

“A Theology for Peacebuilding”

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Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College

1. Introduction

Any twenty-first century venture in constructive theology has to meet the challenge of global Christianity, with its myriad differences in concrete problems and perspectives. This is especially true of a theology of peacebuilding. It might well be said that for peacebuilding, no “theology” is required, only a spirituality that connects the practitioner to God and to a local community. Therefore I begin by acknowledging that all theology has always come out of specific Christian experiences, and is in fact nothing but reflection on Christian experience. Experience, spirituality, and theology are mutually informing. My aim therefore is to seek the mutual nuancing of theology and peacebuilding practices, in dialogue with the many cultural situations and voices gathered for this conference.

My paper develops a theology of peacebuilding around five touchstones: creation, evil, salvation in Christ, the Trinity, and church. I will offer a brief overview of what I think these doctrines can contribute to peacebuilding.

First, though, I want to share with you how much I have benefited from participating in the Catholic Peacebuilding Network. In 2005, I was invited to join the work of the CPN by contributing to a collection of essays on theology and peacebuilding. I am a North American university professor and theologian. I have published and taught on social justice, on just war theory, on liberation theologies, and on peace and reconciliation. However, until a couple of years ago, I never had practical exposure to

the challenges of overcoming violent conflict. Therefore I eagerly welcomed the opportunity to attend CPN conferences in Burundi (2006) and Columbia (2007), where I learned a great deal.

These conferences influenced me in important ways. A first insight I gained was the extent to which conditions of division and violence still exist and continue to be challenges for peacebuilders. At the time of our conference in Burundi (July 2006), conditions were relatively peaceful, especially in the capital, Bujumbura. However, while we were there, we memorialized the life of Archbishop Michael Courtney, the papal nuncio who had been murdered by political enemies only a few months earlier. Likewise, in many areas of East and Central Africa, violence is cyclical. And there is ongoing division in society and the church over histories of victimization, trauma, and collusion with perpetrators.

In Columbia, the Catholic community and its leaders appear unified to oppose the drug trade and illegally armed groups, and to relieve the plight of displaced villagers and those living in slums in the city. The bishops and others insist on negotiation among combatants, and fair and just laws governing reparations. Yet peacebuilders remain in constant danger, especially when negotiating with illegally armed groups. The danger was poignantly brought home by a ceremony in which we participated at a community center. Young people robed in black remembered friends who had been murdered, and led us in procession around rows of white wooden crosses, representing dozens of local people killed in recent years.

A second lesson of the CPN conferences is increased appreciation for the work of women in violence-torn societies. Yet how little and how infrequently women's

contribution receives the recognition it deserves! Women are the mainstay of local community groups, and women play important roles in Catholic organizations and ministries. Yet I heard many women I met in Burundi and Bogota say that their voice and authority either are not recognized, or are subordinated to clerical decision-making. There are of course exceptions. Yet patriarchy is a fact in many countries, including the U.S. It is not my place as a North American woman to define the roles of women in very different cultures. However, the words of John Paul II, as pope, challenge the whole church:

Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude....And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the church, for this I am truly sorry.ⁱ

After all, he continues, "transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness."ⁱⁱ

My third lesson is that I learned how important the Scriptures are to Catholic peacebuilding around the world. In North America and Western Europe, and in international institutions like the U.N., Catholic social teaching is the most widely used foundation of Catholic work for justice. In other cultural settings, people often use more directly biblical language. They refer to the example of Jesus and to the bible, especially the New Testament. Jesus' teaching and ministry are held up as examples of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

In modern North Atlantic societies, the separation of church and state, and religious pluralism, make the more neutral, justice language of CST attractive and effective. The situation is different in Catholic or Christian countries like Burundi and Colombia. This underlines the relevance of a theology of peacemaking that draws on explicitly religious resources.

Keeping in mind these three lessons about biblical resources, ongoing violence, and women's participation, I will now develop my reflections on a theology of peace in five parts: a theology of evil, a theology of creation, a theology of Christ, a theology of the Trinity, and a theology of the church as a community of hope.

1. The Problem of Evil

I want to take the problem of evil first. Evil in the human and natural world is all that destroys the well-being and flourishing of humans and other creatures. Human evil has a moral character, as it involves human intellect and will. Sinful human relationships are relationships in which the basic humanity of other human beings is ignored or violated. The essence of humanly caused evil is indifference to or domination of our fellow human beings. This is the evil that Christ comes to heal. According to the parable of judgment in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says,

"...I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25: 42. 45-46).

