

**A Response to Robert Schreiter's paper, A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Notre Dame, Monday 14 April 2008**

Thank you for including me in this conversation, and thank you for a very full and thought-provoking paper.

**Reconciliation:**

A couple of observations: The word reconciliation suggests the restoration of something that was once present before. Perhaps one problem that people may have with it is the suggestion it conveys, almost subliminally, that what is envisaged is a return to some former state, which was not a good one for many people. Sometimes there was no former state of peace. What reconciliation really means, as this paper indicates, is the creation of something quite new and surprising.

What field of meaning does this word cover? There is an ambivalence that is reflected in the structure of this paper. Is reconciliation to be treated as the overarching theme, so that reconciliation encompasses healing and forgiveness within itself, or is reconciliation one element in peacebuilding alongside healing and forgiveness? There's an unresolved ambiguity here.

Perhaps it would be helpful to state it in the following way: The process of reconciliation is an overarching process that includes the elements of healing and forgiveness. The goal of this process is a state of reconciliation which will be reached when healing and forgiveness, as well as other parameters, have been accomplished. Reconciliation as process includes the work of forgiveness and healing, while reconciliation as end is brought about through various means that include healing and forgiveness (but may also include, for example, other work concerned with peace agreements, arrangements for enabling justice to be done, and so on). Thus reconciliation is, and I think is likely to remain, a close synonym both to peace and to peacebuilding.

**Reconciliation within conflict**

I want to raise a question, and take issue with Bob, about when reconciliation happens. We should not, I suggest, think that the work of reconciliation can be left only to the post-conflict phase. It has to begin much earlier, during the time of conflict. People who are actually fighting need to be brought together. Encounter has to begin, and real issues be uncovered. Only thus, it seems to me, is conflict ever likely to be turned into peace. A theology of reconciliation needs to encompass this work done during the time of conflict, as well as the work that comes afterwards.

The two NT passages that Dr Schreiter has taken as a basis for a theology of reconciliation are Pauline, where Paul explicitly uses the language of reconciliation. Theologically, Paul's state of reconciliation corresponds to shalom and to the Kingdom of God, the term used in the gospels in the preaching of Jesus. The Kingdom is an eschatological concept designating, in its fullness, a perfectly redeemed creation, a vision only wholly fulfilled when God is all in all. In this present world the Kingdom is both 'now' and 'not yet'. If then the state of reconciliation, with God and others, corresponds to the term the Kingdom of God, we should expect to find the same tension between now and not yet in the case of reconciliation. We can see that this is the case in Paul's own experience: he rejoices in

knowing deeply that he is already reconciled to God in Christ, he experiences the flow of God's love in his heart through the gift of the Spirit, and yet he still finds himself still struggling with sin and needing to grow in grace. We might also be able to draw parallels with his personal relationships: he has a deep sense of one-ness in the body of Christ, but his letters reveal him sometimes rejoicing in that unity, sometimes involved in conflicts of various kinds.

What then of the experience of reconciliation in situations of conflict today? Can we discern a similar pattern of now and not yet within them? I suggest that within many modern conflict situations we can discern such a pattern, where the work of reconciliation extends far back into the conflict phase. Indeed, important seeds of such work may have been planted long before the conflict took its present form. We should I suggest include the present reality and the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God among the theological principles on which a practical theology of reconciliation rest

May I illustrate briefly from the experience of South Africa. The ideology of absolute apartheid, separateness, was imposed on South Africa in 1948 by the mainly Afrikaner National Party. There ensued more than forty very painful years when the political and social advances that had occurred were reversed and new advances were absolutely prevented. Apartheid resulted not in pure separation but in an hierarchy of privilege with whites at the top, politically and economically, and black Africans at the bottom. An increasingly ruthless police state grew up to enforce this system.

I first visited South Africa in 1972. I was then a medical student in England, looking for a place to work in Africa. The ideology of apartheid was then at its height. I went with some prior experience of Tanzania and Zambia, where the hospitality of the people had greatly impressed me, as had the importance of the work of the churches in bringing education and health, and their sharing in a sense of freedom and joy. I was also fired with ideals of reconciliation gained from the ecumenical movement and from the international meetings at Taizé.

I was privileged to stay for my first ten days in Johannesburg with that remarkable community, the Little Sisters of Jesus. Their head in SA was a coloured (mixed-race) Sister from Cape Town, Little Sister Iris Mary. She was my tutor for those first few days, and became a firm friend. I also had both Anglican and Afrikaner contacts. Many British people of my generation refused even to visit South Africa, much less to work there, because of the regime. But what I discovered was that there existed an alternative society within South Africa, another reality in which people of all races were determined to live an alternative way of life. It was possible, even within the pain of that situation, to be living the way of reconciliation. It was the existence of those people that drew me back to work there: I felt I could learn from them, and that the work of changing South Africa, both from without and from within, was important not only for that country but for much of the rest of Africa.

