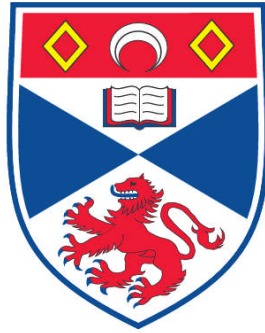


**CHRIST AND CONFLICT : TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF
RECONCILIATION WITH REFERENCE TO NORTHERN IRELAND**

Stuart J. Noble

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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**Christ and Conflict:
Towards a Theology of Reconciliation with Reference
to Northern Ireland**

Stuart J. Noble

A Thesis Submitted to the University of St Andrews in Candidacy
for the degree of Master of Philosophy

23rd June 2006

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I, Stuart Noble, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 70, 000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Abstract

Societies burdened by the deep social and political divisions created by conflict struggle to move on from patterns of division, tension and mutual suspicion. Attitudes and negative beliefs about political opponents are made permanent parts of the social landscape by violence. Political settlements address the mechanics of governance and the organization of society, however, they fail to deal with the way deeply divided societies have evolved during the period of conflict. The cessation of violence and development of political solutions leaves in its wake many questions about how to tackle the injustices of the past and the reality of a divided society. The exploration of these questions and the attempt to address the challenge of deep divisions is central to any move towards reconciliation.

The aim of this thesis is to offer a theological analysis of the political implications of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. The discussion of reconciliation takes place within the context of Northern Ireland, a society burdened by deep divisions caused by decades of violent political conflict. By exploring a variety of models of reconciliation and attending to the particularities of the theology of reconciliation the analysis will attempt to develop a distinctively Christian interpretation of reconciliation and explain its meaning in the Northern Irish context. A discussion of the questions raised by justice and forgiveness will be given significant attention since these two themes are central to any attempt to address the past and move beyond deep societal divisions to a shared future.

Introduction

Is it possible for a society to overcome a violent social and political conflict and make the transition from deep division to reconciliation? What does the Christian gospel contribute to situations of deep social and political division? The aim of this thesis is to offer a theological analysis of the political implications of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. It will do this in the context of the deeply divided society, which has resulted from political conflict in Northern Ireland. The focus of our analysis will be to ask what precisely the distinctively Christian interpretation of ‘reconciliation’ might mean in and for that context. Politically, Northern Ireland has changed dramatically over the past twenty-five years. Yet, deep social divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland remain and threaten to undermine a fragile peace process. It is after the cessation of violence that reconciliation is understood as the basis of addressing social divisions and providing the stability essential for political developments to succeed. High profile moves towards reconciliation, such as those witnessed in post-*Apartheid* South Africa, give the theme of reconciliation a certain prominence in contemporary discussions of the problem of social and political divisions. Yet, reconciliation’s importance is assumed while its content and meaning is frequently overlooked. As this thesis will contend, contemporary interest in reconciliation is not matched by the necessary conceptual clarity about what reconciliation entails and what it means for citizens of deeply divided societies. What does reconciliation require of those living in a deeply divided society? What does it mean to suggest that people need to be reconciled to the past? What sort of society is a reconciled society?

By analysing the concept of reconciliation and evaluating some of the claims made about reconciliation this thesis will attempt to bring an element of conceptual clarity to the way we think and talk about reconciliation. Acknowledging reconciliation’s deeply theological origins, the discussion will pay particular attention to the development of a theology of social reconciliation. This is a particularly interesting question in Northern Ireland where the significance of theological claims and the role of the church have a disputed place in the conflict.¹

The thesis can be broken into two distinct parts. The first includes an attempt to explore the language of reconciliation by way of a review of a number of contemporary approaches to reconciliation. By examining these concepts of reconciliation we hope to distil a more precise

¹ See *Nothing But Trouble?: Religion and the Irish Problem* ed. Dennis Kennedy (Belfast: The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations), 2004 for a helpful introduction to this issue.

understanding of the set of ideas that are fundamental to the concept of reconciliation. This review is followed by an attempt to develop a theology of social reconciliation. Central to this discussion is the work of James B Torrance. It is hoped that Torrance's expansive vision of Christology will enhance our discussion and suggest a way of exploring the significance of Christ's life, death and resurrection for social relations. In this first half of the thesis it becomes evident that a fundamental challenge to overcoming serious social divisions is dealing with the past, indeed it becomes clear that there is no reconciled future unless we address the past. The second half of the thesis takes up the question of the past and looks at it by way of a discussion of the themes of firstly, justice and secondly forgiveness.

It should be added that an analysis of reconciliation offers a vast array of topics and interrelated issues for examination. While this wide-range of material makes for an enriching and interesting project, it also requires that any study of reconciliation be controlled by strict parameters. From the outset it should be made clear that this project will not address every possible question raised by the theme of reconciliation. Given the range of the literature this would go beyond the limits of this project. As has already been indicated the present study locates its description and analysis of reconciliation in the social and political divisions particular to the so-called 'modern troubles' in Northern Ireland, a period that runs from 1969 to the present day.² The choice of the term 'social and political divisions' is important. For divisions one could easily have substituted 'upheavals' or 'violence'.³ The intention is not to downplay the severity of the situation in Northern Ireland; however, 'divisions' captures the particular element of the Northern Ireland problem that this thesis seeks to address. While forgiveness and justice have a central place in this discussion, it would be wrong to suggest that other issues are not important. However, it seems essential that these two issues be given serious attention, before attempting to come to terms with the other questions raised by reconciliation. It is hoped that by focusing in on these specific issues and locating the project in Northern Ireland this thesis will be able to offer helpful comment on set of questions that sit at the heart of the challenge of reconciliation.

² While the paramilitary ceasefires and signing of the Good Friday Agreement suggest the end of the period known as 'The Troubles' these important events do not directly impinge upon the concerns of reconciliation. While political violence and the concomitant emphasis on security may have ceased to be a daily reality, Northern Ireland continues to bear all the hallmarks of a deeply divided society. This study is primarily concerned with the goal of reconciliation rather than a cessation of paramilitary violence.

³ See Malachi O'Doherty's *The Trouble With Guns: Republican Strategy and the Provisional IRA* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1998), p.93ff for a helpful discussion of the importance of being accurate in our description of the nature of the Northern Irish problem.

There is a particular challenge in writing a thesis that takes a contemporary situation as its topic. Much has happened in Northern Ireland since this research project began: elections and subsequent shifts in political power, numerous changes in political personnel and the launch of new initiatives to work towards future co-existence to name but a few. Yet the fundamental questions that a discussion of reconciliation in Northern Ireland raise remain highly relevant. At the time of writing the family of fifteen-year-old Michael McIlveen prepare for his funeral. Michael, a Catholic, was on his way home after a night out when he was beaten by a gang of Protestants. Forty-eight hours later he died in Hospital. One of those charged with his murder is also Fifteen years old. It has been widely reported that Michael McIlveen was attacked with baseball bats, feet and fists because he was a Catholic. Both Michael and at least one of those who attacked and killed him were approximately seven years old when politicians in Northern Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore those who killed him can have little or no memory of the worst periods in recent Northern Irish history. Yet, these young men are continuing the cycle of sectarian violence that Northern Ireland has suffered for decades. Writing about racism in America, Jim Wallis quotes lines from the musical *South Pacific* “You’ve got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made, or people whose skin is a different shade, you’ve got to be carefully taught. You’ve got to be taught before it’s too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate, you’ve got to be carefully taught.”⁴ The murder of Michael McIlveen serves as a tragic reminder that serious social divisions in Northern Ireland teach sectarianism to children and perpetuate the politics of narrow identities and fear. The past continues to hold sway over contemporary life in Northern Ireland. Even those who have little or no memory of that past seem animated by a history of violence and enmity towards their neighbours. Until we begin to explore ways of looking at our past and taking serious steps towards reconciliation there is little to suggest that recent political developments are an accurate reflection of the way people live in Northern Ireland. The following discussion will not answer every question about the potential for reconciliation in Northern Ireland, however, it is hoped it will offer some useful insight into the way we should approach the task of healing divided communities.

⁴ Oscar Hammerstein II, “You’ve Got to be Taught,” lyrics from the 1949 musical *South Pacific* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Quoted in Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the American Right get it Wrong and the Left doesn’t Care* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), 310.

Towards a Definition of Reconciliation

The passion of hatred is so long lived and so obstinate a malady that the surest sign of death in a sick person is their desire for reconciliation

Jean De La Bruyere

What is reconciliation? The unremitting violence that characterises contemporary armed conflicts suggests that De La Bruyere is a sage rather than a pessimist. Yet, despite the evidence reconciliation's significance is unrivalled. As a means of resolving conflict, healing divided societies and dealing with the dark moments of the past it is the concept of reconciliation that has captured the imagination of a diverse range of politicians and thinkers. In an increasingly divided world interest in reconciliation persists across a wide range of disciplines.⁵

But what is reconciliation? Despite its recent popularity there is a distinct lack of conceptual clarity concerning both its meaning and requirements. General observations and local definitions abound; however, an agreed classification of reconciliation remains elusive.⁶ Any depiction of contemporary interpretations of reconciliation would result in a confusing and complex arrangement. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, a clear understanding of what reconciliation means is central to its success. By reviewing some of the wide-ranging 'reconciliation literature' this chapter will attempt to understand reconciliation's apparent ambiguity. By focusing on Northern Ireland as an example of a situation where reconciliation is

⁵ South Africa and Northern Ireland are just two prominent examples taken from a list of many others countries where reconciliation is high on the social and political agenda. A history of violence ensures that moves towards reconciliation will receive a great deal of attentions. However, situations of protracted civil conflict are not the only situations where reconciliation is given significant attention. For example reconciliation between Australia's 'melting pot' of races and cultures is a topic of earnest discussion in the Australian media and amongst academics and politicians.

⁶ In 1993 the Irish School of Ecumenics began a research project that culminated in an inter-disciplinary seminar held in Belfast. The proceedings of the seminar were subsequently published in the volume *Reconciliation in Religion and Society* (Belfast: Inst. of Irish Studies, 1994). The structure of the book reflects the common tendency of studies of reconciliation to avoid conceptual clarity by assuming either a) we know what reconciliation means or b) the way to understand reconciliation is to explore it in a variety of different contexts. Thus the chapters explore 'History and Reconciliation,' 'Bible and Reconciliation,' 'Justice and Reconciliation,' 'Ecology and Reconciliation,' 'Politics and Reconciliation,' and 'Gender and Reconciliation'. Developing one single definition of reconciliation would of course be reductionistic, however, a chapter that flagged the main themes of reconciliation would greatly help our attempts to apply the idea of reconciliation in varied arenas.

needed, this chapter will explore a number of contemporary models of reconciliation and attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of what we mean by reconciliation.

1. Reconciliation: An Ambiguous Term?

Reconciliation is notoriously difficult to define. Much of the literature displays a high tolerance for flexible terminology when it comes to describing reconciliation. A number of factors prevent a precise definition. Firstly, the concept of reconciliation contains an inherent temporal ambiguity. This is seen in the way reconciliation is discussed as a process or a goal or as a combination of process and goal. This dynamic is evident in the various metaphors used to describe and discuss reconciliation and its concomitant activities. For example, reconciliation is a 'quest,' a 'journey,' a 'process,' a 'movement', a 'state' or a 'goal'. Commenting on Hegel's understanding of political reconciliation, Michael Hardimon makes a distinction between reconciliation as process and result, "The process may be variously described as a process of overcoming conflict, division, enmity, alienation or estrangement; the result, as the restoration of harmony, unity, peace, friendship, or love."⁷ The relational focus of reconciliation means that the terms of reference are frequently gathered from the sphere of human relationships, a sphere where precise definitions battle against the essential ambiguity and variety of personal experience.

Secondly, reconciliation can refer to activities on both the 'micro' and the 'macro' levels. The former is perhaps the most everyday version of reconciliation and includes the sort of activities typically associated with a version of reconciliation whereby members of a family overcome relational difficulties. Macro level reconciliation is concerned with overcoming differences or divisions at the national or international level. On the macro level a country is reconciled to its past, groups involved in interstate conflict cease hostilities or two countries declare peace after a period of warfare. Reconciliation's flexibility is also related to its unique relationship to time. When we speak of reconciliation we are at once referring to events in the past, the present and the future. A process of reconciliation may look back to a past relationship and the events that lead to its dissolution while also exploring the present possibilities for

⁷ Michael Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85.

restoration. Thus reconciliation is motivated by both the memory of the positive past and the promise of restoration in the future.⁸

Reconciliation's ambiguity has both positive and negative ramifications. Much of the success of reconciliation rests on how it is perceived by those to whom it is directed. Unsatisfactory understandings of reconciliation can lead to the creation of major obstacles to its implementation. While a certain flexibility regarding definition is typically attractive in the realm of political negotiation, an erratic conceptualisation will counteract the intentions of those who embrace a flexible frame of reference. A combination of reconciliation's inherent ambiguity and the increasing popularity of reconciliation language can lead to definitions of reconciliation that are entirely unhelpful. A recent example of a reconciling misnomer illustrates the potential pitfalls of an overly flexible notion of reconciliation. In 1985 the 'Anglo-Irish Agreement' was described in certain quarters of Northern Ireland as an 'instrument of reconciliation'.⁹ While this may have been little more than political rhetoric the repercussions were severe. Large portions of the Protestant population saw the agreement as an unjust, unfair and undemocratic betrayal. As a result the concept of reconciliation became associated with unwanted political concessions and betrayal. Twenty years later a deep-seated suspicion of the language of reconciliation continues to present a significant challenge to contemporary political settlement.¹⁰

1.1 From thick to thin

A wide range of metaphors is employed to describe the particular type of reconciliation an author is discussing. Reconciliation is therefore variously described as 'strong,' 'weak,' 'soaring,' 'thick,' and 'thin'. David Crocker offers three general meanings of reconciliation that range from the thin to the thick: 1) 'simple coexistence' sees an end to violence and the institution of a *modus vivendi*; 2) a 'liberal social solidarity' seeks a society where former enemies respect each other as fellow citizens as well as merely coexisting. Stronger still is 3) the 'holistic vision' of reconciliation that includes an emphasis on forgiveness, mercy, a shared

⁸ It is important to note that movements towards reconciliation may not always look to an earlier time of positive relationships. Antjie Krog questions the appropriateness of the usage of the term 'reconciliation' in South Africa noting that there was nothing to return to, "In this country there was nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore – in these stark circumstances 'reconciliation' does not seem like the right word." Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1998), 143.

⁹ The Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed by the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Garret Fitzgerald and the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on 15 November 1985, deals with the status of Northern Ireland, political, security and legal matters, cross-border co-operation and interparliamentary relations.

¹⁰ Mervyn T. Love, *Peace Building Through Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), 8.

comprehensive vision, mutual healing and harmony.¹¹ P.E. Digeser describes this ‘thick’ version as a “soaring use” of reconciliation.¹² Alternatively, Norman Porter prefers to describe reconciliation as ‘strong’ rather than ‘thick’; however Porter’s summary of what he means by strong reconciliation demonstrates an affinity with the definition of ‘thick’ on David Crocker’s continuum. Calling for ‘strong’ reconciliation Porter explains

Reconciliation is a priority for a divided society...it poses a challenge to our prejudices and many of our practices that cannot be plausibly ignored. [Reconciliation] invokes the non-instrumental acts and practices of embrace and engagement that are properly conducted in a spirit of openness. These acts and practices entail risk and vulnerability, as we expose ourselves to others in a critically reflective way. They call upon such virtues as reasonableness, magnanimity and forgiveness. In the absence of these sorts of acts, practices and virtues, it is hard to see how reconciliation will not be emptied of much of its content. It is hard to see, in other words, how without them our horizons will be expanded, our destructive divisions healed and common purposes articulated. These are aims that a strong conception of reconciliation refuses to forfeit.¹³

Porter’s talk of healing divisions and expanding horizons is an inspiring recommendation of reconciliation’s benefits, however, the report on reconciliation is not always positive. Warning of an “objectionable” reconciliation, which signals acquiescence or submission, Digeser notes, “One may be reconciled to a political settlement, not because it expresses a greater sense of unity or harmony but because one has no other choice.”¹⁴ The potential ‘abuse’ of reconciliation is raised in a number of other quarters. The well-known *Kairos Document* protested against the suggestion of a concept of reconciliation that ignored widespread injustice in *Apartheid* South Africa.¹⁵ Feminist theologians voice similar concerns about reconciliation. In a feminist rehearsal of the standard query concerning reconciliation and the question of justice, Mary Grey notes, “The very word ‘reconciliation’ can disguise assimilation, forced agreement, imbalance of power and hypocrisy.”¹⁶ Obviously reconciliation’s political potential makes it a useful tool in the hands of politicians wishing to expedite a difficult political settlement or cover the tracks of an ignominious history. However, potential abuses should not detract from the promise of reconciliation. Damaging uses of reconciliation are perhaps enabled by the ambiguity surrounding the precise meaning of reconciliation. Therefore one possible way to circumvent

¹¹ David A. Crocker, ‘Reckoning with Past Wrongs: A Normative Framework,’ *Ethics & International Affairs* vol. 3 (1999): 59-60.

¹² P.E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 65.

¹³ Norman Porter, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003), 93.

¹⁴ Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, 65.

¹⁵ World Council of Churches, *The Kairos Document, Challenge to the Church: Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985).

¹⁶ Mary Grey, ‘To Struggle with a Reconciled Heart: Reconciliation and Justice,’ *New Blackfriars* Vol. 85, Issue 995, (January 2004), 57.

‘cheap’ reconciliation might be to strive for a clearer understanding of what we mean by the term.

1.2 The South African Experience

The *Kairos Document*, published in 1985, is a salutary example of reconciliation’s ambiguity. Central to the concerns of the *Kairos* theologians was an attempt to critique the prevailing state theology that did little to challenge *apartheid* and presented a significant theological obstacle to the Church’s ability to call for justice. This challenge to the Church included a correction of a particular notion of reconciliation from the perspective of liberation. ‘Church theologians’ encouraged reconciliation as if there had been a misunderstanding between two equals, failing to acknowledge the crucial point that one side had been oppressed and the other the oppressor. *Kairos* challenged this attempt to initiate reconciliation without addressing widespread injustice. According to *Kairos*

The fallacy here is that ‘Reconciliation’ has been made into an absolute principle that must be applied in all cases of conflict or dissension. But not all cases of conflict are the same...there are conflicts where one side is a fully armed and violent oppressor while the other side is defenceless and oppressed. These are conflicts that can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil, God and the Devil. To speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation, it is a total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant...In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unchristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed.¹⁷

This quotation captures the determination of the *Kairos* theologians to oppose the appropriation of the language of reconciliation on the part of the theologians of the state. Rather than being an outright rejection of reconciliation their challenge is more accurately described as an attempt at conceptual clarification. Reconciliation’s ambiguity allowed Church theologians to interpret it according to their own terms of reference. *Kairos* represents a robust protest against their interpretation of the term.

For many the recent history of South Africa represents a by-word for both the promise and the pain of reconciliation. Ten years after the first democratic elections, the seemingly endless

¹⁷ World Council of Churches, *The Kairos Document, Challenge to the Church: Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 17.

interest in South Africa's 'journey' from *apartheid* to democracy confirms the importance of the South African experiment in reconciliation. Yet, even South Africa's explicitly institutionalised form of reconciliation embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission remains faithful to the tradition of reconciliation's ambiguity. Richard A. Wilson's provocative study, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State*, offers an insightful exploration of the place of reconciliation in South Africa's transition. Wilson observes that, although 'reconciliation' is increasingly significant in the discourse of political transition it has no legal standing, like proportionality or gross human rights violation. Wilson sees this lack of precision as an essential part of reconciliation's appeal in situations of political transition. His suspicion of reconciliation is confirmed when he describes it as:

The Trojan horse used to smuggle an unpleasant aspect of the past (that is, impunity) into the present political order, to transform political compromises into transcendental moral principles. Reconciliation talk structures a field of discourse in order to render commonsensical and acceptable the abjuring of legal retribution against past offenders. It creates a moral imperative, which portrays retributive justice as blood lust and 'wild-justice' and as an affront to democratisation and the new constitutional order.¹⁸

Leaving a discussion of Wilson's scepticism to one side we note that his account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlights the centrality of ideas such as: confession, forgiveness, sacrifice, redemption and liberation. "Reconciliation," according to Wilson, "is a quasi-religious term that became a guiding principle for new rituals of civic nationalism."¹⁹ Noting the diversity of opinions surrounding reconciliation in the transitional South Africa, Wilson asserts that no single version of reconciliation was ever fixed, even in the minds of those conducting the hearings of the Commission. Instead of one idea of reconciliation, Wilson identifies what he describes as, "three main narratives of reconciliation," the legal-procedural, the mandarin-intellectual and the religious redemptive."²⁰ His description of the particularities of each narrative demonstrates the various strands of reconciliation. According to Wilson, the 'Legal-procedural narrative,' was "a legal positivist, procedural view of reconciliation concerned with creating fairness in individual cases of gross human rights violations."²¹ The 'mandarin-intellectual narrative,' was "a notion of reconciliation which lent towards a more abstract focus

¹⁸ Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 104.

²¹ *Ibid.* 98.

on the nation, shifting from the ‘people’ to the ‘nation’ as the focus of who or what was to be reconciled.”²² The ‘religious-redemptive narrative,’ pursued a substantive notion of reconciliation as a common good, defined by confession, forgiveness and redemption and the exclusion of vengeance. “[This approach] sought not just the reconciliation of ‘the nation’ but also reconciliation between individuals within the nation.”²³ Rather than claiming that individuals held closely to a pure formulation of one of these narratives, Wilson suggests that the narratives are porous and were articulated in a mixed form. However, important distinctions arise when he notes that the first two narratives were more appealing to lawyers and intellectuals respectively, the third “was more the idiom of members of the Commission who were politicians, those who had religious backgrounds and those from the caring professions.”²⁴ Our purpose here is not to explore the particularities of Richard Wilson’s typology of reconciliation in South Africa. However, his study represents a compelling elaboration of the observation that reconciliation is a profoundly ambiguous term. In a situation where reconciliation had been made a priority by the executive and a great deal of energy had been devoted to the project of reconciliation, competing versions of reconciliation persisted and were perhaps encouraged.