This text reminds us that those who turn away from the suffering of others are just as culpable as those who directly cause it. Evil is and always has been very difficult to explain. Sometimes we see evil in a rather simple way, as a matter of free will, about which we have a choice. Of course, in an obvious way, we do have a choice about evil. And seeing it as a choice makes it easier to assign blame and demand change. Yet, on another level, our choice to do evil is not entirely free. This is what the doctrine of original sin means. There is a bias toward evil in each of us. It has a hold on us. The story of the fall in Genesis 3 portrays the first woman and man as willfully disobeying God. But the woman was not wrong when she told God that the fruit was given her by the serpent “whom thou hast made”—she had a good point! Something always precedes our own bad choices and pushes or pulls our choice in the wrong direction.

Liberation theologians make a similar point when they speak of structural sin. Sinful structures are a form of institutional violence against oppressed peoples. But sinful structures and institutions also make it easier for those who are caught up in them to go along with patterns of sin and difficult to resist.

Perhaps it is ultimately impossible to know where evil really comes from and why human beings choose to do evil. I firmly believe that the human experiences of life, love, solidarity and joy are more fundamental and radical than the human experiences of death, hatred, domination and suffering. Yet it is still true that we know the good of the former only in the midst of the evil of the latter.ⁱⁱⁱ The very topic “peacemaking” assumes conditions under which there is no peace. Peacemaking occurs in situations of ongoing violence, division, and aggression. A theology of peacemaking must honestly confront the hold of evil in our world, if it is going to offer a real alternative to evil. A “theology of

peacemaking” offers peacemaking as a practical response to evil, against the horizon of a religious experience of salvation. It is already this inbreaking experience of hope and transformation, that allows us to know that creation is and always has been good.

2. The theology of creation

*“God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).*

*“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”
(Gen 1:31).*

The theology of creation affirms the essential goodness of humanity as made in the image of God, and connects that image with social relationships. Our idea of “creation” is a response to the evil in the world; the symbol “creation” tells us that evil and suffering are not part of God’s providential design and should be resisted. Creation faith counteracts historical experiences of suffering, uncertainty, and evil, and reassures God’s people that God can create them anew.

Genesis actually contains two different creation stories in the first and second chapters. Right now I want to focus on the story in Genesis 2. This story contains an important message about the unity of all members of the human race, and the importance of our relationships to one another.

We are all familiar with the way this account tells of the creation of the first man and woman. The woman is made second from the man’s rib. The man, was made from the mud of the earth, after God had already made the sun, moon, waters, and all the plants and animals. (Attention to this sequence of working material—earth, seas, and sky,

plants, animals, man, woman--should dispel any notion that Eve is subordinate or inferior to Adam because she was made from his rib!) Upon seeing the woman, the man exclaims “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23).

Usually the “one flesh” unity of the first couple is interpreted as the sexual and reproductive unity of the sexes, ideally accompanied by unity of heart and life. However, in relation to peacebuilding, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that at this point in the story the woman and man are the only two people that exist. It is the woman’s humanity that is most significant to Adam, not her gender. When the man says “this at last is flesh of my flesh,” he is comparing his new companion to the animals not to other human males. Thus I propose that we see the “one flesh” unity of the first two people as the fundamental form of human relationship—not just as a model of “one flesh” sexual union. In other words, co-humanity should be more important to human identity and relationship than any bonds or differences based on family, tribe, race, ethnicity, religion, or national belonging. To fulfill the created nature that is “good” in God’s eyes, humans must recognize that we are all “flesh of one flesh,” charged together to be the stewards of creation and the parents and educators of the next generation.

Fellow humanity as a basis for peacebuilding looks back to humanity’s common creation by God, and looks ahead to the redemption of all from evil in Christ. The work of Fr. Emmanuel, of the Centre Ubuntu in Burundi, reaches beyond Catholics to the entire community. Or, as Myla Leguro has told us, “everyone has the seeds of human goodness.” These are both reflections of a creation theology.

3. Salvation in Christ

This text from Paul's letter to the Romans expresses hope of salvation even in the face of violence.

"...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Roms 8: 38-39).

Salvation means that despite the reality of evil, it is possible to begin to live even now in unity with God, in the goodness of creation and in "the kingdom of God" that Jesus preached. This is so because we are united to Christ in the incarnation, healed through the cross of Christ, and empowered by our share in Christ's resurrection. Incarnation, cross, and resurrection—all of these are a part of salvation in Christ. Right now I want to spend a few moments reflecting on the difficult problem of the cross that Paul admitted could seem like "foolishness" and a "stumbling block."

Luke's gospel asks a question that has troubled Christians down the ages. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things?" (Lk 24:26). In the first century, the scandal of the cross was the apparent defeat of God's Messiah. In the twenty-first century, the scandal of the cross is violence that is seemingly willed by and pleasing to God. Did God will that an innocent man die for the sins of others? No! Then how can the cross be reconciled with the nonviolence of God?