Even while injustice is rampant or conflict is still raging, it is likely that we will be able to find persons and groups that constitute signs of hope, flames of truth and reconciliation lighting the darkness around and pointing to the possibility of wider reconciliation. It is possible to find such people today in the Holy Land. Much of the painful story of the Holy Land today is reminiscent of South Africa thirty years ago. When the time comes that reconciliation becomes possible on the political plane, and the whole society shifts from one historical era to another, as happened in South Africa, then people who discovered one

another across the barriers in the dark times can be the core of a new society, free now to introduce others to one another and to be healers.

I wonder if within almost every context of strife we can find saints of reconciliation, people of wisdom, who are not overwhelmed by a sense of victimhood, or by hatred or resentment, but who, in Brother Roger Schutz's words, have found the ability to struggle with a reconciled heart. These are attractive, iconic people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was such a person in Nazi Germany. Mandela has been one in South Africa, and it is important to listen to Mandelas own voice when he speaks of the significance for his own formation of the fact that that he not only grew up as person of responsibility and dignity, a hereditary counselor to the Thembu chiefs, but was educated at the high school at Healdtown, founded and run by Methodist missionaries. (Robert, you speak of Mandela as a young firebrand, but to me that term does not quite fit! Mandela was passionate for justice, but even in youth it was in a most controlled and dignified manner.) In a very similar way, Desmond Tutu grew up without hatred and gained a wider vision from his friendship with the Anglican monks of the Community of the Resurrection, who showed him as a teenager the way of Christ that transcends racial divides, who lived the way of reconciliation in Sophiatown, and who trained him to be a deeply spiritual priest, a prophet and a reconciler.

As Desmond Tutu has written, "nation of victims" (a phrase from Dullah Omar, Minister of Justice 1994) 'was an apt description up to a point. But we should also declare that ours was also wonderfully a nation of survivors, with some quite remarkable people who astounded the world with their capacity to forgive, their magnanimity and nobility of spirit.' (Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Random House 1999 p.20) He points out that no race had a monopoly of such people (1999 p.36). Of Mandela he notes that he developed in prison into 'the prisoner of conscience par excellence' and that 'He did not emerge from prison spewing words of hatred and revenge. He amazed us all by his heroic embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness.' (1999 p.39). Tutu writes of the attitude and quality of this leadership: 'Nearly all the leaders of the black community had been educated in Church mission schools. They said that their commitment to reconciliation was due to the influence and witness of the Christian Church.' (1999 p.43) Such leaders, and those in the Churches who worked within the situation and had been there when the people were hurting had the authority later on to speak of forgiveness and reconciliation and be listened to with respect (1999 p.44).

In 1989, when apartheid was dying but not yet dead and there was severe political violence, a study guide was produced in South Africa by an ecumenical group of theologians, members of the National Initiative for Reconciliation. One contributor wrote as follows:

South African Christians cannot and may not ignore, avoid, or overlook the seriousness of the injustice, pain, polarization and sin of the structures which control people and which tower above their lives. If you claim to be a child of God you have to take action against sin and death and for life and hope.

But how can you get involved? How can you be changed and liberated from years of conditioning, indoctrination, and religious spiritualization? Having had to walk this painful road myself, I believe that the most important means of changing perspectives and attitudes is through a event of encounter, exposure or experience.

God through his Holy Spirit uses experiences of exposure to the world of others to bring about change, freedom, growth and reconciliation. The incarnation

of Christ provides the essential model to guide us towards this road of reconciliation with those in other worlds. (Ivor Jenkins, 'Practical steps', in *Conflict and the Quest for Justice* ed. Klaus Nürnberger, John Tooke and William Domeris (Pietermaritzburg: Encounter Publications, 1989, p. 348)

Here is another fundamental theological principle, that of incarnational presence, to add to the five Pauline principles listed in this paper. As to its practice, the above writer goes on to suggest various practical steps by which congregations, individuals and pastors could open themselves to acquire a new mind-set and become active participants in change. Individuals could 'Establish groups where families of different races share common meals in their respective homes. Spend time on sharing and exchanging ideas and feelings with individuals of other races this sharing must be of high quality. Visit people of other races on an individual or family basis for a day or a weekend.' These were simple activities, but they needed considerable energy and some courage to organize in apartheid South Africa. These grassroots initiatives were reconciling in themselves and contributed to the transformation of the situation from within. To a degree they were also precursors of the later Healing of Memories workshops.

There is a spectrum of possible responses against situations of oppression, ranging from that of victims whose aim can only be heroic survival, through a whole range of active work within the situation, to the taking up of arms in a just revolution. A theology of reconciliation should I think, at its fullest, provide theological reflection on all these positions. They are synergistic and complementary to one another in bringing about an eventual resolution of the situation.