While reconciliation has been less institutionalised in Northern Ireland, there is a similar situation whereby multiple definitions of reconciliation abound. “Reconciliation’s inherent complexity,” writes Mervyn Love, “is complicated further by the fact that there exists in Northern Ireland so many ‘reconciliation groups’ [who] each have their own ideas and interpretation of what they mean by this word.”²⁵ At a general level the move towards reconciliation is inclusive as the ambiguity of the term allows divergent groups to cooperate in an attempt to highlight it as a political and social priority. However, when reconciliation becomes less theoretical and practical attempts are taken towards achieving it a diverse range of versions of reconciliation come to the surface. When this happens reconciliation can mean, in the words of Mervyn Love, “all things to all men (*sic*)”.²⁶

2. Characteristics of Deeply Divided Societies

²² Ibid. 107.

²³ Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation*, 109.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mervyn T. Love, *Peace Building Through Reconciliation*, 8.

²⁶ Mervyn T. Love, *Peace Building Through Reconciliation*, 8.

In order to comprehend the way reconciliation is understood in contemporary usage it is helpful to understand accurately the type of society where reconciliation is seen as an appropriate means of dealing with the aftermath of conflict. As has already been mentioned, increased interest in reconciliation demonstrates a shift both in terms of the type of conflicts that dominate global affairs and the methods implemented in order to bring resolution.

What does an *unreconciled* society look like? John Paul Lederach uses the phrase “deeply divided societies” to capture the combination of factors involved in the life of a society at war with itself. Lederach highlights three interrelated factors: (1) The narrowing of identities; (2) Diffusion of power and confusion about representation; (3) Long-term nature of internal conflicts and attendant social-psychological factors. Rather than beginning with an analysis of substantive issues Lederach points to the phenomenon of ‘narrowing identities’ that is universal in contemporary armed conflicts. People who are threatened and insecure tend to seek security in narrow identities.²⁷ This is based on a long-standing experience of fear and distrust directed towards political opponents. There is a sense of paranoia when even the most innocuous of political activities such as a formal meeting between leaders becomes highly charged and creates politicised moments of tension. These feelings are reinforced by immediate experience of violence that in turn “exacerbates the hatred and fear that fuel the conflict.”²⁸ A narrowing of identity sharpens the definitions of external threats and enemies, polarizes groups who are living side-by-side and obscures commonalities. Geography plays a crucial role in contemporary internal conflicts and marks an important contrast with international conflicts. The experience of fear and violence is immediate, rather than played out on the ‘world stage.’ The conflicting groups live in close proximity and share common histories.²⁹ Given the immediacy of a localised conflict the narrowing of identity is not based on ideology, but rather on a desire for security.

Along with the narrowing of identity, Lederach highlights the diffusion of power in situations of internal conflict. Where access to weapons creates a mandate and a multiplicity of groups claim to represent the interests of ‘the people’ there is little hope of reaching settlement by following the traditional line of diplomacy based on statist hierarchies of power. There are difficult questions about the relationship between political groups and the people they claim to represent and equally difficult is the development of mechanisms for establishing representation

²⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

within a population.³⁰ Even within one group there will be a narrowing of identity, a preference for one leader over another and a lack of continuity or shared political goals.³¹

Violent internal conflicts of the sort witnessed since the late 90s, such as those in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Liberia, Chechnya and Sierra Leone are typically based on long standing relationships. Described as “protracted” by the media the long-term nature of these conflicts means that fear, animosity, stereotyping and divisions are all deep-rooted, often handed down by two or three generations. This dynamic is coupled with the close proximity of the conflicting groups and results in a highly charged environment where political leaders effectively employ propaganda. “Where there is deep, long-term fear and direct experiences of violence that sustain an image of the enemy,” writes Lederach, “people are extremely vulnerable and easily manipulated.”³² Lederach concludes that the resulting social-psychological factors such as perceptions of the enemy; emotions and experiences of violence are the key issues for any project of reconciliation.

2.1 Northern Ireland: An Anatomy of Deep Division

Lederach’s description and analysis of deeply divided societies precisely articulates the problem of social, cultural and political division in Northern Ireland. The three characteristics he identifies can be illustrated by the history of the Northern Irish conflict. Moreover, his analysis importantly demonstrates that political settlements alone are unable to address long-standing patterns of alienation and division.

The political impasse that has followed the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 is a result of a society burdened by a long history of division, a division that can only be overcome through social and political reconciliation. Social and political identities in Northern Ireland have been narrow and exclusive for decades. A increasing sense of insecurity and uncertainty is typical amongst Protestant Unionists³³ and Loyalists³⁴. Increasingly unsure about

³⁰ Ibid. 14.

³¹ This phenomenon can be seen in the splintering of both political and terrorist groups in Northern Ireland. Amongst paramilitaries the sharp divergence between former comrades has led to turf wars as groups vie for control of a particular locale. On the political front the splitting of the unionist bloc amongst a wide range of representatives caused some to be propelled into political leadership and others see their majority disappear overnight.

³² John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace*, 15.

³³ The term Unionist refers to the political successors of those who opposed Home Rule in the nineteenth century and eventually agreed to the formation of the state of Northern Ireland. The two main unionist parties are the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

³⁴ The term Loyalist can also refer to Unionists, but carries with it certain cultural references that frequently connect one’s political preferences with cultural and religious identities.

the status of Northern Ireland and witnessing historic reconfigurations in the realms of politics and society, large portions of the Protestant population are fearful for the future of their community and seek security in a strong Protestant identity. Commenting on the findings of the Opsahl Commission,³⁵ Marianne Elliot, notes, “The fear of Catholicism as a powerful political system was found by the Commission at every level of the Protestant community. It is one element which unites an otherwise diverse, even divided community.”³⁶ A similar malaise haunts Roman Catholic identities. An awareness of historically recent injustices against their communities and continued grievances encourages the strict demarcation of Catholic identity. A combination of this sense of insecurity with an attempt to bolster communal identity is typical on both sides of the religious divide. The question of representation is also an issue in Northern Ireland. Various groups claim to speak for the differing sides of the community divide. However, the popularity of non-political reconciliation groups and attempts towards community relations demonstrates the disjunction between political representatives and those they claim to represent. The superstructure of narrow identities is supported by an historical foundation that includes hundreds of years of history mixed with the potent glue of blood and soil. All of the social-psychological factors included in Lederach’s analysis are present in contemporary Northern Irish society. Narrowed identities and a violent history are combined with intimately localised violence and geographic realities that place the two communities in close proximity, thus creating a situation where social-psychological factors eclipse the divisive capabilities of substantive political issues. The final result is a society where the patterns of the past continue to exert a malevolent influence over the possibilities for the future. “Ingrained cultural differences,” notes Marianne Elliot, “have meant that the two communities have frequently bypassed each other in every attempt at compromise and the differences in outlook have fed into many other areas of the Northern Ireland crisis, notably law, justice and security.”³⁷ Security outweighs other concerns, but while walls are built higher and communities seal themselves off from each other the type of society described by Lederach’s theoretical analysis is concretely manifest in Northern Ireland.³⁸

³⁵ The Opsahl Commission was an independent inquiry into ways forward in Northern Ireland held during 1992 and 1993. A final report was published in June 1993. The Commission received submissions from approximately 3,000 people and held public meetings and hearings throughout the province. See *A Citizen’s Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, ed. Andy Pollak (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993.)

³⁶ Marianne Elliot, ‘Religion and Identity in Northern Ireland,’ in *The Long Road to Peace in Northern Ireland*, ed. Marianne Elliot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), 170.

³⁷ Marianne Elliot, ‘Religion and Identity in Northern Ireland,’ 176.

³⁸ For confirmation that John Paul Lederach’s definition of a deeply divided society applies in Northern Ireland see: Tim Pat Coogan *The Troubles: Ireland’s Ordeal, 1966-1995 & the Search for Peace* (London: Hutchinson, 1995); David McKittrick *Despatches from Belfast* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1989); Joseph Liechty & Cecelia Clegg

Understanding the importance of context we now move to an exploration of a number of contemporary models of reconciliation. An analysis of these varied approaches to overcoming deep division will further aid our attempt to move towards a definition of reconciliation.

3. Four Models of Reconciliation

3.1. Norman Porter: Reconciliation as a Moral Imperative

In his 2003 publication, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, Norman Porter attempts to make a constructive contribution to the ongoing discussion of reconciliation in Northern Ireland.³⁹ Porter is concerned about the failure of attempts towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland and his account lays much of the blame at the feet of Northern Irish political representatives and the prevailing political culture. After listing the seemingly endless stream of efforts towards reconciliation, Porter notes that “Northern Ireland [should] by now be a model of reconciliation.”⁴⁰ However, despite the signing of an ‘historic’ agreement and the initial euphoria of the ceasefires:

Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society. The legacy of a generation of violence has left scars of bitterness and fear among citizens of all religions and political persuasions; cultural differences between unionists and nationalists are as pronounced as they have ever been and continue to create tense situations; housing and educational segregation between Protestants and Catholics in working-class areas of Belfast, for example, is virtually complete and shows little sign of changing; and, in general, a climate of mistrust exists between large numbers of unionists and nationalists and stretches reconciliation’s spirit to the limit.⁴¹

Porter’s diagnosis of contemporary Northern Irish society reads like a particularisation of Lederach’s concept of ‘deeply divided societies’. A reading of Porter’s work allows one to

Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001); John Whyte *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

³⁹ Norman Porter is a Political Scientist who is currently a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University Belfast.

⁴⁰ Porter, *Elusive Quest*, 36. These efforts include: “Personal contacts, government-sponsored initiatives, low budget, locally run, cross-community social and cultural events, as well as high budget, officially backed economic and political partnerships. Promoting reconciliation consumes the energies of many community organisations, voluntary associations and Church groups. Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is also an international affair. Projects designed to enhance its prospects may receive funding from European Union and US sources. Unprecedented political initiatives to encourage reconciliation run alongside international economic inducements. Four historic visits to Northern Ireland by Bill Clinton, for example, the pivotal role played by US Senator George Mitchell in chairing political talks at Stormont, and the duties assumed by the Canadian General John de Chastelain and his colleagues in overseeing the process of decommissioning weapons attest to the type of commitments major international political players are prepared to make for the sake of reconciliation in the North [of Ireland].”

⁴¹ Porter, *Elusive Quest*, 3.

understand what he means by reconciliation and how reconciliation should function in divided societies. Norman Porter's account of reconciliation displays a number of central concerns.

Firstly reconciliation is essentially from above, in other words, political representatives are central to his discussion. Porter understands that societal division in Northern Ireland is a product of a long history of violence and political instability combined with the structural divisions of housing and education. However his account of reconciliation is particularly concerned with a) offering a critique of Northern Irish political culture and b) offering an alternative vision of interaction at the political level. Porter acknowledges that, what he terms, 'fair interactions' are the responsibility of us all. However, he notes, "it may be that the responsibility falls most heavily on political representatives."⁴² Three characteristics of the current political culture present an obstacle to reconciliation: Firstly, Northern Irish politicians all too often engage in defending their political corner and thus reduce political dialogue to "a species of hard-headed enterprise bargaining."⁴³ Porter believes that a "non-instrumental intercultural dialogue... is uniquely capable of throwing up fresh insights and grounds for agreement, even as it calls into question any number of our prejudices."⁴⁴ Secondly, Porter sees reconciliation's demands diminished by a politics of cultural self-interest. This allows political representatives to interpret the conflict in Northern Ireland exclusively from the perspective of their own community. Thus decisions at the political level are shaped by "habits of cultural self-interest."⁴⁵ Thirdly, Porter believes that one of the main reasons for Northern Ireland's unhealthy political culture is a misunderstanding over language, a misunderstanding that obscures two different ways of talking about political problems.⁴⁶ Porter's vision of reconciliation requires a "view of language that simply does not resonate across the North's political divide...[where] unionists and republicans invoke different moral and political vocabularies and succeed mostly in speaking past one another."⁴⁷ Confusion over language allows old prejudices to remain undisturbed and is ultimately inimical to any sort of dialogue. Porter recommends that political representatives learn what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "a second first language... a common idiom allowing conversation."⁴⁸

⁴² Porter, *Elusive Quest*, 96.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 102.

⁴⁶ See Porter's helpful discussion on pp. 111-132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 112.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 113. Porter goes on to offer an account of the two views of language that dominate political discourse in Northern Ireland. Both are linked to a predominately instrumental view of language. He notes a propensity for republicans to engage in the language of violence, "a view that subordinates dialogue to a type of violence that is presumed to speak with a peculiarly powerful voice." Unionists, on the other hand, understand language as a tool.

Secondly, Porter offers a view of reconciliation as a moral imperative. He speaks of “the irreducible moral content of reconciliation,” a content that cannot be obscured by the “squabbles between unionists and republicans.”⁴⁹ The moral aspect of reconciliation requires that it be a political priority that “calls other of our priorities to account.”⁵⁰ As a result unionist and nationalist politicians

are answerable to the moral challenge of reconciliation [a challenge that cannot be] qualified through calculations of unionist or nationalist interests, which encourage treating others in instrumental ways...unless we think of reconciliation as a priority, which has a call on our allegiances, the chances of overcoming our most serious divisions in Northern Society are remote.⁵¹

Porter’s knowledge of Northern Ireland’s political culture forces him to conclude that the future of reconciliation is bleak if the *modus operandi* of contemporary politicians is not challenged. The highly partisan and insular politics of Northern Ireland needs to be superseded by a politics that emphasizes the particular importance of overcoming societal divisions and avoiding the politics of exclusive identities. In order to achieve this Porter constructs a definition of reconciliation that claims the moral high ground over day-to-day political priorities and the long-standing traditions of opposition and protest. This view of reconciliation has been unpopular in certain quarters. Reviewing Porter’s work, David Trimble described it as “a highly moralistic approach to politics.”⁵² In a comment that succinctly illustrates Porter’s description of the politics of cultural self-interest, Trimble complains, “Reconciliation, we are told, is a moral ideal. But a moral ideal which ignores the key question of who bears the responsibility for by far the greatest amount of death, injury and destruction over the period of the Troubles- the Provisional IRA- is a deeply flawed one.”⁵³

Thirdly, Porter’s vision of reconciliation as a political priority requires a radical overhaul of Northern Ireland’s political culture. According to Porter this requires at least three things: (1) “*Fair interactions*, (2) overcoming divisions by occupying *common ground* and (3) the presence

On this view words are useful tools for achieving a given set of purposes. He notes a preference for confrontation over dialogue and a reliance on devices (such as confrontation) that are “politically inept at healing divisions in an unreconciled society.” Porter notes the ‘Prophetic witness’ style of political discourse and draws a connection between this the pervasive influence of Presbyterianism in Unionist culture. If the Sermon is a model for discourse there is little room for dialogue, “the message is accepted or rejected, not debated.” Thus there is a belief amongst unionists that words function as “precise tools of truth and control” this is witnessed by the fixation on the literal sense of words and the unionist infatuation with precision. See Porter’s discussion 111-132.

⁴⁹ Porter, *Elusive Quest*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 92.

⁵² David Trimble, review of *The Elusive Quest*, by Norman Porter, *Times Literary Supplement* No 5220, April 18 2003, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 8.

of a society in which all citizens have a sense of *belonging*.”⁵⁴ Fair interactions will operate at a number of levels from the political to the communal, from formal to informal. “Reconciliation,” according to Porter, “calls for interactions to be fair in the sense that all interlocutors are given their due, that is, allowed to speak in their own voice, are given opportunity to express their views, are permitted to tell their own stories and are listened to with respect.”⁵⁵ Porter’s challenge to the prevailing political culture also involves an emphasis on ‘civic virtues’ such as forgiveness, magnanimity and reasonableness.⁵⁶

Porter’s model of reconciliation expresses a frustration with the politics of a divided society. He sees the current political culture as inextricably linked to the perpetuation of division and so develops a model of reconciliation that will tackle this head-on. While he is critical of current political practices he is clearly hopeful that a political solution to societal division is possible, if only politicians will hear the moral obligation of reconciliation and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

3.2. John Paul Lederach: Reconciliation as Table Fellowship

John Paul Lederach has for many years been a third party in peace building initiatives. His understanding of reconciliation is based on his own experiences and finds mature expression in his *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation In Divided Societies*.⁵⁷ Lederach has described reconciliation as ‘Relationship-Centric’⁵⁸ and sees ‘Relationship as the basis of conflict and its long-term solution’.⁵⁹ His burden is the creation of societies that can cope with the social and political frictions that may threaten reconciliation. *Sustainable* reconciliation rather than simply reconciliation; the difference is an emphasis on achieving “profound reconciliation that will endure,” writes Richard Solomon, “because it is sustained by a society-wide network of relationships and mechanisms that promote justice and address the root causes of enmity before they can regenerate destabilizing tensions.”⁶⁰ Lederach’s ‘relationship-centric’ approach is informed by his investigation of what he describes as “the uniquely human dimensions of the

⁵⁴ Porter, *The Elusive Quest*, 94.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 95.

⁵⁶ See Porter’s discussion, pp. 95-111.

⁵⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation In Divided Societies* Washington D.C.: United States Inst. of Peace Press, 1997.

⁵⁸ See: ‘Five Qualities of Practice in Support of Reconciliation Practices,’ in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, ed. Helmick and Petersen (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 185-86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Richard H. Solomon’s, Introduction ix.

types of conflict under consideration.”⁶¹ As we have seen, Lederach identifies these dimensions as: living in close proximity, direct experience of violence and a long history of enmity. In a situation of intrastate conflict, neighbors are locked into a generational cycle “characterized by deep-rooted intense animosity: fear and severe stereo-typing.”⁶² If a peace-making initiative is to be of any success in situations like this Lederach believes it must “be rooted in and responsive to the experiential and subjective realities shaping people’s perspectives and needs.”⁶³ It is this impulse toward meeting subjective needs and the creation of relationships between divided people that prompts Lederach to reject traditional models of conflict resolution that address issues rather than focusing on relationships.

Lederach’s model of reconciliation is highly theological. He bases his attempt to offer a working definition of reconciliation on a reading of Psalm 85:10, which he translates as “Truth and mercy have met together; peace and justice have kissed.”⁶⁴ According to Lederach truth, mercy, justice and peace are the four major concepts of reconciliation. The Psalmist’s combination of these concepts inspires Lederach to conceive reconciliation as a “social space,” the place where these four concepts meet.⁶⁵

Reconciliation involves the creation of the social space where both truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than being forced into an encounter in which one must win out over the other or envisioned as fragmented and separated parts.⁶⁶

Given Lederach’s assumption that relationships are both the basis of conflict and its long-term solution, meetings between divided parties and antagonists are central. This ‘place’ is of paramount importance in Lederach’s presentation. The creation of this place called reconciliation allows the paradoxes of conflict to be addressed by providing

an encounter between the open-expression of the painful past, on the one hand, and the search for the articulation of a long-term interdependent future on the other...a place for truth and mercy to meet...and [recognizing] the need to give time and place to both justice and peace, where addressing the wrong is held together with the envisioning of a common, connected future.⁶⁷

Lederach’s understanding of reconciliation is closely related to his concern that we grasp the defining characteristics and patterns of contemporary armed conflicts. The place called

⁶¹ Ibid. 23.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. 24.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 28.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 29.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 31.

reconciliation is an arena that is strong enough to accommodate the presence of these four divergent aspects. Their co-existence is a mirror image of the co-existence of enemies.

Perhaps Lederach's model is best captured in the metaphor of 'table fellowship'. He is particularly interested in the events that took place as part of the so-called 'Oslo channel' that led to the famous handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin on the Whitehouse lawn in 1993. Prior to this very public step towards peace there had been a number of confidential encounters between high-ranking representatives from both sides. Teje Larsen, a Norwegian, academic and his wife Mona Juul, a member of Norway's Foreign Ministry, hosted and mediated these meetings, doing everything they could to create an intimate atmosphere. Lederach notes

“The participants stayed in a summer lodge, slept under the same roof and took all of their meals together...living, eating and above all working together. Relationships developed in new, different and more holistic ways. The participants did not relate to one and other exclusively as enemies or political adversaries, rather they shared time and space and came to see one another as individuals as well as antagonists.”⁶⁸

Lederach sees this as an example of how important it is to create a shared social space where narrow identities can be overcome and perceptions of the 'other' based on stereotyping can be replaced by relationships based on authentic understandings and encounter. Of course simply sharing table fellowship will not bring about a complete resolution to long-standing conflicts. In this case, the 'Oslo channel' did not ignore the need to work towards a framework for a negotiated settlement on substantive issues. However, according to Lederach, “It clearly attest[s] to the need for a paradigm of reconciliation as a tool for developing relationships as part of the micro dynamics that became crucial for sustaining the discussions.”⁶⁹

Lederach's model of reconciliation and his emphasis on the creation of relationships are directly related to his description of deeply divided societies and his emphasis on the creation of relationships is consistent with his understanding of deeply divided societies. His conceptualisation of reconciliation as a social space aims to break down the barriers of enmity and overcome fear, alienation, suspicion and stereotyping. The objective is to construct relationships that are robust enough to handle the political instability that will undoubtedly challenge a society that is recovering from years of division and violent conflict.

⁶⁸ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 34.

