sup>28</sup> John Alexander Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Daniele Conversi, ‘Nationalism, Boundaries and Violence’, 561–3.

and creating bridges across. Once more the boundary is also a bond: the rift that binds, the perpetual sign of the destabilising perception of danger from without, becomes the possibility of a bridge that would connect the separate realms. The implication is that without such a bridge, territory becomes a trap, and power is rendered impotent to promote a culture of the commonweal or of freedom for exchange. Rather, the stakes are heightened further and the total focus must be fixed upon the boundary rather than on any objective assessment on what the boundary is designed to shut out or safeguard within.

Here, what has been said above about the ensnarement of 'single identity' consciousness bears some modification, though I would still argue it to be a misnomer. Where communities have been structured around the boundary demarcation of insider and outsider, where the other is perceived as ever-encroaching threat, the boundary itself becomes the repository of identity, and culture is driven by fears for security. In such fraught settings, survival and defiance inevitably become the normative *modus vivendi*. Thus, in the years following the 1994 ceasefires, those living on interfaces claim to have enjoyed little improvement in the sense of security or inward socio-economic investment. They have continued to be plagued by violence and have been more liable to suffer the grip of strategically-driven paramilitary rioting inside and 'low-grade' harassment from outside – tactically welcomed by the vigilante powers within as reconfirming the necessity of the boundary, the frequent flexing of paramilitary muscle, and securing the reliance of residents on paramilitary 'protection'. Following the Holy Cross School protest,<sup>30</sup> a Protestant clergyman, while unequivocally condemning the intimidatory tactics of the protesters, told me of the wholesale public disregard of the plight of a small enclave of elderly residents on the 'Protestant' side of the interface, who were subjected to nightly intimidation and prevented from shopping by day. No one of influence was lifting a finger – whether to rein in the bully-boys or negotiate with opposite numbers across the divide. One resident was left with all her broken windows left unattended for a week, despite the clergyman's efforts to act as go-between with the City Council and with local Unionist politicians. Over time, social confidence had dwindled; there was an absence of on-the-ground leadership, while political and civic

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<sup>30</sup> The pupils of Holy Cross Catholic Primary School, in a troubled interface area in North Belfast, were prevented over a number of months in 2001–2002 from gaining access to their school whose main entrance was located in a predominantly Unionist enclave. Incredible to any general onlooker, scenes of intimidation of terrorised five- to eleven-year-olds and their parents were flashed across the world's media, most notably when Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on a visit to Belfast, lent his solidarity by walking alongside the children. Inevitably, the highly charged situation was politicised, representing many dimensions of a volatile boundary conflict. See the subsequent wider-ranging study by Paul Connolly, Alan Smith and Berni Kelly, *Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3–6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2002) (jointly commissioned by Channel 4 and the Community Relations Council, Belfast).

authorities at one remove seemed content to let the pot simmer, according to their own popular advantage. Small wonder that with such thin lived experience or benefit of ‘bonding capital’ in the internal culture behind the boundary, there is correspondingly little will to invest in cooperation across the interface (‘bridging capital’), or of venturing out into cross-community dialogue, mediation or potential partnership to achieve a desired end.<sup>31</sup> In such contexts the boundary is the ‘bond-age’ whereby no ‘peace dividend’ has been enjoyed and the favoured currency of speech is about heightening the ‘peace-line’ boundary. And so politicians or local community leaders trade in talk of their people’s perceived or real losses, and in the perceived or real gains of the other community, calculated always in inverse ratio, one community to another, with little internal analysis of the disposition of power within and between communities or between a community and the state system.