In the extraordinary transition years from the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 to the democratic election in 1994, when violence was still very much present, those of goodwill in South Africa, and exiles now returned, together with many helpers from overseas organizations (UN, Commonwealth, EU, OAU and some ecumenical Church observers), were suddenly freed from the constraints of apartheid. Many were specifically empowered by the National Peace Accord signed in 1991 to take an active part in South Africa's internal peace process. This work, through the national, regional and local structures set up under the Accord, merits much more study than it has received, as a notable example of previously warring people creating reconciliation, building hope and bringing order out of chaos while that chaos was still frequently producing violence, death, and not a little despair. I am certain that the election of 1994 could not have happened as it did in the absence of this process and the people whom it empowered and trained. A similar process involving the people and not just the political leaders just might have enabled the Oslo accords between Israel and Palestine to achieve success.

Outsiders have an important role, they may be able to help bring together representatives of the warring parties, probably secretly at first, assisting them to find one another and begin to think of peace. In the case of South Africa one thinks of clandestine meetings held in the 1980s in Senegal and Britain involving, among others, the progressive Afrikaner newspaper editor Willem de Klerk whose younger brother FW de Klerk became President of South Africa in 1989. In Mozambique there is the story, only recently known, of the Sant Egidio community hosting the leaders of Frelimo and Renamo for several months in Rome before a breakthrough came and they signed their final peace agreement.

This is the work of reconciliation even within the time of conflict, which I believe is where the work must begin. A theology of reconciliation must include within its ambit those

persons, groups, organizations, networks of friends, who anticipate the dawn, living a life of reconciliation as best they can in an un-reconciled situation, constituting within it signs of hope, transcendence, and future possibility,

I respectfully urge that the bounds of the practical theology of reconciliation be set sufficiently widely as to encompass this work of reconciliation even within the conflict phase. The guiding principles for such a practical theology of reconciliation need to include not only the five already derived from Paul, but also those of incarnational presence, and of the partial realisation, the 'now' and 'not yet', of the Kingdom of God.

## **Healing**

The section on healing is by far the longest in this paper. I wonder if this is perhaps a pointer to its being more a paper about the theology of post-conflict healing and post-conflict forgiveness as aspects of reconciliation, than about reconciliation per se?

Again I'd like to widen this concept of healing. When defining healing, Robert has written in his draft that Healing of individuals and of societies after violent conflict often involves both physical and emotional or spiritual healing. He goes on to note some kinds of physical and material damage: the loss of a limb, of one's home or one's livelihood. Then he continues, Besides the physical and material aspects, psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing needs to be undertaken. He notes that while these three are often separated into distinct areas by Western therapeutic schemes (and spiritual healing may be ignored) for much of the world where conflict has raged these three constitute a whole. It is on that complex of psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing that this chapter concentrates.

I mis-read this paragraph at first, because I wanted it to say is that for much of the world, the triad of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing constitute a whole. The reconstruction or new provision of homes and livelihoods, may seem to come under another heading than healing. But to be a victim of harsh circumstances, or to live as a displaced person without a job or home, is a constant source of real psychological and spiritual pain. To have one's material needs recognized and met is an important aspect of healing. In non-Western societies (and perhaps in the West too) this is not so divorced from spiritual healing.

In 1994 in South Africa, the concept of counseling was fairly new to most people. A team from the Swedish fire brigade came to Johannesburg to impart their expertise to the peace committees, for the debriefing and after-care of peace monitors. The Swedes identified local organizations that could offer trained personnel, and post-trauma counseling was duly offered to the 6000 or so monitors in the Johannesburg region. Many were residents in townships where violence had been endemic. In one such area that I know well, we had trained and deployed over 200 peace monitors. The counselors arrived on a designated day some weeks after the 1994 election, to find just 12 people gathered to meet them at the local peace committee offices. Of these, ten wanted to know when they would be paid for the shifts they had done over the election period (the only period for which most peace monitors ever received any pay). The other two had personal problems at home

A number of things stand out. One is the importance of a rare opportunity to earn money, the pressing need that the people felt was for employment rather than counseling. Second, where a desire for counseling was expressed it was not connected to violence or political

victimization, but to other problems which, again, seemed more pressing. Third, in the light of the methods successfully developed shortly afterwards by Fr Michael Lapsley at the trauma centre and later the Institute for the Healing of Memories in Cape Town, the western model of one-on-one counseling was probably not the appropriate model to offer. The Institute is much closer to African tradition in using a group sharing method, the method that is reflected in Robert Schreiers paper. In the township which I have mentioned, this kind of healing was to some extent accomplished in 1995 and the following years through an ongoing process of reconciliation and reconstruction involving the leaders of the displaced families and those who had displaced them.

### **Forgiveness**

I have run out of time! But it would be good to explore the idea that forgiveness can be initiated either by the perpetrator or the victim. The story of Zaccheus is relevant.

Thanks for a stimulating paper on a topic that can only grow in importance.

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