3.3. Miroslav Volf: Reconciliation as Embrace

In his award winning volume, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf offers a unique account of reconciliation from the perspective of the victim.⁷⁰ Summarising the components of his study Volf begins with a moving description of a conversation with Jürgen Moltmann following a lecture when Volf had stressed the importance of embracing our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. “But can you embrace a *četnik*?” asked Moltmann.⁷¹ Volf replied, “No I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”⁷² *Exclusion and Embrace* is an investigation of the tensions and difficulties thrown up by Moltmann’s question and an account of Volf’s attempt to make sense of questions surrounding the justification of such an embrace and the implications for the identity of a victim who embraces an enemy. Rather than a general discussion of the dynamics of reconciliation the locus of Volf’s enquiry is the particular experience of the victim. Signalling an intention to emphasise the priority of forgiveness, he states, “I will speak mainly to those of us who see ourselves as ‘victims’ about why it makes sense to imitate the self-giving love of the triune God in a world of enmity.”⁷³ Volf’s account of reconciliation includes four main components, an analysis of exclusion, an articulation of his central thesis, a redefinition of the ‘victim’ and a final analysis of embrace.

Volf begins his study with a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of exclusion. Drawing on a wide range of sources such as scripture, theology and modern and continental philosophy Volf describes the existential contours of exclusion. In its own way this is similar to Lederach’s description of the characteristics of deeply divided societies. While Volf is concerned about the social and structural aspects of exclusion the central metaphor of embrace determines the direction of his analysis and results in a highly personalised account that is particularly focused on the relational dynamics of embrace.

The central thesis of Volf’s model of reconciliation stems from a belief that God’s actions towards the world in Christ require a correspondence in creation. “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion,” writes Volf, “is a model for how human beings should relate to one another.”⁷⁴ For Volf this divine ‘reception’ is encapsulated in the story of

⁷⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁷¹ Volf explains, “The notorious Serbian fighters called *četnik* had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches and destroying cities.” Ibid. 9.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 100.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

‘The Prodigal Son’ (Luke 15:11-32), a parable that “originally triggered the idea of a theology of embrace.”⁷⁵ In essence *Exclusion & Embrace* is Volf’s attempt to unpack the social significance of the story of ‘The Prodigal Son.’

As we have already noted, the *sui generis* aspect of Volf’s account of reconciliation is found in his decision to develop a model from the perspective of the victim. Reconciliation requires a combination of four movements on the part of the victim: (1) repentance, (2) forgiveness, (3) making space in oneself for the other and (4) the healing of memory.⁷⁶ Realising the potentially controversial nature of a call for victims to repent, Volf offers an extensive justification that entails the redefinition of the ‘victim.’ Picking up on the two pillars of Jesus’ preaching, the unconditional love of God and the need to repent, Volf questions the traditional moral polarities of just/unjust, pure/defiled and innocent/guilty.⁷⁷ The repentance required of the oppressed and their oppressors is the same; both need to “make a turnabout of a profound and moral import...a recognition that one has sinned.”⁷⁸ While the victim has no need to repent of the oppression of another, his or her repentance is crucial to the success of reconciliation. “For a victim to repent,” notes Volf, “means not to allow the oppressors to determine the terms under which social conflict is carried out, the values around which the conflict is raging and the means by which it is fought. Repentance thus empowers the victims and disempowers the oppressors.”⁷⁹ The rest of this section follows a similar logic. Unless the victim truly forgives or makes space for the other, there can be no true reconciliation. Volf has previously observed, “For reconciliation to take place the inscriptions of hatred must be carefully erased and the threads of violence gently removed.”⁸⁰ Each of these four movements of reconciliation plays a part in erasing the inscriptions of hatred and the threads of violence that Volf has identified in his analysis of exclusion.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibid. 156.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 111-140.

⁷⁷ See Volf’s ‘Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment,’ in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, ed. Helmick and Petersen, 42.

⁷⁸ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 113.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 116.

⁸⁰ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 111.

⁸¹ Volf’s understanding of the healing of memory is perhaps the most controversial aspect of his model of reconciliation. His thoughts in this section are controlled by a central thesis that claims “no final redemption is possible without the redemption of the past and since every attempt to redeem the past through reflection must fail because no theodicy can succeed, the final redemption is unthinkable without a certain kind of forgetting.” (135) This central thesis is tied to an account of God’s forgetfulness regarding our sin. Space does not permit a full evaluation of Volf’s understanding of memory, however, it is clear that he raises some important question regarding memory and identity and the place of suffering in the Christian life. What is less clear is whether or not he has successfully answered these questions and offered a sufficiently comprehensive theology of forgetting. For an alternative account of forgetfulness see L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995), 279-302.

Volf completes his model of reconciliation with a theoretical analysis of embrace that is similar to his earlier account of exclusion. This includes an account of the four structural elements of embrace and a description of the four notable features of a successful embrace.⁸² These elements and features all feed into a final reworking of the story of the ‘Prodigal Son’, a story central to Volf’s account of reconciliation. The two central moments of the story, the Father’s giving himself to his estranged Son and his receiving his son back to his household are clearly the founding movements in Volf’s understanding of reconciliation and explain why he places such emphasis on the metaphor of embrace.

Volf’s model of reconciliation concurs with the prevailing emphasis on relationships. However, his articulation of the dynamics of reconciliation differs considerably from those we have looked at. Central to Volf’s account is the idea that human social life can and should in some sense correspond to God’s movement of gracious love towards humanity. It is this insight, rather than his life experiences, that provides the conceptual framework for a model of reconciliation that is developed from the perspective of the victim. Volf explores traditional Christian concepts such as sin, repentance and forgiveness in the context of a highly sophisticated account of the interpersonal dynamics of exclusion and embrace. Insightful and provocative, Volf’s model of reconciliation perhaps suffers only due to the ambitious scope of the questions it seeks to address. The subtitle signals this ambition, describing the work as a “Theological exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation.”

3.4 John de Gruchy: A Public Theology of Reconciliation

John W. de Gruchy’s career spans a unique period in the history of his native South Africa.⁸³ *Apartheid*, the fight for racial equality and civil rights, the transition to democracy and the experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have all taken place during de Gruchy’s adult life. *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, an adaptation of the Hulsean Lectures, delivered in Cambridge during May 2002 is the product of de Gruchy’s intellectual and personal experiences during South Africa’s recent history.⁸⁴ Following the conventional format for a Christian theologian De Gruchy’s introductory chapter ‘How Dare we Speak of Reconciliation?’ offers a theoretical legitimisation of the project. This is followed by an exposition of ‘Reconciliation in

⁸² Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 141-147.

⁸³ John W. De Gruchy is Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Cape Town.

⁸⁴ John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

the Christian Tradition,' a chapter marked by a particular focus on the theology of the Apostle Paul and modern theologians such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, P.T. Forsyth, James Denney and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Two components of de Gruchy's project stand out. Firstly, he places all that he says about reconciliation within the context of South Africa's attempts towards national reconciliation. Secondly, his reflection moves towards the development of a Public theology of reconciliation.

De Gruchy's decision to locate his discussion of reconciliation within the context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has a number of material implications. Firstly, his conceptualisation of reconciliation is constantly balanced by the practical reality of creating reconciliation in South Africa. As de Gruchy points out, "the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gives contextual continuity and concreteness to the discussion throughout."⁸⁵ This decision sets de Gruchy's project on a particular trajectory. While South Africa's TRC was highly praised across the world, it raised a number of difficult questions about justice. For many the amnesties given to those guilty of 'political crimes' were a high price, perhaps too high, to pay for a reconciled society. As the South African artist William Kentridge observed, "As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done, they get closer and closer to amnesty, and it gets more and more intolerable that these people should be given amnesty."⁸⁶ De Gruchy's focus on South Africa means that he must face these questions. This goes some way to explaining the emphasis placed on 'restoring justice'; restorative justice is central to his understanding of reconciliation. A preoccupation with justice and its attendant issues has been a part of de Gruchy's work in the past. De Gruchy's notes Miroslav Volf's criticism of his earlier tendency to give a primacy to justice rather than reconciliation.⁸⁷ In the current volume de Gruchy incorporates Volf's considerations into his understanding of reconciliation and continues to explore the relationship between reconciliation and justice. Observing the lack of a coherent universal understanding of justice, de Gruchy continues with an exploration of the significance of restorative justice over against the traditional preference for retributive justice.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid. 30.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 204.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 199. De Gruchy offers a *mea culpa* in response to Volf's article 'The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,' *Interpretation* 54 no.2 (April 2000), 158-172. Volf criticises de Gruchy and the *Kairos* document for the "tendency either to see reconciliation and justice as alternatives or to see reconciliation as subsequent to the establishment of justice." (168). Volf notes, "In de Gruchy's dialectical understanding of reconciliation, the struggle for justice is not only rightly seen as indispensable, but it is also given pre-eminence; it towers over reconciliation." (170)

⁸⁸ See de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 200-213.

A second significant component of de Gruchy's project is his overall vision of the relationship between theology and politics. A number of points of emphasis in his work on reconciliation are a subsidiary part of his commitment to the development of a Public theology.⁸⁹ De Gruchy's version of Public theology continues in the tradition of those who have sought to deduce the social significance of central Christian doctrines in an attempt to create a Christian public philosophy. In essence this involves developing political values that correspond to the basic convictions and principles of the Christian faith.⁹⁰ De Gruchy signals his attempt to develop a Public theology by stressing from the beginning that the aim of his work is "to explore the relationship between the politics of reconciliation and the Christian doctrine of reconciliation."⁹¹ Operating within the structures of Public theology de Gruchy is particularly concerned with translating Christian values and ideas into political realities. He explains this process as "bridging the gap between Christian vision and political reality."⁹² At this point we note a coalescing of de Gruchy's major concerns. The need to create a Public theology of reconciliation that will translate to political realities sees de Gruchy focus on the importance of the theme of covenant. Additionally, the theme of covenant allows de Gruchy to continue his interest in the theme of justice.

An exploration of covenant is central to de Gruchy's conception of reconciliation. "Covenant," according to de Gruchy, "can provide the framework within which we can think and act together to overcome and heal the past, restructure power relations, restore justice and develop a common vision for the future."⁹³ De Gruchy locates the doctrine of reconciliation within the framework of God's covenant with creation. Thus covenant signals "God's gracious commitment to heal and restore God's relationship to the world so that it might be brought to perfection."⁹⁴ De Gruchy notes that a covenantal understanding of reconciliation cannot be applied directly in the political sphere; however, there exists what he describes as an "analogous relationship."⁹⁵ Covenant "implies a new commitment to one another that transcends simply agreeing to co-exist, with hostility continuing to simmer beneath the surface and periodically breaking out in another round of violence."⁹⁶ The connection to the political sphere is found in

⁸⁹ De Gruchy's Public theology is in the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971); contemporary exponents include Ronald Thiemann, Max Stackhouse and Richard John Neuhaus.

⁹⁰ See Daniel M. Bell Jr's article "State and Civil Society," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* ed. Cavanaugh and Scott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 423-439.

⁹¹ De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 13.

⁹² *Ibid.* 76.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 183.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 185.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

de Gruchy's assertion that "a covenantal relationship goes further than a social contract because it is concerned about reconciliation rather than mere co-existence...whatever its drawbacks a covenant relationship is qualitatively different from that of a social contract."⁹⁷ A social contract binds society together based on natural claims to equality, a covenant, according to de Gruchy's interpretation, binds people together on the basis of the *Imago Dei* and the universality of sin. This goes beyond the individualism of western democracy by affirming human solidarity and a commitment to transcending self-interest. The shift away from self-interest and individualism is particularly evident in the demands of a covenant, for de Gruchy these demands refer to the maintenance of justice. God's covenant with the world has an analogy in a covenant in creation where people are bound together by virtue of their being created in the image of God and the universality of sin. The demands of this covenant are found in doing justice and maintaining peace. If this is carried out then we will witness the transformation of the social order and environment as a whole.⁹⁸ This is de Gruchy's vision of reconciliation. A vision that creates a Public theology based on God's covenant with creation, a covenant that offers a way to maintain justice, based on restorative principles rather than retribution and moves beyond the individualism and self-interest of a social contract. All of these concerns come together when de Gruchy comments, "Restorative justice has to do with renewing God's covenant and therefore the establishing of just power relations without which reconciliation remains elusive."⁹⁹

The emphasis on covenant and the South African experience prompts de Gruchy to make a strong case for restorative justice. Restorative justice is the judicial correlate of covenant as it rebuilds God's intended network of relations rather than merely punishing. De Gruchy attempts to strengthen his case by observing that biblical justice was relational and social rather than abstract and was marked by a concern for embrace and the healing of social wounds. As an example of a translation of this idea of justice into the public sphere, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission represents an attempt to implement restorative justice and attempt to "forge a relationship between forgiveness and justice."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 185.

⁹⁸ J.B. Torrance has highlighted the difference between a covenant and a contract in the context of a life-long analysis of reformed theology and politics. Torrance demonstrates how covenants are frequently understood in a contractual sense. De Gruchy seems unaware of this danger and therefore fails to think through the possible theological ramifications of using the idea of 'covenant' to bridge the gap between theological principles and political realities. See Torrance's articles in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 'Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth Century Scotland, SJT Vol. 23 (1970) 51-65 and 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy,' SJT Vol. 34 (1981) 225-237.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 204.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 203.

4. The Themes of Reconciliation

As the preceding analysis demonstrates a precise definition of what reconciliation means is frequently absent in the work of its exponents. Often its meaning is simply assumed, as we have seen this can have serious consequences. As an attempt to bring clarity to a definition of reconciliation we now turn to a description of what our analysis highlights as the themes of reconciliation. This section will endeavour to delineate the key factors involved in reconciliation and demonstrate what these ideas and terms mean when used to refer to reconciliation and its attendant activities.

4.1 Relationships at the Centre

Where reconciliation is recommended there is typically a belief that relationships are at the heart of both the problem and its solution. “Reconciliation,” writes Mervyn Love, “is a relationship word.”¹⁰¹ In an expansion of Love’s statement, Michael Hurley observes, “Reconciliation is primarily about persons, people, parties, groups [and] only secondarily about issues.”¹⁰² An issue-based approach to reconciliation looks at the external symptoms of conflict and seeks to address those issues by way of political settlement or concessions. While tackling issues may bring about a cessation of violence it does not address the internal factors involved in violent conflict. “Reconciliation looks through what is visible,” according to John Paul Lederach, “and penetrates processes of perceptions, understandings and interpretations of the purpose and meaning of a relationship.”¹⁰³ The approach of reconciliation initiatives is markedly different from that of Conflict Resolution. Groups involved in protracted violent conflicts may have no living memory of healthy interrelations. There is an absence of trust and a surplus of stereotyping and fear. The emphasis on relationships attempts to address these fundamental components of violent conflict. Trust is eroded and destroyed by protracted violence. Political solutions will not, in and of themselves, bring about the restoration of trust that is required for an agreement to be translated into restored relationships. This translation is essential if a society is to recover from a protracted conflict and not merely co-exist, but cooperate. The concentration on relationships is the product of a thoughtful consideration of the particularities of contemporary violent conflicts. As has already been mentioned, the vast majority of these conflicts take place within nation states and involve neighbours and citizens who share the same

¹⁰¹ Mervyn T. Love, *Peace Building Through Reconciliation* (Avebury: Avebury Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁰² Michael Hurley (ed), *Reconciliation in Religion and Society* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, 1994), 2.

¹⁰³ John Paul Lederach, ‘Five Qualities of Practice’ 184.

space. While political issues are involved in reaching a settlement, the problem has deeper roots. In an account of conflict in Ireland, Geraldine Smyth notes, “Brokenness, division and separation are words that come to mind when we reflect on the civic and Christian reality of Ireland.”¹⁰⁴ Smyth might have mentioned any number of political issues, ranging from the constitutional to the practical, in an attempt to describe contemporary conflict in Ireland. However, an account of these issues would fail to articulate the central problems of social and cultural separation, fear and suspicion that abound in Northern Irish life. Lederach acknowledges that it is his first hand experience of conflict resolution that has caused him to rethink his conceptualisation of conflict and shift away “from a concern with the resolution of issues and toward a frame of reference that provides a focus on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships.”¹⁰⁵

While the shift from issues to relationships is clearly an attempt to get to the heart of the problem it is not without its difficulties. Talking about reconciliation in terms of relationships reminds one that reconciliation is first and foremost concerned with individuals and interpersonal conflicts. However, this raises questions concerning the feasibility of translating a personal and interpersonal dynamic into broader socio-political initiatives. It is certainly true to say that ethnic conflicts are frequently concerned with relationships. This however is only to provide a diagnosis. The problem of dealing with relational difficulties at the group level remains.

Two traditional conceptualisations of reconciliation that are both prominent in current literature emphasise the importance of relationships in reconciliation. These are the Christian understanding of reconciliation and the African concept of *ubuntu*. While religion is blamed for the origins and sustenance of a great deal of the world’s violent conflicts, non-religious thinkers have been employing religious language while exploring new avenues for the resolution of violent conflicts. Alongside the central metaphor of reconciliation, discussions of political repentance, healing, forgiveness and justice are familiar components of ‘secular’ projects.

“Reconciliation,” argues Robert Cushman, “is pre-eminently a New Testament word, a Pauline word.”¹⁰⁶ While it is fair to say that the concept has gone through a period of evolution and political development, its roots remain profoundly Christian. Although Paul’s use of the

¹⁰⁴ Geraldine Smyth, O.P., ‘Brokenness, Forgiveness, and Healing’ *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* etc...

¹⁰⁵ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington D.C: United States Inst. of Peace Press, 1997), 24.

¹⁰⁶ Robert E. Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), 220.

word *katallagē* is not as common as one might imagine, (the Greek words translated ‘reconciliation’ and ‘reconcile’ only occur 15 times in the New Testament) Ralph Martin argues that “the theme of reconciliation [expresses] the centre of Paul’s thought and ministry.”¹⁰⁷ *Katallagē* means literally an ‘exchange,’ “Christ has come,” writes J.B. Torrance, “and taken our enmity, to give us love in exchange; our alienation and hostility, to give us his friendship in exchange; our sin, our condemnation, our death, to give us forgiveness, righteousness and eternal life in exchange.”¹⁰⁸ Central to the New Testament’s understanding of reconciliation is the problem of humanity’s estrangement from God. The New Testament presents, in a variety of forms, an account of how this estrangement has been overcome by way of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, at the heart of this understanding of reconciliation is a relationship; namely the dysfunctional relationship between humanity and God. At a secondary level the restoration of this primary relationship requires the reordering of relationships between human beings in families, Churches and society. Although Christians have traditionally made a distinction between vertical reconciliation (between God and humanity) and horizontal reconciliation (between human beings) the New Testament tends to see the horizontal as an essential outworking of the vertical. A stark dichotomy between the two forms of reconciliation tends to distort the intention of the texts. “God initiated the work of reconciliation,” notes Cecil McCullough, “and made [human beings] agents of that reconciliation.”¹⁰⁹

In South Africa’s search for social and political reconciliation the Christian sense of reconciliation coalesced with the ancient African concept of *ubuntu*. Derived from the Xhosa expression *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning ‘People are people through other people’ *Ubuntu*’s combination with Christian ideals created a compelling force in the country’s attempt to deal with its past, a force that had relationships at the centre. Archbishop Desmond Tutu gives voice to the question that many have raised when confronted with South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “What is it that constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution, to be so magnanimous and ready to forgive rather than wreak revenge?”¹¹⁰ Tutu goes on to explain the significance of *ubuntu* for black South Africans. While it is difficult to render *ubuntu* in western languages, the word speaks of what it is to be a human being, it says, “My humanity is caught up [and] is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong

¹⁰⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 3.

¹⁰⁸ J.B. Torrance, ‘The Ministry of Reconciliation Today: The Realism of Grace,’ in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family*, ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1990), 130.

¹⁰⁹ Cecil McCullough, ‘Bible and Reconciliation,’ in *Reconciliation in Religion and Society*, 36.

¹¹⁰ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 31.

in a bundle of life...it says I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.”¹¹¹ Individuals do not possess personhood in and of themselves, but receive personhood by being involved and connected with the lives of other people. Tutu goes on to explain that the concept of *ubuntu* has significance for how South Africans dealt with the past, especially with the difficult issue of justice. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, the goal of justice was not retribution, but rather “the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence.”¹¹² In a study of Tutu’s ‘theology of *ubuntu*’ Michael Battle argues that *ubuntu* provides a corrective hermeneutic for an overly individualistic western conception of salvation. This correction allows Tutu to offer a theological rendering of *ubuntu* that speaks to the particular challenges of South African society. Battle observes,

Tutu’s theological model seeks to restore the oppressor’s humanity by releasing and enabling the oppressed to see their oppressors as peers under God. In this can be a mutual understanding, as Jesus teaches, through friendship (John 15:15). For Tutu, *ubuntu* expresses this mutuality. The relationship of oppressor and oppressed and the resulting definition of humanity through racial classification are broken through *ubuntu*, an alternative way of being in a hostile world.¹¹³

Tutu’s articulation of *ubuntu* demonstrates the centrality of relationships in the project of reconciliation sought in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Capturing the mixture of Christian and African ideals in Tutu’s understanding of reconciliation, Antjie Krog writes, “for Tutu, reconciliation is the beginning of the transformative process, one must be able to transcend one’s selfish inclinations before one can transform oneself and one’s society.”¹¹⁴

4.2 Forgiveness

It is difficult to imagine an understanding of reconciliation that did not involve a strong element of forgiveness. The literature on reconciliation is unanimous in voicing the centrality of forgiveness. Reflecting on forgiveness and politics, Andre Dumas observes, “If there is no

¹¹¹ Ibid. 32.

¹¹² Ibid. 55.

¹¹³ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 5.