There is a good deal of theorising on the evidence of the comparatively stronger existence and access within Nationalist communities of a distinctive social and cultural capital, ranging from sport and music to language and literature, in which people take pride and experience social joy and solidarity. Nationalist communities set a trail in forms of social organisation – credit unions, neighbourhood associations and citizens’ advice structures, for example, as well as in widespread skill in securing resources for projects of capacity building and of social inclusion and economic access. In the past decades many Unionist neighbourhoods have found some parallel success and adeptness in organising creative enterprises of social up-building through a wide range of educational, cultural and micro-economic endeavours. Some of these were of a joint nature; others of a cross-community nature, and still others internally geared to human uplifting in socially disadvantaged areas. But for those on the interfaces, lived experience is not a whole lot different from before, with regular experience of violence at flashpoint times of year as well as random attacks, intimidation and forced flight from homes. There have been considerable achievements in the expansion of housing stock,

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Robert Putnam (ed.), *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11–12. It is important, however, in adverting to this ‘bonding’/‘bridging’ model, not to neglect the critical significance of the underlying disposition of power relations. A critical corrective is advanced in Pierre Bourdieu’s fourfold distinction between different types of capital within the ‘field’ of power politics: economic; cultural (involving different types of knowledge); social (involving valued social relations between people), and symbolic (arising from one’s honour and prestige). An analysis of the field must also take objective account of the hierarchical locations of power relations; and of the nature of the ‘habitus’ of the agents occupying these structured positions. See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, ‘The Purpose of Reflexive Sociology’, in P. Bourdieu and L.J.D. Wacquant (eds), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 61–215 (101, 167). For a discussion of Bourdieu’s insights, see George Ritzer, *Agency-Structure Integration* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983), 532–42.

although official surveys show that almost a decade after the ceasefires, more people choose to live in housing arrangements that are more sectarian in social structure than at any other time.<sup>32</sup>

One church minister – who has painstakingly dedicated the past decade to pastoral and structural ways of confidence-building within and across communities, developing projects of social analysis, mediation and social regeneration – recently bemoaned, after another spiralling outbreak of boundary rioting, that everything she and her collaterals were building up could be dismantled in a night. ‘It is so frustrating,’ she said, ‘that so much in North Belfast is driven by what is happening on the interfaces.’ One recognises the astute insight here that both ethnic boundary and ethnic culture require a bi-focal attention subtly held together in ways that recognise their respective complexity and their interrelated dynamic impact.

## Two Necessary and Interrelated Approaches to Peace

It is interesting to observe that in particular locations of transition there is an intuitive realisation that where perceptions of violence are softening and the controlling power of the boundaries is being cooled, changes in mural iconography tend to reflect amelioration of the fragile cultural life within. Recently, for all the enduring paramilitary emblems on boundary murals, there are also hints of different cultural contents being exhibited. Where social renewal schemes have borne fruit, there have been accompanying signs of cultural regeneration, for example in local festivals, art exhibitions, writing workshops, intra-nationalist and intra-Unionist debating events. Creative signs of imaginative vitality have appeared on boundary murals. In Nationalist West Belfast, some depict children dancing and playing in a carefree way, with trees and flowers replacing masked faces and armalites. In Loyalist East Belfast, some gable walls display names and symbols of famous local writers such as C.S. Lewis alongside football legend George Best. One can be cynical about cosmetic gestures, but as such they do intimate how communities are engaging in a new level of self-reflection and generating a sense of self-confidence and a pride in a *distinctive* cultural heritage that is none the less sturdy enough to be communicated. Images of self-protection have given way to ones that suggest something more substantive within,

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<sup>32</sup> See Malachi O’Doherty, ‘Religious Legacies’, in *Nothing But Trouble? Religion and the Irish Problem – Papers Presented to the Irish Association* (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2004), 8–17: ‘The flags on your street tell the world that people from only one half of the community need bid for your house. They reduce the competition and therefore the price. Look at the little villages between Larne and Carrickfergus, in some of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland. No tourist will be drawn to them ... They are suffocating under their flags and bunting’ (p. 11).

culturally vital and resistant to assimilation, something which can be shared across the boundary – a cultural bond.