One meaning of the cross is God's solidarity with the victims of violence and injustice. This newer, liberationist model of the cross as divine solidarity with the victims is powerful and revelatory. For theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx and Jon Sobrino, the cross as solidarity calls us all to see "that justice be done to the victims of this world,

as justice was done to the crucified Jesus,” when God raised and exalted him.” Hence, “the course of action called for from us is to take the crucified people down from the cross.”^{iv}

Yet the model of Christ’s death as a sacrifice or as atonement for human sin has also had remarkable staying power in the Christian imagination and piety. Is it still possible to see the cross as somehow bringing forgiveness of our sins, and the conversion of our hearts? Whether we live in the Philippines, Burundi, Columbia or the United States, we need healing from the sins and guilt of violence. These sins include direct commission of acts of violence, complicity in violence, cowardice and dishonesty in the face of violence, apathy toward conditions of violence, and adopting economic and military policies that foster violence.

Jurgen Moltmann powerfully communicates our need for salvation from sin when he recounts his own experiences as a young German prisoner of war who realizes for the first time the atrocities committed by his nation against the Jewish people.

German civilization had been destroyed through Auschwitz. My home town Hamburg lay in ruins; and in my own self things looked no different. I felt abandoned by God and human beings, and the hopes of my youth died. I couldn’t see any future ahead of me.^v

The young soldier’s senses of guilt and despair are overwhelming, until he discovers in the bible a Jesus who is the brother even of sinners. By suffering with despairing sinners, as well as with innocent victims, Jesus Christ is fully human and, with the exception of sin, unites everything human with the divine. According to Moltmann,

“He is the one who delivers us from the guilt that weighs us down and robs us of every kind of future.”^{vi}

A theology of the cross for peacemaking holds up the innocent victims of the violence of others, but it also approaches humans trapped in their own wickedness and lack of empathy for the suffering they have caused. In the incarnation, God enters into every aspect of human suffering, including both oppression and the feeling of “forsakenness” that comes from knowledge of our guilt. Being with us in our suffering, suffering of every kind, God also transforms our human existence. The Christian life is always the way of the cross as well as the way of renewal. This is because the new life we hope to share still struggles to be born amid the broken conditions of history. Yet we also experience the presence of the risen Jesus in the church’s practices as we heal one another and experience redemption. A continuing question for all of us is: What do Christians around the world see in the cross? What is their theology and spirituality of the cross?

4. The doctrine of the Trinity has its beginning point in our experience of Christ in the Christian community. The Trinity is not only about God in God’s transcendence or God’s interior life. It is also about God’s relation to us, as Son and Spirit. In fact, the late Catherine LaCugna, a Notre Dame theologian, titled her widely read book on the Trinity God for Us.^{vii} There is no doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament, but there are hints. For example,

“...when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3: 21-22).

We confess that Christ is truly God because he saves; God is truly present in Jesus Christ. That is the Christian experience. We are united to God in Christ in the church, through the divine presence of Christ's Spirit. What we know of the mystery of God, we know in and through our experience of God's approach to us as Creator, in Christ, and as Spirit. The Son and the Spirit draw us into participation in God's own life. The three-fold nature of God's relation to us reveals a trinity of love in God. The loving communion of persons in God provides a model of the kinds of social relationships that constitute our life in God's kingdom, beginning now.

Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff finds in the Trinity a program of infinite liberation, enabled by a community of diverse gifts and functions. "Communion, which is the nature of the Trinity, means a critique of all kinds of exclusion and nonparticipation that exist and remain in society....The Blessed Trinity represents the best program for full liberation."^{viii}

5. Finally, the church is the community in which we experience salvation as restored right relationship to God and neighbor, and in which we are empowered to change relationships and structures around us. The church is a community of hope because the Spirit gifts us with the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). The gift of the Spirit includes the power and the courage to act. By taking small steps to end violence, and to increase understanding and cooperation, we open the door to a different future, a future in which it is possible to build peace.

“...hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Roms 5:5).

The church is the “place” of salvation by God in Christ through the Spirit. The church is the initiator of the kingdom or reign of God as it begins to take shape in history, conformed to Jesus’ own ministry. We are “incorporated” into Christ in Christ’s body, the church. In Christ, and where the Spirit is truly present, God’s reign is inaugurated.