¹¹⁴ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1998), 144.

procedure for forgiveness, we are left with the endless circle of self-propagating vengeance.”¹¹⁵ An understanding of the limits of political settlements and the social-psychological characteristics of divided societies demonstrates that any progress towards the healing of society requires an initiative that gets at the heart of these issues. Forgiveness addresses the past, questions exclusive identities, overcomes fears and suspicions and supersedes the limits of a purely political settlement. On one hand the promise of forgiveness is rich and compelling. However, forgiveness of any sort presents a number of painful problems. Firstly, a genuine forgiveness cannot be demanded, only encouraged. Even if the importance of forgiveness is acknowledged it may be the case that those who most need forgiveness remain unforgiven by their victims. Secondly, there is the problem of agency. Who forgives on behalf of the dead, the victims no longer present? Thirdly, there are the issues encapsulated in the terms ‘repentance,’ ‘cost’ and ‘reparation.’ Suspicious of *mere* forgiveness many citizens want to see evidence of forgiveness, demanding sufficient repentance or at least a demonstration that contrition is more than vocal. This raises a number of difficult questions concerning models of forgiveness and the relationship between forgiveness and repentance.¹¹⁶

4.3 Justice

The suggestion of forgiveness in a divided society inevitably raises the question of justice. Moves towards reconciliation are marked by their efforts to hold together the frequently competing claims of forgiveness and justice. A collection of essays entitled *Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts* (London: SCM Press, 2003) demonstrates the importance of justice in

¹¹⁵ Andre Dumas, *Political Theology and the Life of the Church*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1978) 76.

¹¹⁶ The question of the relationship between forgiveness and repentance has been the source of a great deal of debate and confusion. For example, David Little develops a model of forgiveness based on Jesus’ parable of the Unforgiving Servant that sees repentance as a key element of forgiveness. He outlines five elements (1) a transaction between two or more persons; (2) A shared acknowledgement between the offender and victim about (a) culpability and wrongdoing and (b) a fitting punishment; (3) contrition and repentance on the part of the offender; (4) a merciful response by the victim, including the annulment of (2b); and (5) obligation of the forgiven offender to forgive others. See David Little, ‘A different Kind of Justice: Dealing with Human Rights Violations in Transitional Societies,’ *Ethics & International Affairs*, 13 (1999), p71. Commenting on the *Kairos* document’s assertion that there can be no reconciliation without justice, J.B. Torrance notes “Here there is a weak part in the document, where, in order to stress [that there can be no reconciliation without justice], it wrongly says that forgiveness is conditional upon repentance – that we are not expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner! No. Forgiveness (70x7), as love in action, is always unconditional, as in our Lord’s response to Peter and in his attitude towards Zaccheus. But such forgiveness unconditionally demands repentance and must be received in repentance if there is to be genuine reconciliation and such reconciliation will doubtless require reparation (as in the case of Zaccheus). Repentance is the necessary response to forgiveness, not its condition.” See J.B. Torrance, ‘The Ministry of Reconciliation Today: The Realism of Grace,’ 137.

reflection on reconciliation¹¹⁷. The three sections of the book offer contributions from a variety of individuals under the headings of 1) Justice and Rights: Initiatives towards Reconciliation, 2) Justice and Hope: Perspectives on Reconciliation from the Religious Traditions, and 3) Justice and Peace: Prevention of Conflict and Process of Reconciliation. The arrangement of the material show that the editors are clearly under the impression that justice is central to the question of reconciliation.

A number of observations allow an appreciation of the dilemmas of justice. Firstly, the political context: Societies that have suffered violent conflicts are typically unstable. When violence and civil unrest cease, the society begins a transition. This time of transition is notoriously delicate and a careful politics is required.¹¹⁸ Under such circumstances politicians often feel compelled to make a choice between justice and reconciliation.¹¹⁹ The choice of reconciliation appears to be determined according to Michael Humphrey because, “The problems faced in reconstructing nationally fractured communities often dictate the choice of reconciliation...the state is not strong enough to pursue the path of justice.”¹²⁰

A second consideration is related to this phenomenon. Intrastate conflicts rarely produce a clear ‘victor’. Compromises are made on both sides and the cessation of violence marks the beginning of a process of coming to terms with the past and deciding on the shape of the future. In such a situation a pure justice, such as that implemented at the Nuremberg trials, is not possible. Noting the complexity of implementing justice after an intrastate conflict, Judge Marvin Frankel writes, “the trial of war criminals of a defeated nation [is] simplicity itself as compared to the subtle and dangerous issues that can divide a country when it undertakes to punish its own violators.”¹²¹ Besides the contradictory perceptions of ‘victory’ both sides are now asked to return to living side by side, in an attempt to overcome the social ramifications of protracted conflict. A strict implementation of justice would undermine this process. “While the allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg,” notes Archbishop Tutu, “we in South Africa had to live with one another.”¹²² This is the logic that lay behind South Africa’s Truth

¹¹⁷ Susin, Luiz Carlos and Aquino, Maria Pilar eds. *Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

¹¹⁸ See Neil J. Kritz, ed., *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, 3 vols. (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995) and A. James Mc Adams ed., *Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law in New Democracies* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

¹¹⁹ See Nigel Biggar’s essay ‘Making Peace or Doing Justice: Must we Choose?’ in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice After Civil Conflict*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Georgetown University Press: Washington D.C., 2001).

¹²⁰ Michael Humphrey, *The Politics of Atrocity: From Terror to Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2002), 105.

¹²¹ Marvin Frankel, *Out of the Shadows of Night: The Struggle for International Human Rights* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1989), quoted in Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 22.

¹²² Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 21.

and Reconciliation Commission. A related issue concerns the conditions for peace. A discussion of mechanisms for justice will be part and parcel of the activities that lead to peaceful settlements. It is highly unlikely that those who have been involved in violence will support a process that concludes with their indefinite imprisonment.¹²³

Thirdly, reconciliation raises painful questions about the limits of forgiveness and the very meaning of justice. Such questions witness the clash of concepts and experiences as abstract definitions of justice collide with the reality of creating justice in a divided society. Differing concepts of justice often compete for attention. One side interprets justice in terms of individual victims; the other develops an understanding of justice based on the experiences of an oppressed community. Both sides have legitimate claims; the challenge lies in representing these claims and creating mechanisms or even rituals where they can be expressed.

Fourthly, similar to forgiveness there is a problem of agency. In violent conflicts the vast majority of victims are dead. Often these lost names and faces are the most compelling representatives in competing demands for justice. However, this raises difficult questions about bringing justice for the deceased. Who can speak for the dead and articulate what they would determine to be just?

David Stevens offered an understanding of justice that draws together a number of the factors this chapter raises:

What do we mean by justice? In the Judeo-Christian tradition justice is a relational concept. It is not primarily about material possessions or having 'rights'. Justice is about having a place, being included in the community, to be given what is needed to make a contribution, to be taken into account, to be treated as a human. Justice in a divided society is what is required to share the space together without domination or victimisation. It is integral to authentic reconciliation.¹²⁴

Reflecting on South Africa's experience of dealing with justice Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks of "balancing the requirements of justice, accountability, stability, peace and reconciliation."¹²⁵ Tutu points out that objections to South Africa's solution are usually based on a concept of retributive justice, rather than the restorative justice that lies at the heart of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The preference for restorative justice is an

¹²³ In the run-up to ceasefires in Northern Ireland, prisoners on both sides of the conflict were involved in a long period of dialogue regarding their future status in a post-conflict Northern Ireland. Without the assurances of prison releases that were part of the agreement it is unlikely that any settlement could have been reached. For a comprehensive account of the paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland see Tim Pat Coogan *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (London: Arrow Books, 1996).

¹²⁴ David Stevens quoted in Mervyn T. Love, *Peace Building Through Reconciliation*, 11.

¹²⁵ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 23.

implication of the South African concept of *ubuntu*. Rather than focusing on the punitive aspect of justice, restorative justice carries the concerns of *ubuntu* such as healing breaches, redressing imbalances, restoring broken relationships and the attempted rehabilitation of both the victim the perpetrator.¹²⁶

4.4 Truth

Leaflets publicizing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission proclaimed, "Truth: The Road to Reconciliation". While a large number of truth commissions have taken place during the past two decades, it is South Africa's project of national reconciliation that is most frequently associated with the phenomenon of truth commissions.¹²⁷ The South African experience brings the issue of establishing the truth to the forefront of the majority of contemporary efforts towards reconciliation. It is assumed that bringing the 'sins' of the past into the light of the present is an essential part of any move towards reconciliation. Moreover the South African example implies that reconciliation is impossible without truth. In favouring slogans such as, "Revealing is Healing," South Africa's TRC depicted the South African nation as a diseased body in need of healing. The desired healing was national reconciliation and the suggested therapy was telling the truth about the past.¹²⁸ The perceived success of South Africa's TRC is an inspiring example for those involved in the difficult process of dealing with their past.¹²⁹ "If reconciliation in any of its several senses is to take place, there must be some agreement about what happened and why," notes David Crocker, "Former enemies are unlikely to be reconciled if what count as lies for one side are verities for the other."¹³⁰

However, this optimism, according to Brandon Hamber, "has encouraged the drawing of simplistic conclusions about trauma and its treatments."¹³¹ Hamber's analysis of truth commissions questions the popular conception of a causal relationship between 'full disclosure' (truth) and 'healing' (reconciliation), raising important questions about what exactly an excavation of the truth achieves. While the TRC made strong claims for the success of truth

¹²⁶ Ibid. 54-55.

¹²⁷ There have been at least twenty-four truth commissions in the last two decades including Argentina, Bolivia, Chad, Chile, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Uruguay and Zimbabwe. See The United State's Institute of Peace digital collection at www.usip.org/library/truth.html.

¹²⁸ See Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, 15.

¹²⁹ This is evident in the intellectual cross-fertilization that takes place between academics and government officials from a variety of nations and South Africa's reconciliation experts. Another example is the setting up of the International Centre for Transitional Justice whose President is Dr Alex Boraine, former deputy chair of the TRC. No conference on reconciliation is complete without a contribution from someone involved in South Africa's TRC.

¹³⁰ Crocker, 'Reckoning With Past Wrongs,' 50.

¹³¹ Brandon Hamber, 'Does the Truth Heal? A Psychological Perspective on Political Strategies for Dealing with the Legacy of Political Violence,' in Biggar, *Burying the Past*, 147.

telling, Hamber is more cautious, adding the caveat, “despite successes it would be an error to exaggerate the ability of truth commissions or public testimony to address *en masse* the needs of individuals struggling with a personal and social history of human rights abuses.”¹³²

Establishing the truth about the past is closely associated with the other main themes of reconciliation. Truth is central to the question of justice, crucial if forgiveness is to take place, an important aspect of the restoration of relationships, and part of the restoration of humanity. However, despite the centrality of truth in the process of reconciliation, truth commissions are not without their problems. In the forum of a truth commission, truth becomes public property and we witness the tension between the internal needs of victims and the bureaucratic needs of a society in transition. While the participants of a truth commission hope for personal healing and seek truth for justice or vindication, the political wheels that provide the momentum for a TRC seek a national healing that will contribute to the forming of a new national identity. South Africa is probably the best example of this tension between victims recounting human rights violations and politicians using, in Richard Wilson’s words, “human rights talk to construct a new national identity.”¹³³ Truth, memory, justice and identity create an emotive argument for the creation of a truth commission, yet in reality in South Africa the full truth was never heard.¹³⁴ The benefits and indeed the possibilities of ‘full disclosure’ may be debated. However, the point of this section has been to observe (1) the almost universal assumption that truth is an essential component of any move towards reconciliation and (2) the accepted wisdom that the best way of ‘dealing’ with truth or ‘the past’ is to initiate a truth commission.

Reconciliation as both a process and a goal includes a wide range of themes. From a consideration of the characteristics of deeply divided societies we have seen that reconciliation moves beyond the realm of substantive issues and political settlements and focuses on the creation, healing and restoration of human relationships. Addressing the social and psychological factors of individuals and communities, reconciliation attempts to overcome alienation, suspicion and stereotyping and begins to reverse the process of creating exclusive identities. With forgiveness at its centre, reconciliation challenges fixed notions of justice and attempts to deal with the violence of the past in a way that avoids division in the future. In order to further our attempt to offer a definition of reconciliation we will now turn to an analysis of several contemporary models of reconciliation.

¹³² Ibid. 134.

¹³³ Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, 13.

¹³⁴ See John de Gruchy’s discussion of the South African TRC in *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002) 154-164.

Conclusion: Reconciliation and the Restoration of Humanity

South Africa's journey towards reconciliation raises another significant element in definitions of reconciliation, namely the restoration of humanity. Along with the emphasis on relationships captured by *ubuntu* there is the importance of the restoration of humanity, both the humanity of the oppressed and the oppressor. A process of dehumanisation or depersonalisation typically marks situations of violent conflict. This allows oppression to become a reality in a variety of forms, from the denial of basic human rights such as representation or basic health care and housing to the breathtaking violence of ethnic cleansing. Common to both is the dehumanisation of 'the other.' Robert J. Schreiter notes seven ways of perceiving 'the other' that permit this dehumanisation to take place: (1) demonising the other; (2) romanticizing the other; (3) colonising the other; (3) generalising the other; (4) trivialising the other; (4) homogenising the other and (7) vaporising the other.¹³⁵ One of the key aspects of the relational aspect of reconciliation is a move towards restoring the lost humanity of 'the other.' This can range from the act of reconfiguring one's perception of 'the other' by challenging long held assumptions and stereotypes or acknowledging the reality of one's participation in oppression and or violence. This will also require the restoration of one's own humanity and therefore a questioning of exclusive identities and superior attitudes. By oppressing another, one has denied not only their humanity but also one's own.

Attempting to define reconciliation has required that we attend to a wide-ranging variety of issues and concerns. Rather than isolate one particular definition we have instead emphasized the main themes of reconciliation while offering an account of its contemporary appeal and the inherent tendency towards ambiguity. Any usage of the language of reconciliation is context specific and there is no 'one size fits all' version. At the heart of reconciliation lies the desire to move beyond the shortcomings of political settlements. An analysis of deeply divided societies shows that although substantive political issues are involved in the development of conflict they are not the only significant factors. Political settlements can answer "political" questions. Too often they fail, however, to reach the social and psychological factors that perpetuate violent conflict.

No single definition of reconciliation exists, yet it seems appropriate that our preliminary discussion of reconciliation concludes with a close pairing of reconciliation and the restoration of humanity. Lamenting F. W. De Klerk's disappointing testimony to the Truth and

¹³⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission in a Changing Social Order* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 52-52.

Reconciliation Commission, Tutu comments, “I cried for De Klerk – because he spurned the opportunity to become human.”¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 210.

CHAPTER 2

Constructing a Theology of Social Reconciliation

Reconciliation presupposes a problem. Regardless of what we mean when we use the term, a concern for reconciliation appears only when a rupture in relations of some severity has taken place. Thus while the term connotes positive, reparative activity, it prescribes a negative judgment on that which has past. Our first chapter attempted to explore the way the concept of reconciliation has been understood in its varied uses and contexts. By way of John Paul Lederach's diagnosis of deeply divided societies and an analysis of a series of contemporary accounts of reconciliation we sought to isolate a number of themes that continually recur in the literature on reconciliation. While one version of reconciliation may emphasize one theme over another it is safe to say that each of these themes in its own way and in dialogue with a particular context contributes to a definition of what reconciliation means. One of the characteristics noted in chapter one was reconciliation's capacity for ambiguity. While this may prove helpful in the midst of a process of reconciliation it can prevent us from developing a precise understanding of what we mean by reconciliation and how it is that we will seek to achieve particular goals. Violence is not our primary concern, but rather the deep divisions of Northern Irish society; where vast portions of the population live, learn, work, worship, relax and die in isolation from those of a differing religion. Writing in 1996 Norman Porter offers a depressingly accurate account of Northern Irish society. We note that his description is not focused on violence, but rather deep societal division of the sort described by John Paul Lederach.¹³⁷

Social and political life in Northern Ireland is in a sorry condition. Some say it has always been; few dispute that it has been since 1969. Its condition is sorry not only because many citizens experience serious social deprivation but also because Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society. Conflicting political aspirations lie at the heart of its divisions and sectarianism remains an ugly blight on the social and political landscape producing as it does practices of violence, discrimination and segregation. The reality of sectarianism makes trust among opposing political actors a scarce commodity and contributes to an impasse that characterizes many aspects of political affairs. One result is a politics of constitutional standoff between unionists and

¹³⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington D.C.: United States Inst. Of Peace, 1997).

nationalists which drains politics of much of its meaning for citizens. It also cramps political possibilities and inhibits progress beyond the current form of undemocratic government prevailing in Northern Ireland.¹³⁸

Despite its near ten-year vintage, Porter's description resonates with the contemporary socio-political situation. A review of both political developments and news coverage of Northern Ireland since 1996 serves only to put flesh on the bones of Porter's depiction. While gun attacks and bombings have mercifully receded into the background the psychological and physical barriers of violent conflict continue to shape Northern Irish life.

Theology and Social Relations

This chapter attempts to offer a theological contribution to the situation Porter describes. In attempting to formulate that contribution it will make the following argument: the message of the Christian gospel is a message of reconciliation, both reconciliation between God and humanity and between human beings at the social level. This message provides an analysis of the problem of deep division and a proposal for the reconciling of deeply divided societies. Alongside the suggestion that a vision of reconciliation is central to the Christian gospel we will argue that this vision requires that we attend to the particulars of Christology and understand the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis of any theology of social reconciliation. This move results firstly, in a critique of approaches to social reconciliation that pay insufficient attention to Christology and, secondly, in the suggestion that the Christology of J. B. Torrance offers a way of making the required connections between theology and society. Our argument requires that we attend to a number of facets of the theology of social reconciliation. Firstly, a diagnosis of the problem we seek to resolve, secondly, an exploration of how we conceptualize the goal or goals of reconciliation, thirdly, a discussion of the foundation or basis of a Christian understanding of social reconciliation and finally a proposal for a theological approach to social reconciliation.

By combining theology, reconciliation and Northern Ireland our discussion raises a question that is both obvious and important: Does theology have anything useful to say to a deeply divided society, especially a society where theology, of some description, is a constituent part of the problem? There is an important debate about the extent to which Northern Ireland's

¹³⁸ Norman Porter, *Rethinking Unionism: An Alternative Vision for Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1996), xv.

‘troubles’ can be described as religious or theological.¹³⁹ While it is clear that paramilitaries are not fighting over the theology of the Eucharist, it is vital that we recognize the theological component of Northern Ireland’s social divisions. It is undeniable that sectarianism with all its religious and theological connections is central to Northern Ireland’s experience of long-term social division. Surely the most rational response to Northern Ireland’s problems would be to advocate less theology and not more. Three observations suggest a way forward. Firstly, it seems illogical to suggest that because there is a theological element in Northern Ireland’s social divisions that should rule out any positive theological contribution. Secondly, if indeed there is a theological element in the perpetuation of sectarian attitudes and behaviour then a theological solution is surely the most appropriate response. By offering critique and correction it may be possible to prevent people from using powerful religious rituals and symbols to sanctify the politics of self-interest. To jettison all theological content merely allows the continuation of questionable theological practice.¹⁴⁰ Thirdly, the South African experience is instructive. Despite the important theological element to both the origins and preservation of *Apartheid*, the Christian theology of forgiveness and reconciliation was central to South Africa’s peaceful transition from tyranny to democracy. This is exemplified by the centrality of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to the success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹⁴¹ It is therefore precisely because there is a theological element to Northern Ireland’s problems of social division that the gospel of reconciliation remains a vital resource for social reconciliation. Central to our argument is the suggestion that social reconciliation will be well served by a recovery of a Christian theology of reconciliation that is conceived on a Christological basis. This suggestion raises the question of how, or even why, we relate discussions of social relations to the Christian gospel.

As a means of helping to clear some conceptual ground Alan J. Torrance suggests there are three reasons why the Christian theologian who seeks to understand what it is to be human and the nature of human relationships must begin with Jesus Christ.¹⁴² The reasons may be summarised as (1) methodological, (2) epistemological and (3) ontological. Firstly, Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end of God’s purpose for humanity. To engage in an attempt to

¹³⁹ Important note – see Liechty and Clegg, chapter 1.

¹⁴⁰ See Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001).

¹⁴¹ See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997),

¹⁴² Alan J. Torrance, ‘The Theological Grounds of Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Socio-Political Realm,’ in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, ed. Daniel Philpott (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

understand God's purpose on any other basis is a rejection of God's self-presentation. As Torrance notes, "For the Eternal Word to become incarnate requires to be understood as divine endorsement of how God intends himself and his purposes to be known."¹⁴³ Thus when we come to think about humanity and human relationships we should begin with this Word rather than beginning elsewhere and then attempt to coordinate our preconceived understanding of ourselves with the self-presentation of God. Secondly, to say that Jesus Christ represents God's self-presentation to humanity is not merely a statement about who God is; it is simultaneously a declaration of what it is to be human. "The incarnate Word," writes Torrance, "constitutes the mediation not only of the one true God but also of the one true human. In him, therefore we know what humanity is created to be and to become – that is, we know humanity not in its supernatural but in its natural state."¹⁴⁴ Finally, we should not think of this process of coming to understand God's self-presentation as merely an exchange of information. Thus, "revelation is not simply the communication of ideas, ethical instructions or information but God's self-communication in an event of communion as this involves the creation of a creaturely context of noetic, epistemic and semantic participation in the divine life."¹⁴⁵ Revelation on this scheme is not merely the addition of new information to the container that is our mind. It is rather the transformation of our language and categories of interpretation or classification.¹⁴⁶ In expanding our understanding of revelation we note that the event of revelation occurs through and with participation by the Spirit in the life of the Body of Christ. The Church or *ecclesia* is the community created by and for revelation. God's pneumatological communion with humanity has the effect of establishing community between human beings at the horizontal, or social level. "God was in Christ reconciling the world," writes Torrance, "not some hermetically sealed Church. Intrinsic to revelation, therefore, is the reconciliation of our orientations and attitudes both toward God and toward others."¹⁴⁷ Torrance's primary intention in setting out these three reasons demonstrates a desire to see Christian theologians engage in theological reflection when presented with anthropological or sociopolitical questions. While this may sound somewhat tautological the propensity for Christian theologians to jettison both their Christian and theological commitments when it comes to addressing social questions is worryingly noteworthy. However, aside from methodological instruction, Torrance presents us with the

¹⁴³ Ibid. 2

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ See Dietrich Bonehoffer's lectures on Christology for an extended discussion of this understanding of revelation.