There have been other public enterprises of artistic imagination such as ‘Different Drums’ bringing the Orange Lambeg drumming culture into interplay with traditional Irish musicality in a dazzling display of ethno-musical conversation. Plays like Marie Jones’s *Pentecost* or Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching to the Somme* reveal a hitherto unsuspected capacity for cultural self-questioning, and empathetic exploration of the political and religious landscape of the other tradition in ways that lift moral sensibility to a new place. The quiet enduring work of the Cultures of Ireland Association, or, at a more popular level, the narrative exhibitions of ‘The Cost of the Troubles’ or of ‘*An Crann – The Tree*’ spring to mind as opening new forms of cultural remembering and memorialisation, therapeutic breakthrough or dialogical analysis. These diverse creative expressions of both an internal and boundary-crossing kind have nourished imaginations and imbued the interpretation of history with more subtle and vital possibilities. Some such ventures have been staged locally – but have progressively been staged in spaces deemed neutral, and with increasing confidence, within the heartland of the other culture or with guests invited inside from the opposing culture. While reiterating the need to eschew easy simplifications, in recognition that the creative spring can so easily be muddied by ideological interests and fresh insights hitched to fundamentalist wagons more practised in closing the *laager* than in the open exchange of the public square, such risk and imagination are to be encouraged and reflected upon. Strangers come with new stories which confuse the coordinates of familiar reality. The exigencies of encounter, dialogue and the revisiting of history are rarely without contention. Conversation with strangers risks blurring the edges of oppressor and victim, and of control and responsibility. It is a necessary risk.

It is helpful to recall what was said earlier about negatively constructed moral responses to violence in contrast with more positive or formative expressions of peacemaking on the one hand, responses whose main purpose is to set limits to violence, reduce hostility and safeguard boundaries, and conversely, approaches whose starting point is the vision of peace and narratives of reconciliation which celebrate life for all. The former operates by preventing violence, reducing damage and closing rifts. It involves the addressing of conflicting rights, seeks to establish equity on clear grounds, and redress by negotiation and arbitration. Its logic is exclusive and its aim security in a defensive sense. It relies on methods of legal justice and political enactments whereby claims can be asserted and appeals weighed by testable principle and criteria. In situations where minorities have been excluded, this conflict model, for all its limitations, does forge a necessary path in the securing of human rights, equality of access and cultural parity. To date, both Nationalists and Unionists rely heavily on this politically-based, conflict-driven approach.

But, as experience also shows, it issues forth in situations of impasse, whether over ‘rights to march’ or ‘rights to govern’. Tribunals for establishing the truth of what happened (Bloody Sunday) or Ombudsman’s Reports or Commissions of Inquiry (alleged police corruption), while satisfying or partly satisfying one side, have left the other more aggrieved than before.

This conflict model of society has been developed along defensive lines of protection *against* infringements of a human rights or cultural entitlement, functioning to protect the citizen against violence, putting political constraints on oppression and discrimination. But, in this embattled world, as Michael Ignatieff reminds us: ‘Rights language offers a rich vernacular for the claims an individual [or individuals within a sub-group] may make on or against the collectivity, but it is relatively impoverished as a means of expressing individuals’ needs for the collectivity ... and there is more to respect in a person than his [*sic*] rights.’<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in this time of transition, ways must be adopted which take into account human *needs* as well as human rights, ways of opening up and cooperating within the contested space, not by relying on arbitration or competition, but by tapping into the capacity for solidarity and conviviality. In addition to a political ethic, we need an ethic of life. The language of this moral discourse is life-centred, expressive and symbolic, and it is concerned to sustain the moral and spiritual substance of communities through practices of hospitality towards stranger and outcast. For Christians this is embodied in the gospel culture of peace. It is summed up in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5) and is rooted in sensitivity to the other’s aspirations, in relationships of trust and the struggle to live in charity and forgiveness.