According to Paul, we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection through the practices of the community, including baptism and the eucharist. Life in the Christian community teaches us mutual respect, moral discipline, sharing among rich and poor, faith, hope, and above all love (1 Cor 5-7, 10:14-23, 11:17-33, 12-13, 16:1-4; Col 3:8-16). Jesus’ ministry to the poor, his forgiveness of sinners, and his table fellowship with those unacceptable to respectable society illustrate the practice of the kingdom of God. Seen through Paul’s lens, the practices of the kingdom are reconciling practices; reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a “new creation.” Human peacebuilding practices, as church/body of Christ, participate in God’s creative action (2 Cor 17-19).

In desperate circumstances of violence and deprivation, such as we saw in the Philippines, Colombia and Burundi, to engage practices that nurture hope requires courage and imagination. Though Christians are commissioned for a special ministry of reconciliation, that ministry is not limited to the internal life of the church. In line with Catholic social teaching, Christians are called to seek compassion and justice in civil society, politics, and government. As an international and transnational institution, the Roman Catholic Church provides unique opportunities for global peacebuilding

activities. The opportunities include cooperation with other faith traditions. Peter Phan cites Redemptoris Missio no. 54 in support of such interreligious cooperation. Here John Paul II suggests that the Holy Spirit also works in other religions. In the Mindanao region of the Philippines, for example, Catholics partner with Muslims and indigenous peoples to build dialogue and collaboration in the implementation of a historic peace agreement.

Sin is not easily abandoned, however, and this includes sins in and of the church. The need for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation extends to the church. Religions, including Christianity, are too often and too easily co-opted to serve exclusive and violent group identities and ideologies. Religions and churches have been major players in wars, ethnic conflicts, and genocides. Even when advocating and participating in the reconciliation processes, Christian churches and their members (not least of all Catholics) do engage in self-justifying rationalizations, in blaming the victims, in evasion of responsibility, in attempts to hold onto status and power, and in making advantageous alliances and compromises with recalcitrant wrongdoers.

The Church, and we its members, must have the courage to repent of our own sins. By doing so, we can model the way to take the first and most difficult step in the reconciliation and healing process. Within the church, the eucharist can bring new life for the innocent and guilty alike, gathered in one body. The church as a “sacramental community,” holding love and reconciliation in “clay jars,” can be an embodiment of the new and redeemed humanity essential to successful peacemaking. The church can also take the initiative in establishing mutual listening and cooperative social practices among

previously divided factions. The church is not yet the City of God. But it is a “community of hope” whose mission is to “confess hope in action.”^{ix}

In Christian theological tradition, hope is a practical virtue. It is a virtue of the will that disposes us to act for a future good that is difficult to attain, but not impossible.^x Hope is not blind trust that “everything will work out for the best” despite all evidence to the contrary. It is more than the expectation of rewards in eternal life, for the sake of which we endure life’s burdens. Hope does not require absolute assurance that human life and history are getting better, or that the world is safely on the road of progress. Thomas Aquinas calls hope an “infused” virtue, meaning that it comes from God. But this virtue is not detached from human efforts, nor does it come to us apart from our experience of community. Hope depends on practical action, steps that are taken to change situations of difficulty or despair. Myla Leguro speaks of work on “day to day issues” to overcome the root causes of violence. This kind of action lets hope grow and bear fruit.

Conclusion

Peacemaking practices unite across divisions and reconcile violent adversaries, even if locally and provisionally. They witness to “God’s absolute saving presence in what he has called to life.”^{xi} God’s saving presence in creation as Word and Spirit, the reconciling death of Jesus Christ, Christ’s being raised by God, Christ’s communication of the Spirit to the church, the practices of the church as body of Christ and mediator of reconciliation—all these are the wellsprings of a theology for Christian peacebuilding. Conversely, Christian peacebuilding is a testimony to the truth of Christian faith and to the trustworthiness of our hope in salvation.

ⁱ John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” no. 3, Origins 25/9 (1995) 139.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ As Edward Schillebeeckx makes clear with his category of “negative contrast experiences,” the “fragments of goodness, beauty and meaning are constantly contradicted and crushed by evil and hatred, by suffering, whether blatant or dull, by the misuse of power and terror. This contradiction, which is so characteristic of our world, seems to balance out evil and good.” Edward Schillebeeckx, Church: The Human Story of God (New York: Crossroad, 1993)5.

^{iv} Ibid., 48.

^v Jurgen Moltmann, Jesus Christ for Today’s World, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 2.

^{vi} Ibid., 2-3.

^{vii} Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

^{viii} Boff, Holy Trinity, 115. See also Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

^{ix} Douglass John Hall, The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World (Minneapolis; Fortress, 2003) 195, 196.

^x On the theological virtue of hope, see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II-II. Q 17-22; and Romanus Cessario, O.P., “The Theological Virtue of Hope,” in Stephen J. Pope, ed., The Ethics of Aquinas (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002) 232-243.

^{xi} Schillebeeckx, Church, 99.