¹⁴⁷ Alan J. Torrance, 'The Theological Grounds of Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Socio-Political Realm,' in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, ed. Daniel Philpott (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

beginnings of a way to forge a connection between Christology and social ethics. In the event of revelation we are presented with a way of thinking about the questions of human nature, but also with a way of being human. This way of being is not the suggestion of a new ethical code or way of life to imitate, but the presentation of how the incarnation has impacted human personhood, an impact that does not rely on our apprehension but is objectively real by virtue of Christ's assumption of human flesh. It is humanity's participation in this reality that will form the basis of our attempt to think about the theology of social reconciliation.

The Goal of Reconciliation: Utopian or Realist?

Surely reconciliation is a good thing? Scholarly literature, public perceptions and the media coalesce on this verdict. While people may differ in their approach or practice the individual opposed to reconciliation would find herself in a minority position. However, besides the rather vague notion of 'overcoming division' it is frequently unclear precisely what a successfully reconciled society would look like. Aside from the obvious, the goal of reconciliation frequently remains indistinct. Yet, for a number of reasons it is important that we reflect on what we expect when we begin a quest for reconciliation. For our purposes in this chapter it is important that we ask what vision of society should fire the engines of a theology of social reconciliation. The importance of this question can be illustrated in a number of ways.

Firstly, this is important because what we believe about reconciliation will necessarily shape how we approach the whole business of making reconciliation happen. Or in the negative sense, if our assumptions about the nature of reconciliation are hopelessly utopian our practical approach may simply be to hope, pray or wish for some miraculous intervention before we arrive at a distant land flowing with milk and honey and inhabited by lions that lie down with lambs. While the concept of a utopia is usually associated with a positive hope or aspiration there is a risk that a conception of reconciliation that is highly improbable or miraculous will only rob us of our hope and leave us with a nebulous dream of implausible scenarios.¹⁴⁸ The less realistic our picture of reconciliation the less chance we have of realising reconciliation in the present tense. To borrow a phrase from the playwright David Mamet, reconciliation can become a "dramatic abstraction". According to Mamet, "dramatic abstractions have no referents in reality and are understood to mean: 'when strife is gone. When things have been resolved. When

¹⁴⁸ It might be suggested that Christian versions of social action that tend towards passivity are more focused on the final coming of reconciliation rather than working to achieve reconciliation in the here and now.

there is no more uncertainty in my life.”¹⁴⁹ In other words they mean very little and only serve to undermine attempts towards action in the here and now.

Secondly, there is a theological dimension to the question of how we envisage reconciliation. In our theological reflection on reconciliation it is important that we be clear about the basis of our assessment of the problem of deeply divided societies and how we conceive reconciliation. As we have explained in chapter 1, Lederach outlines three ‘broad-brush’ characteristics of deeply divided societies: (1) The narrowing of identities; (2) Diffusion of power and confusion about representation; (3) The long-term nature of internal conflicts and attendant social-psychological factors.¹⁵⁰ By juxtaposing Lederach’s characteristics with Porter’s description of the ‘sorry condition’ of social and political life in Northern Ireland we are given a sense of the problem we face. What is clear is the picture of a society divided along narrow identity lines that are unable to deal with differences in culture, religion or political aspirations in a way that prioritises dialogue and the interests of society as a whole, rather than the narrow interests of a particular group. Ceasefires and political progress have not halted the parallel lives lived by people in Northern Ireland. In an article assessing the impact of socio-cultural divisions on children in Northern Ireland, Karen Trew makes the following observation.

Most children in Northern Ireland are not surrounded by the public manifestations of division such as political murals, which characterise the more deprived working-class neighbourhoods. However, the religious segregation of housing and education ensures that most Catholic and Protestant children grow up among coreligionists with their views shaped by indirect rather than direct involvement with other groups. Even in neighbourhoods where Catholic and Protestant children live in close proximity to each other, the vast majority attend segregated schools that are characterised by the religious homogeneity of the staff and students. In these circumstances it is natural that children will mix with those who share their background and become involved with them in the many recreational activities that revolve around neighbourhood, school and church. In addition, daily events within segregated schools underlie exclusivity and difference rather than inclusivity and commonality.¹⁵¹

Trew’s observations about the junior members of the population encapsulate an important aspect of the problem. Educational segregation embodies a wider societal norm where exclusivity and difference trump inclusivity and commonality. It is important to recall that in Northern Ireland

¹⁴⁹ David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 24.

¹⁵⁰ See Lederach, *Building Peace*, 13ff.

¹⁵¹ Karen Trew, “Children and Socio-Cultural Divisions in Northern Ireland” *Journal of Social Studies* 60:3, 2004, 509.

the problem we face is the legacy of violence and social separation, rather than violence *per se*.¹⁵²

From the perspective of Christian theology the condition of Northern Irish social and political life runs against the vision of social life exhibited in the narrative of the New Testament. Where politics becomes a game of calculating gestures and where social life is marred by violence, discrimination and segregation it is safe to say that something is deeply wrong. Even where expectations for societal cohesion are at their lowest, Northern Ireland's record of exclusivity and difference occluding inclusivity and commonality is surely unsatisfactory. While post-enlightenment democracies are based on the logic of social contract theory, the New Testament envisages the breaking-in of a society framed by fellowship and a dismantling of the sexual, political, economic and cultural barriers that pervade human social life.¹⁵³

A theology of social reconciliation should be informed by a vision of reconciliation that is 'realistically utopian'. By this phrase we aim to hold together two disparate trajectories. On the one hand our vision of a reconciled society needs to avoid becoming so utopian that there is little chance of achieving anything other than the frustration of unfulfilled expectations. However, an overly cautious and unambitious attempt to implement the reconciling vision enshrined in the Christian gospel is perhaps worse. As we think of the concrete realities of division in Northern Irish society, especially where these divisions follow the fault lines of theological affiliations, it is clear that a movement towards reconciliation is urgently needed. However, the question of the particularity of Northern Ireland's move towards reconciliation remains. At this point, it is suggested that at the heart of that move is an understanding of what life together for human beings *should* look like. James B. Torrance appeals to John Macmurray in this regard, noting the theological importance of Macmurray's distinction between 'society' and 'community'.

[Macmurray] defined society as a collection of individuals indirectly related to one another by law, by employment, by contract, to meet needs (economic, financial, physical etc.). Community, on the other hand, he defined as a collection of persons in relation, directly related by love... The concept of community, Macmurray contended is a religious notion, deriving from a Hebrew Christian consciousness. From a trinitarian standpoint, God is in the business of creating community. We are, of course, social

¹⁵² The recently published *A Shared Future* Document signals the government's attempt to tackle this legacy headlong. *A Shared Future* outlines the ways in which government at both local and national levels will attempt to use legislation to discourage sectarianism and ensure that government policy does what it can to encourage the development of a shared future between all communities in Northern Ireland.

¹⁵³ Ephesians 2: 14-22.

beings who live in society with our economic, financial and political needs, but a compassionate government should seek to make a loving, caring community possible.¹⁵⁴

Where the normal societal bonds have broken down and persons in society are drawn into a fragmented and antagonistic existence the need for a recovery of community is vital. In Northern Ireland the term ‘two-communities’ is an acceptable way of describing the current arrangement of society. Yet, Macmurray’s vision and more importantly that of the New Testament makes the language of ‘two-communities’ oxymoronic, or at least challenges this version of community. A number of positive implications follow from making a vision of community fundamental to our understanding of reconciliation. Firstly, we address the important question of whether or not reconciliation requires that we move towards a homogeneous society where for the sake of peace particularity is neutered. This is an understandable concern as one possible way of achieving reconciliation is to attempt to sterilize the perceived causes of conflict. Thus in Northern Ireland we call people out of their distinctive cultural or religious identities into a new, inclusive vision of citizenship. Social identity theory suggests something like this when it claims that a new social category could be employed to bring members of two conflicting categories together under an inclusive, superordinate category of identity.¹⁵⁵ Thus in Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants could throw off their internecine social and religious identities and come together under some other all-embracing categorisation. While the worry that this suggestion may lead to a homogeneous society is valid, it seems more salient to question the idea that one’s social identity can simply be thrown off, like an article of clothing. Another problem with social identity theory is that it suggests that the locus of the problem is found in our social or religious identities thus suggesting that there is something inherent or irrepressible about conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Finally, one wonders what this superordinate social identity might be? The sceptic might point to the 1980s conflict between Iran and Iraq, nations united by their shared adherence to Islam, yet locked in a bitter conflict. While social identity theory is important in thinking about the role played by identity in conflict and can inform those who are attempting to create dialogue between conflicted parties it is surely unhelpful to suggest that denying our particularities is the essence of reconciliation.

It is for this reason that the concept of community, in particular the New Testament’s emphasis on the way our differences are simultaneously retained yet relativised, offers a provocative way of thinking about reconciliation. This principle seems to be at the heart of

¹⁵⁴ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 29-30. It is interesting to note that Tony Blair’s vision of British society is marked by the influence of Macmurray’s vision of community.

¹⁵⁵ See Esler, P ‘Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict’ in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* eds. W. Stegemann, B Malina and G. Theissen, Minn: Fortress, 2002, 185-205.

Pauline thought when it is suggested that in Christ, “there is neither Jew, nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.”¹⁵⁶ Of course the New Testament continues to maintain social and gender distinctions, its pages speak frequently of the slave and the free and men and women. However, Paul’s christology and his insistence that human beings are *en Christo* requires that these categories are not the final say on who we are as human beings. God’s community in Christ embraces particularity while simultaneously affirming our place *en Christo*. Thus the church exists at the local level as a gathering of a diverse group of individuals and at the global level as a gathering of diverse congregations.

Avoiding an ethic of self improvement

By suggesting that Christology is central to a theology of social reconciliation it is important that we do not overlook the failure of theological approaches to social issues to think carefully about how they understand the connection between Christology and society. As we shall demonstrate, there is a tendency on the part of theologians engaged with social issues towards advocating an ethic of self-improvement. This is essentially a message that correctly diagnoses a problem and then simply holds out the example of Christ or a call to discipleship as a solution. This approach is not limited to those offering a theological solution to the problem of social division. Thus we begin with Norman Porter’s treatment of reconciliation and then turn to those in the theological camp.

Norman Porter’s reflection on reconciliation makes an excellent contribution to the debate about the future of Northern Ireland and there is much in his approach to be recommended. Yet, at a foundational level Porter’s understanding of reconciliation is weakened by an over reliance on an abstract ideal. The fuel that propels Porter’s vision of a reconciled society is essentially the ideal of citizenship. This results in two problems. Firstly, by making the ideal of citizenship foundational Porter runs the risk of individuals interpreting citizenship according to their own particular cultural or political agenda. The ideal of citizenship could be hijacked by other ideals such as patriotism, loyalty and solidarity. In a situation of deep division these ideals are far from benign and are typically filtered by one’s cultural or political allegiances. Secondly, Porter’s suggestion for the way we create a reconciled society calls for a higher degree of citizenship, or as he puts it “a multi-faceted understanding of citizenship”¹⁵⁷ Thus the ideal of citizenship represents both the hope and solution for reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In a representative passage, Porter writes

¹⁵⁶ Galatians 3:26-29

¹⁵⁷ Norman Porter, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003), 255.

I am claiming that a reconciled society, unlike a perfect one, is a reasonable possibility; that it is a possibility that hangs on the realisation of inclusive citizen belonging; that such a realisation is best understood in terms of recognition of individual, cultural and political modes of citizen dignity; and that these modes are the entitlements of all citizens rather than the exclusive or privileged preserve of members of one tradition or another.¹⁵⁸

Of course a criticism of Porter's belief in the ideal of citizenship is not to say that the values and behaviours he uses to define citizenship are not important goals for society, especially one plagued by decades of violent political division. The distinct lack of positive behaviour by citizens is certainly a contributing factor in the perpetuation of 'traditional divisions' in Northern Ireland. The problem with Porter's understanding of reconciliation is that, in the final analysis, it insists that reconciliation requires that the population of a divided society improve themselves and quite simply, become better people. The final word on reconciliation's requirements suggests that people enrich their understanding of citizenship and act accordingly.

It is Porter's call for a greater emphasis on citizenship that is most troubling. By urging dysfunctional citizens in Northern Ireland to embrace a greater understanding of citizenship and commit to better behaviour, Porter places himself in good company.¹⁵⁹ Whether the ethical arena is political or ecclesial there is rarely an alternative to pointing people towards their own resources and obeying the ethical prescriptions of moral philosophers and theologians. One potential model is found in the concept of the *imago Dei*. Not only do human beings have a shared humanity, but they are also created in the image of God. This, it is suggested, offers a possible social ethic or means for building peace. In a study of trinitarian theology, David Cunningham combines trinitarian reflection with the concept of the *imago Dei* to argue the case for Christian peacemaking. Cunningham writes, "Created as we are in the image of God, human beings bear the stamp of God's likeness and are capable of modelling the peaceableness of the triune God."¹⁶⁰ He adds "the violation of the other is ultimately a violation of self. This follows necessarily from the claim that all human beings are created in the image of God and that their particularity does not isolate them from one another."¹⁶¹ Our concern with this particular utilisation of the *imago Dei* is that it does not seem to take the fall into consideration. While it may be difficult to argue that the image of God has been completely erased from humanity, it is

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ David Trimble describes Porter's work as involving "a merging of political and religious languages...the result is a highly moralistic approach to politics which makes high, not to say impossible demands on a population which is emerging from thirty years of polarizing terrorist violence." See *The Times Literary Supplement* April, 18, 2003, p.7.

¹⁶⁰ David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 243.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 245.

surely consistent with the biblical narrative to suggest that the image has been distorted due to sin. Cunningham's use of the image fails to consider the ramifications of the fall from grace by supposing that sharing in the *imago Dei* is a sufficient cause for peacemaking. A second concern focuses on the way Cunningham's model throws us back on ourselves. What is the basis of the putative link between the *imago Dei* and the capability of human beings to model the peaceableness of the trinity? By stressing shared humanity and the *imago Dei* Cunningham offers a version of the self-improvement ethic that demands that we respond from our own resources.

Another possible foundation for Christian social ethics is found in Latin American liberation theology. In the Christological thinking of both Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino we detect a social ethics based on the concept of imitation. Jesus Christ has walked ahead of us on the road to liberation, thus paving the way for our liberation. Therefore the fundamental challenge of Jesus Christ, according to Sobrino, is to "reproduce his own way of life in oneself and one's life."¹⁶² Boff offers a similar understanding with the observation that Jesus is the first to arrive at the goal "we will follow him."¹⁶³ Our criticism of Liberation theology's attempts to find a theological foundation for social ethics runs along the same lines as our critique of David Cunningham. They confront us with the exemplary life and teachings of Jesus but leave us on our own when it comes to putting this life into practice.

Miroslav Volf's celebrated theology of reconciliation, *Exclusion and Embrace*, exhibits a similar tendency by failing to make any ontological connection between the movement of God towards the world and the actions of human beings.¹⁶⁴ Central to Volf's picture of embrace is the belief that human social life should in some sense correspond to God's gracious love towards humanity.¹⁶⁵ In Volf's case the victim is called upon to forgive her enemy. However, while Volf takes time to make a connection between the acts of the victim and the example of Christ there is no space given to the importance of Christ's vicarious humanity.

The Christian version of urging better behaviour is perhaps most problematic since it creates a sharp distinction between the event of Christ's death and our active response. For the purposes of our argument it is this theological version that is most interesting. In raising this question we approach the territory typically marked for a debate about the connection, or lack thereof, between

¹⁶² Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* trans. John Drury (London: SCM, 1978), 21.

¹⁶³ Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for our Times* trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), 34.

¹⁶⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹⁶⁵ See our discussion of *Exclusion & Embrace* in Chapter 1.

justification and sanctification. How far do the effects of Christ's death and resurrection run? Do they provide for Christian holiness or merely create the potential for individual Christians to emulate or embody the actions of Jesus Christ? This is an important question for those engaged in the development of a theological model of reconciliation. By making Christology the basis of a model of reconciliation we are forced to ask about the connection between what we base our ethics on and what the goal of social ethics requires of us. In an attempt to articulate what he means by the term 'Incarnational Social Ethics,' Todd H. Speidell helps us highlight the difference between our two options.

In Christ, God himself was present reconciling all things to himself. The vicarious humanity of Christ provides *an objective reality of reconciliation*, over against a *subjective potentiality of making ourselves good*. Christian ethics must not become an autonomous subject separate from theology, for in his humanity Christ both reveals God to us and reconciles us to God and one another. Christian ethics, therefore, presupposes intrinsic ontological grounds for reconciliation in the humanity of Christ, rather than abstract, independent or universal moral laws.¹⁶⁶

Speidell's distinction between "an objective reality" and "subjective potentiality" and the "intrinsic ontological grounds for reconciliation" and "abstract, independent or universal moral laws," offers a precise distillation of the point we are trying to make. Christ's reconciling life, death and resurrection has significance for both the beginning and the end of our social ethics. Christ does not merely set an example to follow, but actually achieves our reconciliation. Rather than turning to abstract moral ideals, Speidell suggests we explore an ontology of reconciliation built on the humanity of Jesus Christ.

To make sense of an argument that suggests that Jesus Christ brings about reconciliation between God and humanity and between human beings requires that we explicate the Christology of J B Torrance, paying particular attention to his understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ and the concept of participation.

A Proposal for a Theology of Social Reconciliation

Christ does not heal us as an ordinary doctor might, by standing over against us, diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us to get better as we follow his instructions. No, he becomes the patient! He assumes the very humanity, which is in need of redemption, and by being anointed by the Spirit in our humanity, by a life of perfect obedience, by dying and rising again, for us, our humanity is healed in him, in his person.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Todd H. Speidell, 'Incarnational Social Ethics' in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family* ed. C. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 146, (emphasis mine).

¹⁶⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1996), 42-43.

We began this chapter by suggesting that the Christian gospel is a message of reconciliation and that this message has profound implications for our understanding of the social order, in particular the way we should approach the development of an understanding of reconciliation in situations of deep social division. Thus far we have made some methodological observations and offered a critique of unsatisfactory approaches to the theology of social reconciliation.

We turn now to the constructive portion of our chapter, what we are suggesting represents a proposal for a theology of social reconciliation. As will become clear our proposal rests on a number of ideas gleaned from the theological corpus of the Scottish theologian James B. Torrance. During the course of his career Torrance sought to bring the full weight of his theological insights to bear on the social challenges of his day. In particular Torrance, wrote, lectured and conversed on the deeply divisive social conflicts in *Apartheid* South Africa and Pre-Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland.¹⁶⁸ Space does not permit a full appraisal of Torrance's theological *oeuvre*, what follows is a summary of some of the main points of his research and an exploration of how they contribute to a theology of social reconciliation.

Covenant vs. Contract

Anyone familiar with the work of James B. Torrance will recall that the distinction between a covenant and a contract was central to his theological work. It was his *idée fixe*. Familiarity perhaps allows one to forget the importance of the distinction, yet its relevance to contemporary theological discourse remains. An understanding of the distinction between a covenant and a contract begins with an appreciation for the theological framework of Federal Calvinism; an influential school of theology that J.B. Torrance believed obscured the New Testament meaning of grace.¹⁶⁹ Developed in the late 16th and 17th centuries, Federal Calvinism took root in England, Scotland, Holland and Puritan New England. The concept of covenant was central to the theology of the Federal system. Theologians in this tradition directed their energies to the distinguishing of the different covenants that governed God's relation to the created order. Covenant thus became the framework in which all theological thinking was cast. At the heart of this framework was the hard and fast distinction between the Covenant of Works or Covenant of Nature and the Covenant of Grace. J.B. Torrance notes the meaning of this distinction, observing,

¹⁶⁸ See Torrance's essay 'The Ministry of Reconciliation Today' in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family* ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 130-140. Here Torrance offers a theological reading of the socio-political conflicts in both South Africa and Northern Ireland.

¹⁶⁹ J.B. Torrance, 'Introductory Essay' in *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1996) 5.

According to this scheme, God made Adam the child of nature, who could discern the laws of nature by the light of reason. On the basis of this, he entered into a covenant or contract (the so-called Covenant of Works) that if he obeyed the laws of nature (which are the laws of God) and fulfilled the conditions of the Covenant, he would find eternal life. This is the *foedus naturale* – the contract of nature upon which all society is based. Adam as such is not a private individual but the federal head of the race. Thus when he disobeyed, he brought the curse not only on himself, but all for whom he contracted. But God in his sovereign grace does not destroy the human race, but elects out of the mass of fallen humanity a number for himself and makes a covenant of grace for them in Christ. God then calls the elect of his Spirit and brings them to saving faith by the instrumentality of Word and Sacrament, the signs and seals of the covenant of Grace.¹⁷⁰

Regardless of the widely shared assumption that the federal system derives from the work of John Calvin, Torrance points out that the distinction between covenants was unknown to Calvin nor was Calvin ever likely to teach such a distinction. According to Calvin there was only one eternal covenant of grace. The distinction between Old and New covenant does not denote two different covenants, but two forms of the one eternal covenant.¹⁷¹

Two features of Torrance's critique of Federal theology are germane. Firstly, his observation that "the whole federal scheme is built upon the deep-seated confusion between a covenant and a contract." As Torrance points out a covenant (theologically speaking) is a promise whereby two people or two parties bind themselves to love one another unconditionally. A contract is a legal relationship in which two people or parties bind themselves together on mutual conditions as in a business arrangement where one party agrees to pay another a set amount when a certain service has been provided. While there is room for some flexibility of definition in legal or social arrangements based on a contract, when they are employed in theological language they must be carefully distinguished. "The God of the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," cautions Torrance, "is a covenant God, and not a contract God. God's covenant brings its promises, its obligations and its warnings. But the obligations of grace are not conditions of grace and it is false in Christian theology to articulate moral obligation in contractual terms."¹⁷²

A second important feature of Torrance's critique concerns the way the federal scheme creates a radical dichotomy between the sphere of nature and the sphere of grace or in other words a firm distinction between natural law and gospel. Two problems flow from this dichotomisation of nature and grace according to Torrance. Firstly, there is a return to the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ See James B. Torrance, 'The Concept of Federal Theology – Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?' in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae. Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture* ed. W. H. Neuser, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1994). See also Michael Jinkins, *A Comparative Study in the Theology of Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and John McLeod Campbell, Atonement and the Character of God* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993).