In a now-classic essay, Charles Taylor demonstrates the inadequacy of procedural liberalism in the matter of accommodating cultural difference. Referring to cultural identity clashes in Canada, he notes that there is a form of ‘the politics of equal respect, as enshrined in a liberalism of rights, that is inhospitable to difference ... [and] suspicious of collective goals’. He goes on to argue the need to accommodate difference in areas of non-fundamental rights over against the blind uniformity of a ‘culture of judicial review’. Thus, he points up the need for a more flexible model of liberalism ‘grounded very much on judgments about what makes a *good life* – judgments in which the integrity of cultures has an important place’.<sup>34</sup> Rowan Williams argues for a counter-balancing of this necessary but over-dominant moral discourse of

<sup>33</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–73 and 60–61. Taylor clearly has in mind the limits of Rawlsian ‘difference-blindness’ in situations where multi-culturalism must be accommodated within a politics of equal dignity. His conclusion that the ‘rigidities of procedural liberalism may rapidly become impracticable in tomorrow’s world’ (p. 61) have a prophetic but also an empirical ring.



claim and counter-claim by the risk of ‘civic vitality’ (preferring the term to ‘social cohesion’ with its assimilationist overtones) and grounded in people’s shared history and actual needs. He might have had the current Irish political impasse in mind, asserting that such risk ‘does not wait for the restoration of a situation in which all entitlements are satisfied before engaging in social converse, challenge and even co-operation’.<sup>35</sup> While insisting on the prior necessity of recognition, Williams, *pace* Taylor, asserts that full recognition

... entails a move beyond the idea that my good, my interest, has a substantial integrity *by itself*: no project is *just* mine, wholly unique to me. I have learned from others how to think and speak my desires; I need to be heard – but that means that I must speak into, not across, the flow of another’s thought and speech ... [so] I may gradually understand the sense in which the robust, primitive, individual self, seeking its fortune in a hostile world, and fighting off its competitors is a naïve fiction.<sup>36</sup>

To engage in this ethic of life with its hospitality to difference is then a necessary correlative to a political ethic of rights, and it requires that we deepen our capacity for imagining and risking relationship across the boundary. This preferential option for the stranger within an ethics of life comes towards us as a radical disruption of our dependency on mutual deterrence as a means of maintaining the social contract. Such a preferential option for the stranger is a transcending human need, which will be fostered in trust and risk across the rift that can also become an undreamt-of bond that is strong enough to bear difference.<sup>37</sup>

### **Boundaries and Bonds: The Gospel Way of Right Relationship**

Doubtless, churches in Ireland have played a role in boundary-pacifying and boundary-crossing, not least in the worst times of violence. There have, too,

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<sup>35</sup> Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: T&T Clark; New York: Continuum, 2003 [2000]), 141.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Lost Icons*, 113.

<sup>37</sup> This alternative ethic of life is rooted in particular spaces, and has in NI been generated by community groups, women’s associations, neighbourhood and cross-community bodies and ecumenical groups. These operate by processes that affirm life within and between communities, enabling people to express and celebrate their potential as bearers of life and hope. It is all the more regrettable that with the suspension of the formal Legislative Assembly in 2003, the Civic Forum (so much resisted by most of the political parties) has also been prorogued, thereby obstructing the vital under-stream of dialogue and development that constitute other ways of doing politics in the ‘lifeworld’ of civil society. Rowan Williams reminds us that it is by such community engagement that ‘the self’ or one’s culture, or history, by being put into question, is capable of being rethought, remarking also on the significant coincidence of the ‘decay of critical perspectives on the self’ and the ‘decay of ‘charitable’ space in social transaction.’ One cannot but agree with his conclusion that ‘one is not going to be restored without the other’ (Williams, *Lost Icons*, 114).

been some outstanding gestures of Christian leadership that have kept open the way of reconciliation. But the churches have not been to the fore in sustaining relationships of shared life. Their relationships have been more characterised by the manner of boundary-keeping in regard to their own identity, minimalist in creating opportunities for contact and celebrations of common lament or intercession. The normative pattern is comparative and competitive. Exchange has been too often constrained by political considerations, both secular and ecclesial, bent on securing denominational identity. This is not to deny the political ethic its rightful role, with its protective procedures for regulating church life, doctrine and worship. But one also expects churches to witness together in acts of repentance and new vision, and to contribute to movements of ecumenical hospitality, in the belief that ‘where sin abounds, grace does more abound’. It is therefore the more to be welcomed that Archbishop Brady, the Catholic Primate of Armagh, speaking on 1 September 2004, the tenth anniversary of the first ceasefire, adopted a more explicitly magnanimous rhetoric affirming the risks taken by Protestant clergy in engaging with Republicans to achieve the early ceasefires and calling for their renewed help through the current stalemate. In like manner, Archbishop Eames, the Anglican Primate, called on people to move beyond the suspicion that had overtaken the initial euphoria of the ceasefires, encouraging the ‘reinstatement or creation of a new sense of trust – that they can believe what they are being told’.<sup>38</sup> These statements call for a renewed commitment to the Gospel way of reaching across boundaries and sharing life. It is with a short reflection on a typical Gospel narrative that I conclude.

The Gospel of Mark, as intimated above, geographically dramatises Jesus’ frequent crossing of boundaries between Jews and Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, as well as of gender and social status. Particularly significant is the frequent lake crossing, manifesting Jesus’ constant movement between his own place and the alien territory on the far side.<sup>39</sup> One agrees that Jesus’ mission was deeply shaped by the ‘double bind’ within his own tradition of

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<sup>38</sup> Maeve Connolly, ‘Protestant Clergy Can Aid Peace: Archbishop’, *The Irish News* (31 August 2004), 1; and Gerry Moriarty, ‘Churches Urge Politicians to Take Risks to Build Peace’, *The Irish Times* (1 September 2004), 7.

<sup>39</sup> This pattern is not peculiar to Mark and it is, of course, related to emerging developments and controversies in the post-Resurrection community. In both Matthew and Mark there is a replication of the feeding of the multitude on both sides of the lake, representing on the one hand ‘home territory’ (Matt.14:13ff; Mark 6:30ff, with a reference to the left-over food gathered into ‘twelve baskets’ – with reminiscences of the Twelve Tribes of Israel), and on the other, ‘the other side of the lake’ (Matt. 14:13ff and Mark 8:1ff, where the remaining food is gathered up into ‘seven baskets’, possibly symbolising the Gentiles, if one also recalls the choice of *seven* deacons in Acts 6:1–6, from among the Hellenists). It is clear that the main purpose of the redactor at this point is to show that Jesus was in touch with both sides of the lake, anticipating the dissolving distinction in the early church between Jew and Gentile (cf. Gal. 3:27ff; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13).

particularity and universality, and like other prophets before him, it cost him his life. Mark – the starkest of the gospels – evokes a sense of dread in the face of the foreign territory on the far side of the lake. Yet Jesus, as if impelled to extend his mission there, is seen crossing the waters in a manner which symbolically evokes the primeval chaos of the opening words of Genesis. The man with the unclean spirit confronts him. He had been wandering among the tombs – realm of the dead and of the social outcast. The encounter is portrayed in terms of struggle and crisis. Jesus upbraids the unclean spirit which possesses the man. They question each other, and Jesus asks to know his name. At this point, ‘the one’ takes on the form of ‘the many’: ‘My name is Legion.’ Sending the spirits into a herd of swine which proceed to destroy themselves, Jesus proceeds to heal the man, and then sends him back to his own home – to tell others of his experience of the Lord’s mercy (Mark 5:2–19). Jesus himself moved on to the deeper strangeness of the Decapolis region (Mark 5:20–43). Only then does he return to his own side of the lake.

Not long after, we hear that his own people in Nazareth ‘took offence’ at the wisdom of his preaching, resenting that this could come from the local carpenter’s son, as if to set bounds to his identity and to keep Nazareth a trouble-free zone. Jesus, we are told, ‘could do no deed of power there ... and he was amazed at their unbelief’ (Mark 6:3–6). One recognises here that the defensive erecting of a boundary *within* one’s own group can be a threatening experience. Here it confronts Jesus with a limit to be transcended. Some time after this, and subsequent to his feeding the five thousand on his own side of the lake, Jesus once more crossed to the opposite shore, where the Gerazenes rushed to meet him bearing their sick. It was they, rather than his own, who recognised that Jesus was a bringer of healing and grace.