¹⁷² J. B. Torrance, 'Introductory Essay,' *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1996) 6.

medieval view that grace presupposes nature and that grace perfects nature. This is a marked departure from the central emphasis of the Reformation that declared that nothing is prior to grace. Therefore, secondly, the created order, including humanity, is related to God as to a judge, under natural law and exposed to the sanctions of law. As Torrance points out this means that “the relationship between Church and the world, Church and State, is no longer understood Christologically as by Calvin and Knox, but in terms of Gospel and natural law.”

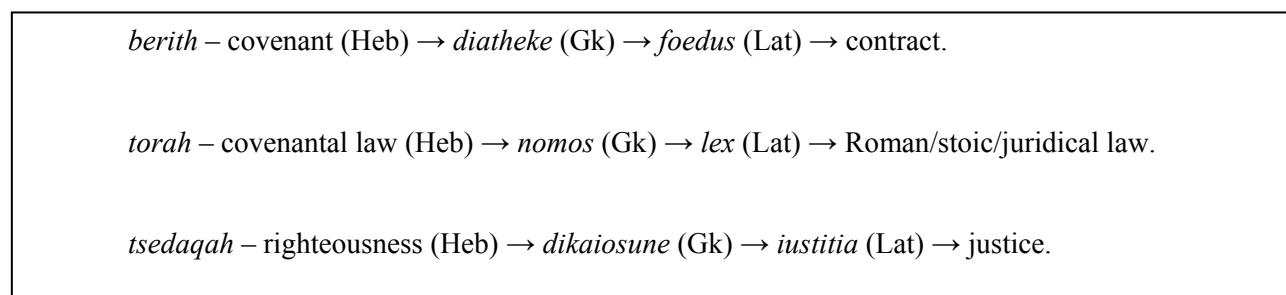
By offering a critique of the federal system Torrance is not trying to suggest that covenant is somehow unimportant. His intent is the opposite. By failing to make the required distinction between a covenant and a contract the federal scheme obscures the true nature of God’s covenant with the world, thus even though covenant was central to federal theology, Torrance’s point is that they have missed the true significance of covenant. As Torrance points out the conceptuality of covenant sits at the heart of Judaism and frames and directs the entire exposition of the Hebrew Bible. The history of God’s people is interpreted by way of the category of covenant and God’s covenant faithfulness or *hesed*. If, under Torrance’s influence we reject the version of covenant adopted by Federal theologians what do we suggest as an alternative conceptuality? Three aspects of the Hebraic understanding of covenant are noteworthy.

Firstly, the covenant between God and Israel is unilateral. Unlike a marriage where both parties offer their free consent and commitment, God unilaterally establishes a covenant with Israel. Secondly, this is a unilateral covenant without conditions. God makes a free commitment to Israel irrespective of merit or obligation. This in particular allows us to differentiate between a covenant and a contract. Whereas the conditional ‘if’ clause is inherent in the logic of a contract, the conditional ‘if’ becomes incoherent if placed within a unilateral, unconditional covenant relationship. Thirdly, the unilateral and unconditional covenant established by Yahweh carries unconditional obligations. At this point we note that the unconditional nature of God’s covenant is not to be confused with the ‘cheap grace’ critiqued by Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁷³. As those included in God’s covenant community, Israel is to be faithful both to God and to one another. The Ten Commandments lays out in simple terms what this vertical and horizontal faithfulness looks like. Crucially the unilateral and unconditional nature of the covenant does not eradicate the importance of human response. However, rather than an attempt to fulfil conditions the response to the covenant is an apodictic or natural response to God’s prior faithfulness. The identity of Israel is bound up with the covenant relationship, therefore the obligations ask them

¹⁷³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959) 45ff.

to live in a way that corresponds with their identity.¹⁷⁴ Covenant obligations are prevented from being interpreted as conditions by the recognition that God’s covenant faithfulness is prior to the expected response. As J. B. Torrance often put it, the indicatives of grace precede the imperatives of law, “I am the LORD, your God, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt...*therefore*, have no other gods before me...”¹⁷⁵ Following the inscription of the ‘Ten Commandments’ the rest of the Hebrew Bible tells the story of Israel’s inability to offer an appropriate response to God’s gracious covenant. Israel’s sin was her unfaithfulness as a covenant partner. By recovering the meaning and implications of covenant Torrance exposes the relational logic that sits at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. A logic that is definitional for God’s Trinitarian life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the relationship between God and creation and for the Church’s calling to service in the world.

While this analysis of Protestant dogmatic history is interesting it is important to ask what bearing it has on a discussion of the theology of social reconciliation. By recognising that God’s fundamental orientation towards the world is filial rather than legal, covenantal rather than contractual Torrance allows both the correction of an errant strain in the tradition and the development of a fresh perspective on theological, ecclesial and political questions. From the outset of this chapter we have made the assertion that the Christian gospel is a message of reconciliation, and that this message has profound significance for situations of deep social division and conflict. Yet, the message of reconciliation has frequently failed and thus its social significance is rarely understood with sufficient clarity. This failure is directly related to the confusion over covenant and contract and the way concepts central to Hebrew theology have been misunderstood as they have been translated from Hebrew to Greek to Latin to English. Alan Torrance uses the following diagram to illustrate the conceptual confusion that results as central theological terms evolve from Hebrew to English.¹⁷⁶



¹⁷⁴ The same logic of linking identity and ethics is seen in Paul’s letters to the Churches, in particular those to the Colossians and Ephesians where the Church’s identity is *en Christo* calls forth a particular way of life.

¹⁷⁵ Exodus 20.

¹⁷⁶ See Alan, J. Torrance, ‘The Theological Grounds of Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Socio-Political Realm,’ in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, ed. Daniel Philpott (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

Alan Torrance's diagram represents the ease with which a term such as covenant can slowly over time become understood as contract. The implications, according to Torrance, are far-reaching.

The effect of this [mistranslation] has meant that God's filial purpose (unconditional, unilateral) comes to be conceived as denoting a somewhat impersonal legal purpose – too often conceived in bilateral and, indeed, conditional terms. The relational or filial categories of God's covenant love, unconditional faithfulness and righteousness are translated into the individualistic categories of contract, conditional acceptance and a forgiveness conditional upon the satisfaction of legal requirements.¹⁷⁷

The consequences of western Christianity's mistranslation of terms central to the Hebraic depiction of God's relationship to the created order are felt in a number of areas and not merely in the field of dogmatic theology. Torrance notes that this misconception of the divine life and purposes with its focus on contract, *lex* and *iustitia* has "compounded our tendency to interpret social relations between human beings in contractual terms – as a 'social contract.'"

The preceding discussion allows us to make an interesting connection with an aspect of political ideology embraced by sections of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. In his award-winning study of unionism Norman Porter makes the following observation as a way of developing a distinction between cultural and liberal unionism.

The cultural unionist idea is sometimes conveyed through the language of contract, in a manner reminiscent of Locke, but more often through the language of covenant. And this latter language is appropriated from Calvinist theology in general and a Scottish Covenanters tradition in particular. To make matters even more complex the term 'covenant' is at times invested with a specific theological content and at times not.¹⁷⁸

In a description of a theological theory of covenant, of the type most associated with Ian Paisley, Porter highlights three ideas that typify this approach. Firstly, the version of covenant believes that God has entered into a covenant with his people (Protestants) whereby they are assured of his faithfulness if they honour his ways. Secondly, the British sovereign, by virtue of the oath taken upon coronation and the declaration made upon accession to the throne, "incurs covenantal obligations to God. These include not only upholding 'true religion' but opposing false, which is to say Catholicism, since not to do so is to invite God's curse upon the nation."¹⁷⁹ Thirdly, as part of their covenantal obligations Protestants are required to obey the sovereign and the laws

¹⁷⁷ Alan J. Torrance, 'The Theological Grounds of Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Socio-Political Realm,' in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, ed. Daniel Philpott (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006)

¹⁷⁸ Norman Porter, *Rethinking Unionism: An Alternative Vision for Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1996), 111.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 113.

of the state in so far as they reflect or are not in conflict with the law of God.¹⁸⁰ In sum, Porter notes

Ultimate authority derives from a divine principle, the sovereign is presumed to have a divinely ordained duty to uphold a particular faith and to oppose another, obedience is tied to a government's faithfulness in maintaining and implementing God's law, and it is Protestants who are envisaged as the covenanting partners of God and of the sovereign.¹⁸¹

Taken together the work of the Torrances and Porter's depiction of Unionism paint a discouraging picture. Western theology has misunderstood concepts at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and lost sight of God's filial relation to the world, meanwhile theologically inclined Unionists in Northern Ireland, under the influence of Protestant orthodoxy, have developed an additional covenantal framework whereby the political relationship of a particular section of Northern Ireland's population is bound up in a covenantal relationship with the British sovereign and the Judaeo-Christian God.

From our discussion of covenant we can draw out a number of negative implications. Firstly, we can see that a certain perception of covenant allows certain sections of Northern Ireland's population to hold potentially dangerous views about the way society should be ordered. The centrality of God's partnership with Protestants offers a theological underwriting of sectarianism, thus giving rise to Protestant paramilitaries choosing 'For God and Ulster' as their motto.¹⁸² Secondly, a mistaken understanding of covenant has negative implications for an understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation and thus the message of reconciliation that we have suggested is found at the heart of the New Testament. Where individuals feel that God's relationship to them is mediated by way of a legal contract and where God is conceived in legal terms rather than filial it is likely that reflection on forgiveness at the social level will follow the same pattern. Thus forgiveness is withheld on the grounds that repentance or at least a demonstration of contrition is the condition for grace. If and only if one's enemy repents can they receive forgiveness. We have suggested that the Christian message of reconciliation has profound implications for an approach to social reconciliation. It is important to say that if the Christian message is misunderstood or corrupted it can have profoundly negative implications for society. The recent history of Northern Ireland illustrates this observation.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ See Porter's discussion on 115-116.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 116.

¹⁸² 'For God and Ulster' is the motto of the Ulster Volunteer Force or UVF.

¹⁸³ For an excellent account of the connection between Evangelical Protestantism and Protestant political aspirations see Patrick Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster 1921-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Metanoia and Social Reconciliation

At the heart of Torrance's understanding of the doctrine of reconciliation is an emphasis on the epistemological significance of on the one hand, human sinfulness and on the other the way salvation overcomes the noetic effects of human sin. Both sin and salvation have undeniable epistemological importance. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this emphasis is a discussion of how Torrance understands the concept of repentance. Crucial to any discussion of repentance is an analysis of the prior theological decisions that dictate how one understands the concept. In keeping with what we have seen Torrance delineates two possible approaches: the legal and the filial. If God's interaction with the world is construed in juridical terms, whereby legal obedience functions in a contractual sense and conditions God's love, repentance will be perceived in moral terms as the individual's act of turning away from a life of sin. Torrance locates this mistaken conception of law at the heart of an errant strain in Protestant theology. Where law is interpreted as *Lex* there is a loss of the meaning of law as *Torah*. Introducing John McLeod Campbell's *The Nature of the Atonement*, Torrance notes

If our basic concept of God is primarily that of the lawgiver (interpreted in terms of the Latin concept of *Lex*, law of contract, as in Western jurisprudence) then our doctrine of atonement will imply that God has to be conditioned into being gracious, either by human merit, or by Christ satisfying the conditions of such a law that the Father might be gracious to the elect, as in certain forms of scholastic Calvinism. This can also lead to a stress on the conditions we must fulfil or the evidences of repentance we must show if we are to enjoy any assurance of salvation.¹⁸⁴

Despite the popularity of the conception of God as lawgiver and the attendant legal apparatus that guides our interpretation, Torrance attempts a recovery of what he believes to be a more accurate doctrine of God and therefore a renewed sense of what salvation means.

If our basic concept of God is that of the Triune God of grace who has being in communion as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and who has created us to share in that life of communion, then our doctrine of atonement will be seen rather as God in grace bringing those loving purposes to fulfillment in redemption...Law is then seen, not as some impersonal law of contract, but rather (as in *Torah* in the Bible) as spelling out the unconditional obligations of grace as the Father's loving heart coming out to us in the form of commandments, and Christ is then seen as the Father's loving heart coming out to us in the fulfilling of that law. On such a view we see the priority of grace over law, the filial over the judicial, and that God is a covenant-God of faithfulness, not a contract-God.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ James B. Torrance, 'Introduction' to John McLeod Campbell's *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1996), 1.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

These two ‘basic’ conceptions of God, which essentially boil down to God as lawgiver or God as loving Father necessarily result in two divergent views of forgiveness and repentance. As we already explained a conception of God as divine lawgiver interprets theological categories via a judicial lens so that everything we think about God is somehow understood as inherently legal. If our ‘basic’ conception of God is filial there is a shift away from the legal and an interpretation of God’s posture towards creation as inherently gracious. These two divergent understandings of repentance are a good way of illustrating this phenomenon. Few people saw with the clarity of Torrance how a legal interpretation of repentance was in fact a misinterpretation. For where repentance becomes a moral imperative the true meaning of what repentance is has been lost. To fully appreciate Torrance’s point it is important to note, firstly, the importance of Calvin’s distinction between legal and evangelical repentance and secondly, the epistemological significance of repentance.

Torrance notes that Calvin in Book III, chapter 3 of his *Institute* makes a distinction between *legal* repentance and *evangelical* repentance. As Torrance notes

Legal repentance said, ‘Repent, and if you repent, you will be forgiven!’ This made the imperative prior to the indicative, and made forgiveness conditional upon an adequate repentance. So the medieval world said that if the sinner is truly contrite, if he confesses his sins and makes due amends (*contrition, confession, satisfactio*) then he may be forgiven and restored...Calvin argued that this inverted the evangelical order of grace and made repentance prior to forgiveness, whereas in the New Testament forgiveness is logically prior to repentance. Evangelical repentance, consequently takes the form ‘Christ has borne your sins on the Cross, therefore repent!’ Repentance, Calvin argues, is our response to grace, not a condition of grace.¹⁸⁶

From Calvin we note a number of implications. (1) For Calvin anything we choose to describe as an ‘act’ of repentance is a response to grace rather than any attempt on the part of human beings to condition God into showing grace or as the fulfillment of law. Repentance is the response of those who have already been forgiven.

(2) The theological decision that posits a basic conception of God as divine lawgiver rather than loving Father obscures a central aspect of both the problem of human sinfulness and the ‘solution’ as presented in the Christian gospel. That this has a significant bearing on the question of the theology of social reconciliation will soon become clear.

(3) Thus far we have claimed that repentance is misunderstood if it is conceived as a moral category or moral act, for example the way repentance is often conflated with the act of apologizing. However, if we remove repentance from the locus of morality what then do we claim for repentance? To what aspect of human life does it refer? To answer this question and

¹⁸⁶ Torrance, J.B., ‘Introductory Essay,’ 12.

obtain a correct understanding of repentance it is helpful to look at how repentance is understood in the New Testament. The key is in the Greek rendering of repentance, which is *metanoia*. When we consider that *metanoia* is to be articulated in epistemological rather than moral terms we begin to see something of the difference between the normative conception of repentance as actions and *metanoia*. *Noia* comes from the Greek *noein*, which means ‘to think’, and thus *metanoia* can be translated as denoting a ‘change of mind’ or perhaps the ‘transformation of our minds.’ Obviously it is not difficult to see how a certain strain in the Protestant tradition could make the move from an epistemological to a moral category. This is illustrated by Richard A. Muller’s definition of *metanoia* in his *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*

metanoia: repentance, change of mind; e.g., Luke 15:7. The Protestant scholastic will frequently conjoin *metanoia*, defined as a change of mind, with *metameleia*, defined as the feeling of regret or anguish over sin, in their definitions of repentance and conversion.¹⁸⁷

By conjoining *metanoia* with regret or anguish over sin the emphasis of the term is placed on prior acts of sinfulness and subsequent regret rather than the epistemological transformation that *metanoia* is intended to convey. By focusing on acts of contrition or the feeling of regret the focus is on the experience and acts of the individual human being rather than the Triune act of transforming the mind of the individual.¹⁸⁸ The problem of sin is neither moral nor a lack of one’s ability to be sorry for sin. At the heart of human sinfulness is our alienation from God, while it is fair to say that acts of sin flow from this alienation it has its root in our minds, rather than the realm of morality. The transformation required to overcome this state of epistemological alienation is not within the purview of fallen human beings. Rather than an act of human volition, i.e. ‘changing one’s mind,’ this is a transformation from above. While Alan Torrance has pointed out we are given “eyes to see and ears to hear what we cannot otherwise see, namely God, ourselves and not only our loved ones but also our enemies in a radically new light. It is to discern them ‘in truth’.”¹⁸⁹ It is at this point that we begin to get a sense of how significant this version of repentance is for the construction of a theology of social

¹⁸⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1985), 192.

¹⁸⁸ Interestingly it is the scholastic strain in Protestant theology that J.B. Torrance’s critiques in his work. See in particular his introductory essay to John McLeod Campbell’s *The Nature of the Atonement*. Torrance’s attempts to revitalise interest in McLeod Campbell are noteworthy given that by doing so he places himself in a dissenting tradition from the mainstream opinions of the Church of Scotland. McLeod Campbell was deposed from the ministry by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1831 for teaching universal atonement and assurance of faith.

¹⁸⁹ Alan J. Torrance, ‘The Theological Grounds of Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Socio-Political Realm,’ in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, ed. Daniel Philpott (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

reconciliation. Our relationship with others is disordered and dysfunctional because of the inherent alienation within our minds. The first step towards the transformation of our relationships both with God and fellow human beings is this *metanoia* or transformation of our minds from above, or what we might call an epistemological reconfiguration that allows us to perceive things in a new light.

Thus far we have argued that the construction of a theology of social relations requires that we approach the topic from a christological basis. As we have seen christology needs to interpret both our estimation of the problem of deep division and our conceptualisation of how this problem might be overcome. To this end we have argued that a christological basis has both methodological and epistemological ramifications. In reality it is fair to say that we would expect any epistemological ramifications to result in methodological changes and vice versa. As we shall hopefully demonstrate in subsequent chapters the theological advantages of making christology the basis of our theology of social reconciliation are far-reaching.

Throughout this chapter much has been made of the distinction between an ‘ethic’ of reconciliation and an ‘ontology’ of reconciliation. In this regard we recall Speidell’s distinction of “an objective reality of reconciliation” from a “subjective potentiality of making ourselves good.”¹⁹⁰ The theoretical difference is clear, yet what are the wider ramifications of making such a distinction and how does it contribute to a theology of social reconciliation? Much has been made in our analysis of the problems with what we have called an ‘ethic of self-improvement’. Alongside the methodological and epistemological ramifications of exploring reconciliation from a christological basis we now see the way christology allows us to avoid an ethic of self-improvement. By constructing an ontology of reconciliation we are able to circumvent the idea that encourages people to pull their ethical socks up and be better persons, or more loving, patient, compromising etc. On this scheme reconciliation has a concrete ground and is no longer something out there or some sort of abstract ideal. By placing the accent on what Christ has already achieved we avoid the situation whereby the message of the gospel is reduced to an ethical yardstick.

Torrance’s christology alerts us to a truth that is widely underestimated in theological social ethics, namely the predictable tendency towards seeing Jesus Christ as inaugurating some sort of potential movement for human beings to resume communion with God and concomitantly with each other. On this scheme Jesus begins the process, but we must provide

¹⁹⁰ Speidell, ‘Incarnational Social Ethics,’ 146.

the continuing momentum and conclude what Jesus began. Torrance's understanding, put simply, asserts that the job is finished, that a theology of social reconciliation needs to eschew the debilitating exertion of an exemplarist christology and explore the significance of participation in Christ. Thus there is a sense that it is not the stereotypical 'Saints' who are called to the work of reconciliation, but ordinary human beings with their shortcomings and contradictions who, by virtue of their participation in Christ, are called to a ministry of reconciliation. As Speidell observes,

He [Jesus] does not merely leave his life and teaching for us to copy and embody in the world, but he continues to re-present himself as the ongoing reality of social reconciliation and true humanity. We do not need to become poor, pacifist and powerless like him – unless Christ freely chooses to lead us into this lifestyle. Rather, we must be who we are – poor or rich, black or white, male or female – in him.¹⁹¹

Karl Barth captures this idea precisely when he reflects on the concept of loving one's neighbour. To love one's neighbour, according to Barth, does not require the repetition of the love of Christ, but that we bear witness to God's reconciling activity in Christ by meeting "our neighbours truly and honestly only as lost ourselves, i.e., exactly as we are, and not in the role of saviours."¹⁹²

Conclusion

We began by asserting that the Christian gospel has at its heart a message of reconciliation. The preceding discussion sought to stress that this message has profound implications for the social order. Where reconciliation is founded on an abstract ideal the connection between the message of the gospel and social conflict is often limited to spiritual platitudes that fail to exploit the social significance of the gospel. Thus we see the popularity of models of reconciliation that require people to engage in the ethics of self-improvement where they increase their love for their neighbours. Yet the problem of social division remains untouched, as the gospel message is prevented from challenging our very concept of neighbour or humanity or personhood. The logic of this model appears in a variety of forms in both secular and religious versions of reconciliation. We have argued that a theology of social reconciliation should eschew an ethics of self-improvement and offer an understanding of reconciliation built on a substantive christology. The resulting understanding of reconciliation offers a diagnosis of the problem of deeply divided societies and suggests that overcoming division requires that we attend to the

¹⁹¹ Speidell, "Incarnational Social Ethics," 146.