Furthermore, these journeys to the other side had the effect of provoking resistance and fear in his followers. This is dramatised in the narrative of the storm on the lake as they made their first journey to the other side. Jesus slept through it and they cried out in terror of sinking. The cosmic upheaval of wind and wave is the outward symbol of the terror that must be embraced and stilled if his disciples are to stand on the other shore, if they are to be bearers of healing and liberation beyond their own. The raging lunacy of the Gerazene demoniac shouting abuse at them did not exactly have the ring of a welcoming committee. One could describe the situation as suffering from an ecumenical deficit. The Gerazenes and the disciples – like ourselves – could be described as ‘ecumenically challenged’. Jesus’ healing of the ecumenical deficit took him and his disciples into the deeper reaches of themselves where they had to face their own fear, sink into their own vulnerability and find some empathy with the other’s need in all its strangeness.

Recent scholarship on the origins of Christianity has shown that these stories cannot be understood outside the early Church’s contested relationship with Judaism, particularly in the light of the destruction of the

second Temple in 70 CE. While it is beyond our scope to examine the dynamics at work between the two groups, some safe assertions can be made: for example, that Jesus and the Jesus movement that became the church were profoundly Jewish in their primary identity; that Christian identity and Jewish identity as these came to emerge in the inter-testamental period were forged in contexts of opposition, polemics and the gradual mutual hardening of boundaries; the emerging Christian community maintained many points of continuity in belief, ritual and worship, while investing these with new meaning (ritual meals and baptism, for example), reflecting the logic of the Resurrection that transgressed the boundary between life and death, sin and grace, exclusion and communion.<sup>40</sup>

I acknowledge here a critical insight from a conversation with Jerome Murphy O'Connor, who is in fact of the opinion that this Marcan text relating to the Gerazene demoniac portrays Jesus as crossing a boundary in his own self-understanding, re giving priority in ministry to his own (suggested by the initial stage of his conversation with the Syrio-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:27). For Murphy O'Connor, the cure of the raging demoniac and of the daughter of the Syrio-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:29), these are not 'post-Resurrection loopholes', but examples of Jesus breaking his own rules on boundary-crossing. Even without such a strong claim, however, there are good warrants indeed from the social-critical tradition of biblical scholarship and from feminist biblical scholarship for a reconstructive reading of the Gospel texts from the perspective of boundary-crossing. These texts speak for themselves of the need to respect boundaries and the blessed ties that bind within the community of the tradition. But they contain within them also the seed of a countering, inclusive vision. Their inner self-correcting tension is recalled in the words cited in Leviticus 19 or Isaiah 49, or indeed anticipate those of Brian Keenan about the imperative to cross the Jordan, or Kristeva's on the restless ambiguities and inescapable disturbance in the encounter with Strangers. They speak into our own reflection on boundaries and bonds of culture in our necessary journeying beyond sectarianism.

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<sup>40</sup> This new logic relates to the opening-up of the boundaries of the young Christian group to those not at first envisaged as its members. Thus, while one cannot minimise the work of post-Resurrection redaction, and while one should not expect the historicity and authoritativeness of every word and deed of Jesus to explain the emergence of Christianity, one should nevertheless resist the positivist temptation to drive a firm wedge between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith'. Followers of Jesus must constantly seek to correlate the example and teaching of the Jesus of the gospels with the emergent understanding of the significance of Jesus Christ in the life of the early church. Like the contemporary churches in Northern Ireland, this church was doctrinally conservative and highly conscious of maintaining boundaries; hence the well-attested interpretation of events related in Acts 10 as a turning point for the early church in terms of the admission of Gentiles, despite Peter's undoubted reluctance in the first and second instance.



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