¹⁹² Karl Barth, *Ethics* ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Seabury, 1981), 343ff.

epistemological and ontological aspects of the problem with as much vigour and determination as the ethical. We have deliberately avoided any attempt to extract ‘principles’ for a theology of reconciliation in the hope that we can move away from a practice whereby the heart of social theology is lost for the sake of principles that are available to anyone, regardless of their estimation of the overtly theological logic that supports the entire edifice. Of course our theology of social reconciliation must face the difficult question of how we face up to the past, in particular questions of justice and forgiveness. In the subsequent chapters we shall attempt to bring the logic of our theology to bear on the questions raised by the challenge of facing the past and moving towards the future in societies burdened by deep division.

CHAPTER THREE

Seeking “Justice” as a Means of Facing the Past

Today we know that the dream of everlasting peace can become a reality only if there is vigilance and a continual effort for peace through justice and reconciliation.

Luiz Carlos Susin, ‘Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts,’ *Concilium* 2003/5.

Justice is set off on the path to failure from the outset...not simply because humanity cannot be that good but because injustice is irreversible. Once injustice has been committed, no future can ever make good the suffering of the past...justice can re-establish the precarious balance of rights, but even then the offense is not offset. This problem comes into high relief when the injustice is a matter of the tortured and murdered.

Daniel Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History*¹⁹³

Reconciliation represents an attempt to repair past injuries. The injuries are various, emotional, physical, personal and public. Yet all of those involved in the process of reconciliation are attempting to address what has already occurred. However, even though certain events may have occurred in the past the product of those events is very much part of the present. It is foolish and dangerous to believe that simply righting the wrongs of the past will guarantee peace in the future. Ignoring what we know about deeply divided societies guarantees that our attempts towards reconciliation will fail. Having reminded ourselves of reconciliation’s complexities we turn now to an exploration of one way in which the project of reconciliation attempts to address the injuries of the past, namely the understanding that sees justice as a means of contributing to reconciliation. Central to this chapter is the question of whether justice, as defined as the justice of contemporary western legal systems, makes a positive contribution to the project of reconciliation, whether it has the capability of putting the past to rest and contributing to the healing of deeply divided societies.

1. The Blood that cries out from the ground

Conflict changes everything. As we have previously noted, when we talk about reconciliation it is important to bear in mind that there can be no return to the way things were before. Even if

¹⁹³ Daniel Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London, Routledge, 2001).

peaceful coexistence actually occurred in some distant past, conflict imposes a permanent transformation of relationships. Thus we are reminded that reconciliation is not so much about returning to the innocence of an Edenesque existence, but managing the violent history and differences of the present. The impact of societal conflict varies in its significance and intensity, certain issues, such as the creation of a healthy democratic process, may seem daunting but exist within the realm of possibility. However, the prospect of attempting to resolve other issues can easily dampen enthusiasm. The most potent and lasting legacy of violence is given profound voice in scripture's narration of primal conflict: Responding to God's question about his brother's whereabouts, Cain, with struggling nonchalance, shrugs, "Am I my brother's keeper?" only to be met with God's damning response, "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."¹⁹⁴ But what, we might ask, does the blood of Abel cry out for? Various answers are possible. Revenge, or perhaps vengeance, yet for most of us, who shrink back from the idea of giving voice to revenge, the blood of the victims cries out for justice.

Yet as the quotations above demonstrate talk of justice is problematic. For Susin justice is an essential means to the realization of 'everlasting peace.' On this account there can be no question of approaching peace or the reconciliation of divided peoples without a strong emphasis on justice. Yet, at the same time Daniel Bell Jr suggests that justice ultimately fails. Not because humanity is lacking, but because injustice cannot be undone. The blood that cries out from the ground signals an absence that 'justice' cannot overcome.¹⁹⁵

This chapter will argue that justice fails as a means of achieving reconciliation. We will support this assertion with reflection under two broad ideas that are encapsulated in the following proposition: As a means of contributing to the goal of reconciliation, justice, that is the justice of western liberal society, is neither practically efficacious nor theologically adequate. In terms of its practical effects justice divides rather than unites and fails to break the cycle of division inherent in deeply divided societies. At its best justice merely sanctions division, at its worst justice exacerbates existing societal divisions. Secondly, justice is far from monolithic, thus even if we decide to pursue justice Alasdair MacIntyre's question, "Whose Justice?" surely complicates any attempt to conceive justice as a helpful way of dealing with the past. At the theological level, contemporary notions of justice are a far cry from the form of justice enshrined in the New Testament. Any attempt to develop a theology of social reconciliation is required to

¹⁹⁴ Genesis 4:9-10.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London, Routledge, 2001) 12.

think carefully about the obvious dissonance between criminal justice and the justice of the gospel. While a great deal of effort is expended in theological formulations of *social justice*, that is the Church's attempt to represent the poor, weak and disenfranchised members of society, the current study will concentrate on making a theological comment on the norms and assumptions of justice as it is conceived in liberal western societies.

To do 'justice' to this argument we will have to explore a number of avenues of thought. Along with the issues raised above it is important to ask why justice is frequently at the heart of thinking about reconciliation. Where does our preoccupation with justice come from? It will also be important to consider the possibilities of restorative justice. Does this increasingly popular approach to dealing with crime avoid the problems that the standard approach to justice contains?

It is important to make clear from the outset that this chapter is not an attempt to explore justice *per se*, but rather an attempt to explore the extent to which an emphasis on justice should form part of a theology of social reconciliation.¹⁹⁶ As we have suggested above there are a number of reasons why an emphasis on justice is a mainstay of reflection on reconciliation. Our goal in this chapter is to explore the basis of justice's popularity.

2. Understanding the Importance of Justice

Before commencing a discussion of justice it is important to restate our understanding of reconciliation and the nature of the problem that our analysis of reconciliation seeks to address. Our discussion in chapter one highlighted the elasticity of the term 'reconciliation' and we discussed approaches to reconciliation that focused on the interpersonal version of reconciliation, i.e. repairing a ruptured friendship and the national form whereby a change in the system of government requires a clean break from the past and the legitimization of the new regime. While it is fair to say that projects towards reconciliation are generally concerned with the same issues and questions it is important to pay close attention to the particular context of each move towards reconciliation. The popularity of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions over the past fifteen years highlights the importance of reconciliation, yet has the tendency to homogenize reconciliation by giving the impression that an emphasis on reconciliation and a desire to attend to historical injustices presents a category of countries where populations are

¹⁹⁶ For a useful introduction to the concept of justice see Barbara A. Hudson, *Understanding Justice: An Introduction to Ideas, Perspectives and Controversies in Modern Penal Theory* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996). For a more theological approach see Walter Moberly, *The Ethics of Punishment* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968).

preoccupied with reconciliation. A brief analysis of some examples of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions demonstrates that it is both unwise and inaccurate to group these countries together. Three examples will suffice.

Firstly, in Latin America populations that had suffered under military dictatorships made a transition towards democratic rule and sought to explore historical human rights abuses.¹⁹⁷ The point of the Truth Commissions was to bring to light the details surrounding the murder of dissidents and those deemed a problem by the military rulers.¹⁹⁸ Secondly, the map of Eastern Europe has changed dramatically in the light the collapse of the Soviet bloc.¹⁹⁹ Again populations sought to make the transition from life under soviet regimes to democratic rule. In a move similar to that taken in Latin America it was deemed necessary to address the abuses of the former regime. This decision was in part due to the belief that the stability of the democratic process required a clear break with the past. Central to achieving this clean break was the attempt to prevent those who had previously been in power from reclaiming powerful positions in the new government. This process of lustration was particularly concerned with instilling confidence in a population who had grown to mistrust those in power. There are strong similarities across the geographical boundaries, as Neil Kritz points out, “new terms are created for the country or region in question – denazification in Germany after Hitler, defacistization in Italy, dejuntafication, decommunization – but they all express the same attempt of a liberated society to purge the remnants of its vilified recent past.”²⁰⁰

The end of the *apartheid* regime in South Africa represents a third type of reconciliation. In South Africa the minority white population had consistently oppressed the majority black population, denying them basic human rights and organizing governance along racial lines. Gross human rights violations took place over a period of many years, yet South Africa made a peaceful transition from *apartheid* to representative democracy. The Truth Commission in South Africa placed the emphasis on telling the story of those who had suffered under the old regime rather than making an attempt to seek out and punish those who had either ordered or committed offences. The approach to dealing with former regimes in these three situations demonstrates a number of commonalities. Firstly, they are all making a transition from a form of unjust governance to democracy. This is important as we note that the move towards democracy is that which requires the focus on reconciliation. The interest in reconciliation is of course concerned

¹⁹⁷ Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Chile.

¹⁹⁸ See Neil Kritz, “The Dilemmas of Transitional Justice,” in *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes, Vol. 1 General Considerations* ed. Neil J. Kritz, (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995).

¹⁹⁹ Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Russia and Lithuania.

²⁰⁰, xxi.

with individual people and the way they have suffered, but the priority is the stability of the new democratic rule. This becomes clear when we note that the practical concerns of governance sometimes outweigh the ethical or moral concerns of addressing the abuses of the past regime. Krtiz notes that sometimes those who are implicated in the injustices of the past are essential to the smooth transition to democracy.

Particularly in those countries where the ousted regime was in power for many years, these people may be the only one with the knowledge and experience to staff the ministries and the banks and the other institutions without which the national infrastructure would surely collapse. Practical considerations may make them indispensable.²⁰¹

A second common feature of countries making the transition from repressive regimes to democracy is the potential for victor's justice. Clearly where a transition to democracy is possible the old regime has lost and there is an obvious demarcation between those who have achieved a political victory and those who have lost political power. While the manner of how to implement a victor's justice is debatable, there is little question surrounding the old regime's fall from power.

A third feature is the totality of change. Military juntas, authoritarian regimes and the *apartheid* rulers of South Africa impacted society at every level. Nothing in the ordinary lives of the population was left untouched by the regime. The shift to democratic rule is thus rightly discussed in revolutionary terms as people witness historic changes in nearly every sphere of their lives. The dramatic collapse of a former regime brings with it inevitably dramatic changes for the population.

Having briefly sketched out some of the salient features of some of the contexts where reconciliation has been central to the success of emerging democracies it is easy to see why justice is so prominent. To rehabilitate a population that has suffered under an oppressive regime an emphasis on justice inspires confidence and can spearhead the movement away from the negative patterns of governance that marred the old regime. Stability is crucial for the success of emerging democracies; by prioritizing justice the new political rulers can present a stable and cohesive political culture where the grey areas and complete disregard for due process created a deeply unstable and uncertain political culture. Those who have been unjustly punished by former regimes need to be reintegrated into mainstream society. Their treatment and demands for justice can make a significant difference in communities that have suffered the worst

²⁰¹ Ibid. xxiv.

excesses of the former regime. Neil Kritz's three-volume contribution to the conversation about transitional justice shows the central importance of the justice dilemma and highlights the fact that it is impossible to deal with former regimes without pursuing justice. The importance of Kritz's contribution and also the work of Priscilla B. Hayner is that it takes note of contextual differences and how the priorities in South Africa are different from those in Argentina or Albania.²⁰² With this in mind it is crucial to ask about the particularities of Northern Ireland. Regularly included in lists of countries facing up to their past and a potential location for another Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is Northern Ireland comparable with South Africa, or Latin American or Post-Soviet experiences? Northern Ireland is undoubtedly in a period of transition, but is this the same sort of transition as those we have just reviewed? This is an important question, as it seems that the answer is integral to the sort of reconciliation we construct.

Even in the worst days of violence in Northern Ireland it remained a functioning democracy. There is clearly a strong argument to be made that prior to the evolution of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s there were inherent problems in Northern Irish democracy and it is fair to say that Northern Ireland represented a dysfunctional democracy that was preoccupied with the interests of the Protestant unionist section of the population and discriminated against Catholics at the highest level.²⁰³ Housing, employment and education were key areas where the Catholic section of Northern Ireland's population was treated unfairly. The success of the Civil rights movement was its ability to highlight these abuses and the fact that the old sectarian form of governance was challenged and an emphasis placed on non-discriminatory practices constitutes a testimony to the achievement of early civil rights protestors. It is hard to see how the violence that irrupted in the late 1960s achieved little more than a hijacking of the civil rights movement and a shift in thinking towards a more absolutist ideology on both sides. Northern Ireland suffers from the remnants of a protracted political conflict. Central to that conflict and its legacy is the problem of a deeply divided society. Thus our approach to the question of justice will be particularly concerned to explore the possibilities for justice in a situation of deep division. Does justice contribute to the development of reconciliation and the amelioration of a deeply divided society? A violent political conflict leaves a justice deficit in its wake, or at least causes a problem that many believe only justice can solve. As the forgoing discussion makes

²⁰² Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰³ See Tim Pat Coogan's *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1997* (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart, 1997) for a compelling rehearsal of this argument.

clear, justice makes repeated appearances in both the academic literature and the media's discussion of reconciliation. While the contextual examples above shed some light on the reasons for the prominence of justice it is worth reflecting further on the abiding significance of justice.

3. Justice and Reconciliation

There are at least three reasons why justice is central to a discussion of reconciliation. Broadly speaking these are: (i) the moral sense, (ii) political utility and (iii) the legal imperative. While its meaning and significance are open to debate it is clear that human beings possess a moral sense of or perhaps for justice. This sense can vary from person to person or community to community, but it is clear that people share a feeling, intuition or impulse that deems certain acts wrong and demands that something happens to rectify the situation. The broad range of emotions, traditions and ideologies involved in the moral sense for justice makes this particularly difficult to quantify. However, it does have philosophical pedigree in Immanuel Kant's formulation of deontological ethics. As Michael Sandel points out, Kant's version of the primacy of justice understands justice in a straightforward moral sense,

It says that justice is primary in that the demands of justice outweigh other moral and political interests, however pressing these others may be. On this view, justice is not merely one value among others, to be weighed and considered as the occasion arises, but the highest of all social virtues, the one that must be met before others can make their claims.²⁰⁴

Sandel goes on to show that a fully deontological ethic is not simply about morals, but concerned with the foundation of morals or what Kant would have called its 'determining ground,'

On the full deontological view, the primacy of justice describes not only a moral priority but also a privileged form of justification; the right is prior to the good not only in that its claims take precedence, but also in that its principles are independently derived. This means that, unlike other practical injunctions, principles of justice are justified in a way that does not depend on any particular vision of the good. To the contrary: given its independent status, the right constrains the good and sets its bounds.²⁰⁵

There are, of course, many questions raised by Kant's understanding of the genesis of morality. Yet his transcendental arguments, i.e. his attempt to seek out the presuppositions of certain indispensable features of experience, do resonate with what the person in the street would describe as their moral sense, a sense that leads to moral outrage when individuals perceive injustice. This is well illustrated by the apparent majority who complain angrily when prisoners

²⁰⁴ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 2.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

are provided with therapeutic leisure activities to aid their recovery or given legal aid to argue that their human rights have been violated by conditions in prison. While the evidence for this outrage is hardly empirical it is clear that some sense of justice fuels complaints of this kind.²⁰⁶

A second reason for the prominence of justice in moves towards reconciliation is found in its political utility. This is particularly relevant where a nation makes a transition from one form of governance to another, usually from a negative form to a positive. From a political perspective the break from an authoritarian rule or dictatorship is not simply a matter of removing high officials and initiating a people's revolution. Once the initial excitement of revolution has petered out it is essential for politicians to bring stability and initiate reforms that will demonstrate both a clean break from the past and legitimize the new form of government. Crimes against citizens during the old regime and questions about those who have been deprived of civil or human rights are a potentially destabilizing factor that must be explored. Civil servants or politicians who worked within the structures of the old system who remain in their jobs are also likely to prompt questions about the legitimacy of the new system. Both of these factors force politicians to confront the past and engage in 'Transitional Justice'. This factor explains why a great deal of literature on reconciliation focuses in on justice.

A final reason for the centrality of justice in thought about reconciliation is found in the legal imperatives that frame life in modern societies. These legal imperatives can be both internal in that they stem from the legal traditions of a nation or external in that they come via the pressure of international law. Modern society takes a highly legislated form. By that we mean to say that our activities as individuals or members of a collective have legal consequences and are framed by the limits of the law. Regardless of our position in society we all live under certain legal restrictions that serve to outlaw certain types of behaviour and practice. These laws are not revoked in situations of political conflict. Thus while in moments of crisis less emphasis may be placed on enforcing a particular law or ensuring prosecution for particular offences, the law still stands. That this is the case has cultural implications and thus when the legal imperatives or assumptions of modern life in Northern Ireland coalesce with a sense of moral outrage a formidable recommendation of justice occurs.

In Northern Ireland all three reasons for the importance of justice work together. Thus talk of reconciliation and exploration of forgiveness, amnesty or investigation of the past

²⁰⁶ Tabloid newspapers in the United Kingdom do tend to pour fuel on the fire of moral outrage when it comes to cases like those mentioned. It's clearly one of the oldest tricks in the journalist's book, yet its continued appeal surely depends on the newspaper's version of moral outrage resonating with their readership and the public in general. If this were not the case it would be a seriously self-defeating strategy and would make little sense from an editorial or business point of view.

encounters strong opposition where individuals have a strong sense of injustice, where these same individuals have their perception of communal life shaped by legal imperatives and where other high profile attempts towards reconciliation have prioritized justice and insisted that it is essential to their transition. This is not an attempt to evaluate critically each of the three reasons for the prominence of justice. It is rather an attempt to explain the self-evident importance of justice and explore why a prioritization of justice continually recurs in the literature on reconciliation. For those involved in reconciliation in Northern Ireland there is a complex mix of reasons that drive demands for justice. A mixture of reasons and motivations that are already in place before we turn to the equally complex question of talking about justice where conflicted communities possess divergent and competing understandings of what justice means and how it might be achieved. For further insight on the question of justice we turn to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

4. Reading MacIntyre in Northern Ireland

Alasdair MacIntyre's work on justice, in particular his seminal study, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is germane for an analysis of justice in Northern Ireland.²⁰⁷ At its most basic level MacIntyre's contribution alerts us to the important question of differing conceptions or rationalities concerning justice. Thus when faced with the question of justice or a set of demands for justice it is essential, according to MacIntyre, that we avoid a univocal conception of justice. This has obvious significance for ethical and moral questions that go far beyond the bounds of a discussion of reconciliation, for example the 'popular' dilemmas concerning the development and use of nuclear or chemical weapons, military intervention, the death penalty or abortion. From the outset MacIntyre asks us to consider the intimidating range of responses to these dilemmas that stems from beliefs about the requirements and demands of justice. Often justice demands or requires contradictory or incompatible courses of action.²⁰⁸ MacIntyre points out,

Underlying this wide diversity of judgments upon particular types of issue are a set of conflicting conceptions of justice, conceptions which are strikingly at odds with one another in a number of ways. Some conceptions of justice make the concept of desert central, while others deny it any relevance at all. Some conceptions appeal to inalienable human rights, others to some notion of social contract, and others again to a standard utility. Moreover, the rival theories of justice which embody these rival conceptions also give expression to disagreements about the relationship of justice to other human goods,

²⁰⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

²⁰⁸ Military intervention in Iraq is a classic example. Both those who opposed this move and those who supported it claimed that the intervention of the coalition was just/unjust on various grounds. Justice simultaneously demanded the removal of Saddam Hussein and the 'liberation' of Iraq and a complete cessation of the coalitions unjustified attack on a sovereign nation.

about the kind of equality which justice requires, about the range of transactions and persons to which considerations of justice are relevant, and about whether or not a knowledge of justice is possible without a knowledge of God's law.²⁰⁹

According to MacIntyre, national debates about issues of justice are impossible in pluralistic societies given the incommensurability of perspectives on justice. For MacIntyre social groups in contention over justice cannot agree on rational grounds and thus appeal to their rival convictions, making no attempt to offer a rational justification. As MacIntyre observes,

Disputed questions concerning justice and practical rationality are thus treated in the public realm, not as a matter for rational enquiry, but rather for the assertion and counter assertion of alternative and incompatible sets of premises.²¹⁰

As MacIntyre's argument proceeds we see that while he has much to say about justice and our attempts towards rational discourse in the public square, he is equally preoccupied with his role as a philosophical town crier, vigorously proclaiming the death of a central aspiration of the Enlightenment. For Enlightenment thinkers debate in the public square required methods and standards of rationality and justification that would permit the rational adjudication of contentious issues. Thus, "it was hoped, reason would displace authority and tradition."²¹¹ As MacIntyre points out, this is a noble aspiration, yet the thinkers of the enlightenment and those who carried on their legacy failed to provide the essential formulation of principles that could be agreed upon by all rational persons. MacIntyre laments, "Consequently, the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain."²¹² Our social location has a profound impact on our beliefs and practices and this is not necessarily a bad thing. As Michael Sandel points out, "To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth."²¹³ The failure of the Enlightenment ideal prompts MacIntyre to assert the tradition-bound nature of theories of justice. He explains,

Theories of justice and practical rationality confront us as aspects of traditions, allegiance to which requires the living out of some more or less systematically embodied form of human life, each with its own specific modes of social relationship, each with its own canons of interpretations and explanation in respect of the behaviour of others, each with its own evaluative practices.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 1.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* 6

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 179.

²¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 391.

The relevance of MacIntyre's work for Northern Ireland is clear. When we talk about justice as an essential part of a process of reconciliation it is imperative that we consider the divergent understandings of justice that are embodied in the multiple traditions that exist in Northern Ireland. At least three traditions are relevant to the discussion. Firstly, there is a Republican/Nationalist tradition that is made up of mainly Catholic members of the population. It is of course a 'broad church' so it is difficult to say that conceptions of justice will be shared by all those who might identify themselves with this group. This tradition has frequently understood itself, as having suffered discrimination and injustice, thus rights and the reassessment of historical injustices are important. Certain acts of violence may, for some, be interpreted as necessary and justified under certain conditions.²¹⁵ Secondly, we have the Unionist/ Loyalist tradition. Again this is an unfortunately wide-ranging category. But it can be said that members of this tradition typically see themselves as law-abiding citizens who were forced into a conflict for defensive purposes. Where certain members of the first tradition refused to recognize the authority of British justice, members of the Unionist/loyalist community found it confusing when they were imprisoned in one of her Majesty's prisons. As graffiti in loyalist areas proclaimed, "Their only crime was loyalty."²¹⁶ Finally there is a third tradition. This is the institutionalized form of justice embodied in the British legal system that is normative in Northern Ireland. This tradition is important as it plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of justice and is an essential ingredient in how the first two traditions approach the question of justice. The existence of all three traditions needs to be taken into consideration in any attempt to think through questions of justice in the Northern Irish context.

²¹⁵ Current events in Northern Ireland have thrown the existence of divergent understandings of justice into high relief. The murder of Robert McCartney in January 2005 brought about unprecedented protests from Catholic residents of the Short Strand area of Belfast against the IRA. McCartney's family, in particular his sisters, took the brave step to stand up to his killers and demanded that the IRA cease to intimidate witnesses, hand over evidence and admit to the part they played in the cover-up of this brutal killing. As political pressure mounted the IRA issued a statement saying that they had offered to shoot those responsible for the murder. Mr McCartney's family rejected the offer, insisting that they wanted justice. The offer to shoot those involved was typical of the IRA's approach to incidents of this sort. While this is an extreme example it does demonstrate the existence of two very different perceptions of justice within one community. A related debate surrounding the McCartney affair was Sinn Fein's refusal to encourage people to go to the police with any evidence or information they might have. In continuing to assert their protests against the Police Service of Northern Ireland they would only go so far as to recommend that witnesses go to their solicitors or the Police Ombudsman. While this move has damaged Sinn Fein it demonstrates that they remain committed to the Republican tradition of not recognising forms of justice, such as the police and the Court services that they feel are unrepresentative of their community. What many commentators have found interesting is the way people who had faithfully voted for Sinn Fein over many years and presumably supported their policies are rejecting the Republican definition of justice.

²¹⁶ See Bill Rolston, *Politics & Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (London: Associated University Press, 1991) and *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1992), 3; Neil Jarman, 'Troubled Images: The Iconography of Loyalism', *Critique of Anthropology* 12 (2): 133-65.

The importance of MacIntyre's contribution to the debate is made clear when we look at the way people approach the question of justice in Northern Ireland. Father Gerry O'Hanlon's essay 'Justice and Reconciliation' serves as a good example of one who hasn't taken MacIntyre into consideration.²¹⁷ O'Hanlon covers most of the key issues involved in an analysis of justice. His essay explores a biblical approach to justice and attempts to integrate this biblical conception with interpersonal and socio-political queries about justice. However, O'Hanlon conducts his discussion of justice without ever reflecting on the problem of how divided communities may hold incommensurable perceptions of justice. It is all very well to talk about the importance of justice and the need for victims to be given a sense that their experience of injustice has been addressed. Yet, O'Hanlon's approach suggests that he believes in a univocal form of justice. Thus his initial questions are not concerned with addressing divergent understandings or rationalities, but raising the apparent tensions that exist between a desire for reconciliation and the demands of justice. This is an important question, but it would seem to be crucial that we discuss the problem of tradition-bound justice before we begin to treat justice as an uncontested idea. Media and community-level demands for justice are replete with examples of strong calls for justice or the assertion that justice must be done without ever acknowledging the problem that one version of justice may be perceived as injustice to another community. The point of our argument is not to say that tradition-bound justice needs to be abandoned. The work of MacIntyre and Sandel amongst others shows that the Enlightenment ideal of a "view from nowhere" is impossible. Instead, at least three insights follow from MacIntyre's work. Firstly, as we have pointed out, there needs to be recognition that justice is not a singular or univocal concept. If this insight is taken seriously it will become an essential part of our reflection on justice. Secondly, and closely related to the first observation, is the realization that divided communities need to converse about justice, rather than simply highlight individual cases of injustice. Rather than beginning with a focus on addressing individual examples communities need to engage in an exchange of ideas about their perceptions of justice and, perhaps more importantly, their perceptions of injustice.

Judith Shklar in her important book *The Faces of Injustice* ponders the peculiarity of how our understanding of injustice is usually defined as the absence of an abstract form of justice.²¹⁸ Explaining the thesis of her book she notes,

The conventional pictorial representation of injustice shows a devil breaking the scales of justice, tearing the blindfold from her eyes, and beating her up. Injustice simply

²¹⁷ Gerry O'Hanlon, 'Justice and Reconciliation' in *Reconciliation in Religion and Society* ed. Michael Hurley, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994), 48-67.

²¹⁸ Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

destroys justice. Moreover, although almost all versions of the normal model begin with a brief sketch of injustice, it is clear that it is significant only as the sort of conduct that the rules of justice are designed to control or eliminate. Injustice is mentioned to tell us what must and can be avoided, and once this preliminary task has been quickly accomplished, one can turn with relief to the real business of ethics: justice. I propose to question this program because it does not treat injustice with the intellectual respect it deserves.²¹⁹

Shklar's argument alerts us to an aspect of the justice debate that is frequently overlooked. Namely that energy is typically poured into efforts to establish the nature of justice, rather than a conversation about injustice. A move towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland would profit if efforts were made to explore definitions of injustice, rather than simply assuming that injustice is an absence of an abstract understanding of justice. As Shklar points out injustice is not simply breaking rules, "Most injustices occur continuously within the framework of an established polity with an operative system of law...often it is the very people who are supposed to prevent injustice who, in their official capacity, commit the gravest acts of injustice, without much protest from the citizenry."²²⁰

Thirdly, it is important to note that MacIntyre's understanding of how our definitions of justice are bound by tradition does not mean that we ignore those voices that call for justice. Recognizing the complexity of defining justice does not result in an abdication of any attempt to establish a just society or address past injustices. However, MacIntyre's work should sound a note of caution to any attempts to approach reconciliation as something that simply requires the implementation of justice or to assume that justice is an unambiguous key to the process of reconciliation. We have already shown how the idea of justice takes root in people's minds in such a way that its importance becomes an unquestioned assumption. By way of MacIntyre we want to complicate that assumption and suggest that a singular focus on justice will not necessarily further the aims of reconciliation. Deeply divided societies may in fact feel the need to substitute other 'goods' for justice as they try to overcome the divisions that have perpetuated political conflict.

5. Ineffective and Inadequate: Justice as *suum cuique*

In modern liberal societies justice is understood primarily in a distributive sense. The idea or ideal of *suum cuique* - 'to each what is due,' is central to our conception of what justice is and what justice requires. The problem with this conception of justice, as we shall demonstrate, is

²¹⁹ Shklar, 17

²²⁰ Ibid. 19.

that distributive justice is inherently divisive and contributes nothing to the unification of divided societies. Thus we suggest that distributive justice is inimical to the aims of reconciliation. To argue this point successfully we are required to offer a brief summary of the development of understandings of justice from the classical conception, through the medieval version to today's "rights-based" understanding of justice.

Daniel Bell, Jr. tells the story of the evolution of justice to great effect in his various analyses of Liberation Theology and the way Latin American theologians construe justice.²²¹ Bell begins by pointing out that the classical understanding of *suum cuique* begins with Aristotle. For Aristotle justice was both general and particular. General justice was concerned with the good or end (*telos*) of society as a whole, particular justice addressed the good of individuals, making sure that they shared in the common good by receiving what was due to them. Particular justice was subdivided into distributive and corrective forms of justice. As we might imagine, distributive justice deals with the division of goods among individuals, corrective justice attempts to rectify any harms that may occur during the course of individual relations. Central to the classic conception of justice was the belief that the good had priority over the right. So when deciding what is just the classical conception depends on a prior determination of the good for humanity or society. An agreement on the nature of justice is only possible after the agreement of what constitutes the proper end or good for humanity.

Various technological and philosophical factors associated with the rise of modernity brought about a radical departure from the classical view. As Bell points out, "the classical view of justice carried the day for over a millennium, when developments associated with the birth of modernity and the ascendancy of liberal political philosophy gave rise to a host of competing theories of justice erected upon a very different vision of society."²²² Modernity brought about a shift from the classic sense of community as a matter of solidarity in a shared *telos* to a more fragmented understanding of community with a thinner conception of the good that brings people together. Liberalism conceives society as a mass of individuals, each with their own interests, ends and conceptions of what constitutes the good life. As Anthony Arblaster observes,

Liberal individualism involves seeing the individual as primary, as more 'real' or fundamental than human society and its institutions and structures. It also involves attaching a higher moral value to the individual than to society or to any collective or group. In this sense the individual comes before society in every sense. He is more real

²²¹ See Dan Bell Jr., 'Sacrifice and Suffering: Beyond Justice, Human Rights and Capitalism,' *Modern Theology* 18:3 (July 2002): 333-359; 'Justice for All: Confession and Sin,' *Liturgy* 20.1 (2005) 31-6.

²²² Daniel Bell Jr., 'Justice and Liberation,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 182-195.

than society...he is seen as existing before society temporally as well. Finally, his rights and demands come morally before those of society.²²³

While the classical conception prioritized the good over the right, liberalism inverts this logic and gives the right priority over the good. Thus the determination of justice is reached before any agreement about what might constitute the good or *telos* of society. As this evolution progresses justice becomes increasingly distributive. This in turn sees “right” become a matter of discrete “rights” which are located in sovereign individuals who possess them prior to any communal bonds. According to this scheme justice is understood as a police force that supervises the competition of rival interests as individuals compete for society’s resources in pursuit of private ends.

This modern vision of justice is clearly evident in three dominant philosophical accounts: deontological theories, utilitarian theories and contractarian theories. Deontological theories of the sort associated with the work of Immanuel Kant, stress the strict adherence to universally applicable rules and a respect for individuals. By stressing universal rules and emphasizing the place of individuals, deontological theories lead towards an ethic based on rights. Secondly, Utilitarian theories, of the sort associated with John Stuart Mill or Jeremy Bentham, understand justice as ‘the greatest good for the greatest number.’ However, given the absence of any agreement about what might constitute the ‘greatest good’, utilitarian theories tend to focus on individual rights. Thus individuals may pursue their own goods, with the sum of these individuals pursuing private goods amounting to the greatest good for the greatest number. Finally, contractarian theories, such as those associated with John Locke or more recently John Rawls, cast justice as the product of a social contract between individuals who surrender their individual rights to the state for the sake of mutual advantage and protection. Once again justice is construed in terms of rights. Individuals cooperate and agree on certain rules or procedures of justice to maximize their ability to pursue private ends.

The point of Bell’s argument is to draw attention to the divisive tendencies inherent in the prevailing western notion of justice. For our purposes Bell’s estimation of contemporary notions of justice further problematises the question of justice. As Bell points out,

Justice that is primarily distributive rather than unitive essentially becomes simply the regulator of conflict; it becomes a matter of maintaining the peace between the multiple private goods that compete for society’s resources...a tenuous balance of power that could at any moment issue in renewed conflict and violence...[Distributive justice] only perpetuates the violence and prolongs the conflict that afflicts people. This holds true even when it is successful in reasserting violated rights and re-establishing the volatile

²²³ Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 15.

equilibrium between competing claims on the fruits of society. Even when successful it does not pave the way for new relations among peoples, relations that might transcend the truce of mutual advantage. Instead it keeps humanity trapped in an agonistic logic where the mutual recognition of rights is constantly threatened by the pull of competing visions of the good.²²⁴

The prevailing notion of justice as a means of securing individual rights will inevitably fail to contribute positively to attempts to overcome societal divisions. As Bell reminds us, this conclusion does not stem from an overly pessimistic estimation of human beings, but from a consideration of the logic of how justice is understood in liberal western societies. Justice is not a neutral ‘force’ or reality but a concept set on a particular trajectory. This trajectory will result in a greater sense of division in already divided societies and a failure to meet the needs of those who are the victims in violent societies or societies living with the burden of internecine violence. Having highlighted the practical insufficiencies of justice we turn now to the question of its theological adequacy.

6. The Inversion of Justice

Justice as *suum cuique* offers an inadequate understanding of the Christian message of salvation. While it is safe to say that the theme of justice is central to both the Hebrew bible and the New Testament, the idea that God operates on the principles of ‘rendering what is due’ in his attitude and acts towards the world finds little support. As we shall argue there is strong sense of deeply ingrained human conceptions of justice being overturned in God’s economy of salvation.

Our concern in this chapter is an attempt to show God’s inversion of human categories of justice. Yet, this strain of the Christian message has been muted by a louder, more influential theology of the atonement that provided the theological justification for an overtly punitive strain of criminal justice. As Timothy Gorringer argues in his persuasive study, *God’s Just Vengeance* the satisfaction theory of the atonement exercised a potent ideological function when it came to the justification of retributive justice.²²⁵ In his important study, *Beyond Retribution*,²²⁶ Christopher D. Marshall begins by asking what it is that the Apostle Paul meant when he described the gospel as the revelation of the justice of God.²²⁷ Marshall, who places particular emphasis on restorative justice, argues that Paul’s understanding of justice has been obscured by the imposition of western legal categories, noting,

²²⁴ Daniel Bell Jr, *Liberation Theology at the End of History*, 127-128.

²²⁵ Timothy Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.)

²²⁶ Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2001.)

²²⁷ Romans 1:16-17.

Paul's interpreters have unwittingly brought to the text an essentially western concept of retributive justice based on a metaphysical law rather than a Hebraic concept of covenant justice based on relationship...this [western] concept of justice is based on the notion of an abstract moral order in which imbalances must be righted and each person receive precisely what is due.

Marshall's observation invokes what Alan Torrance describes as the 'myth of the scales' that is central to a great deal of thinking about justice in the west. That this 'myth' has exercised considerable influence over Christian understandings of atonement is clear. According to the 'myth of the scales' justice is understood as a metaphysical reality that quite literally must be kept in balance. The myth of the scales takes us to the heart of retributive justice. Where an offence occurs it must be balanced out with an appropriate punishment. Appropriate on this scheme means a punishment that will restore metaphysical equilibrium to the scales of justice. According to the logic of this metaphor justice and mercy are caught in perpetual tension. For showing mercy involves a disruption of the scales of justice; failing to restore balance is unthinkable. As Marshall points out,

On this scheme God is duty bound, by God's own righteous character, to punish wrongdoers and thus uphold the moral order God has created. God cannot overlook breaches of universal law, for then the universe would become a disordered and irrational place. While God is loving and merciful, God cannot simply forgive sin, for God's justice also demands satisfaction.²²⁸

One could even go beyond the thought expressed here and say that it not merely 'God's justice' that demands satisfaction, but an external reality of justice that cannot be violated, even by God. For obvious reasons Christ's crucifixion is essential to the logic of retribution. While the demands of justice prevent God from showing mercy to humanity, the cross allows God to satisfy justice by inflicting the penalty of sin on Jesus Christ. This version of events highlights a number of important aspects of the theology of justice in Christian tradition. Firstly, the way that justice and mercy are routinely placed in an agonistic framework, as if both impulses war against each other in God's seemingly schizophrenic personality. Secondly, at the very point where biblical testimony would seem to prioritize mercy, namely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the retributive tradition sees a perfect example of the triumph of justice and the opportunity to show mercy. Rendering what is due is clearly an inescapable part of the logic of justice on this scheme.

Yet Marshall and others seek to remove what they see as the obfuscating façade of this interpretation. For Marshall the retributive theory with its emphasis on satisfaction, the

²²⁸ Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 44.

balancing of an abstract, metaphysical justice and rendering what is due completely misses the emphatic subversion of the myth of the scales that is narrated by the New Testament. Marshall's point is to suggest that the gospel is indeed the revelation of the justice of God, but that this justice is a far cry from the justice of retribution. The *telos* of God's action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not an attempt to restore a metaphysical equilibrium but to overcome the breach in a relationship. A *telos*, as Marshall and others are quick to point out that cannot be served by retribution. Attempting to reconfigure our understanding of justice, Thomas Talbot asks, "What specifically does perfect justice require? What sort of thing would make up for, or cancel out, sin? If we accept the Christian view, according to which sin is anything that separates us from God and from each other, then the answer to our question is clear: Perfect justice requires reconciliation and restoration."²²⁹ We note that Marshall, Talbot and others do not jettison the language of justice. The opposite is in fact the case as Marshall is at pains to show just how significant a theme justice is in the pages of scripture. Their strategy is instead to endow justice with new meaning. To recover what they see as 'true justice' and thus challenge the satisfaction version that has held sway over the tradition for centuries.²³⁰

For the purposes of our argument it is sufficient to see that the justice of *suum cuique* is a theologically inadequate way to configure justice as it fails to capture accurately the way God subverts the norms of justice in the gospel and forces a semantic revision on the part of those who subscribe to the myth of the scales. Marshall captures the essence of this subversion of the normal canons of justice in the following observation,

True justice resides in the restoring of relationships and the recreation of *shalom*. It is only when the cycle of evil is broken and as far as possible, the consequences of criminal action remedied, consequences which blight the lives of both crime victims and their abusers – only then is true justice modeled by God, attained in measure.²³¹

Marshall et al leave us with the distinct impression that a program of restorative justice should replace the prevailing retributive paradigm. This prompts us to see the potential significance of restorative justice in a deeply divided society. Does restorative justice avoid the difficulties we have outlined?

²²⁹ Thomas Talbot, 'Punishment, Forgiveness and Divine Justice,' *Religious Studies* 29: 1993, 163.

²³⁰ Ibid. 150-160.

²³¹ Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 69.

7. Reconciliation and the Promise of Restorative Justice

Howard Zehr's *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* makes an important contribution to the debate on restorative justice. Zehr's passion for photography informs the conceptualities of his approach to crime and punishment and his central metaphor of 'changing lenses' is derived from his experiences as a photographer. Zehr's work is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, he offers a robust critique of our standard understanding and practice of criminal justice. Secondly after rejecting the prevailing model, he offers a compelling articulation of why the restorative justice paradigm is a potentially constructive and much more helpful way of approaching crime and punishment. To understand Zehr's approach to restorative justice and how it may serve our own interests we need first to turn to his critique of the standard approach taken to crime and punishment in criminal justice.

Central to Zehr's analysis of theories of criminal justice is his analysis of the way we conceptualise crime and the victims of crime. Zehr notes that once a crime is reported and the offence considered serious enough for prosecution, the question of the identity of the victim becomes unclear. Once the police, lawyers and the courts become involved the victim is no longer an individual who has suffered at the hands of another, but rather the victim of the crime is now understood as society in general and society, embodied in a court of law, will punish the offender. Zehr considers this shift problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, he notes that once this shift occurs the original victim is left out of the whole process. Unless he or she is required to give evidence in court they are now "peripheral to the justice process. In the legal process, victims represent footnotes to the crime."²³² Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the original offence is no longer understood as an act perpetrated against an individual human being with entirely negative consequences, but is now conceived as an offence against society or the state and more importantly as an insistence of law breaking. This move has problematic consequences for the offender's perception of the crime. "The idea that [an] offence is against society," notes Zehr, "rarely makes sense to offenders. It is too abstract and their own identification with society is too limited."²³³ Thirdly, it is clear that one of Zehr's key concerns is that offenders learn lessons of responsibility. Much of what we call crime can be seen, according to Zehr, as particularly potent examples of irresponsible behaviour, or what might be described as the culmination of a pattern or lifestyle of irresponsibility. For Zehr a crucial step in

²³² Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1990), 31.

²³³ *Ibid.* 50.

undoing the damage done by crime or at least preventing re-offending is for offenders to learn responsibility. This latter point prompts his trenchant criticism of our presumption that imprisonment is the only possible destination for those convicted of crime and worse still the unquestioned belief that prison allows the individual time to contemplate their actions and see where they went wrong.²³⁴ Zehr argues that these assumptions about prison and its potential for the rehabilitation of the offender are fictional. The prison experience of the average offender will afford little opportunity to learn about responsibility or alternatives to violence. It will in fact result in the opposite. Prisons are notoriously violent places where individuals learn how to survive in the harshest of social environments. Rather than learning responsible citizenship prisoners enter a situation where they have no decisions to make about the basic aspects of their life, eating, dressing, interacting with others and work. They are highly institutionalised and may learn only how to be devious. Zehr notes that another lesson learned in prison is that “manipulation is control. How else after all, can such few prison authorities manage so many prisoners, given such limited resources? In short the convict learns to con.”²³⁵ Or as Jude Dennis Challeen puts it:

We want prisoners to have self worth....
So we destroy their self worth...
We want them to be responsible...
So we take away all responsibilities...
We want them to be positive and constructive...
So we degrade them and make them useless...
We want them to be non-violent...
So we put them where there is violence all around.²³⁶

Zehr’s critique of the way criminal justice understands crime and how society seeks to deal with crime rests on his own understanding of crime and its ramifications. For Zehr crime is a violation, a desecration of who we are and of what we believe, it is an invasion of our private space, an attack upon our personhood. As we can see this conceptualisation of crime is a far cry from the broken laws of an abstract state.²³⁷ In an instance of crime the individual victim of crime experiences a loss of control and an overwhelming sense that someone else is in control of their life. For Zehr crime undermines two fundamental assumptions. Firstly, the assumption that

²³⁴ The prison as we know it today is based on a model influenced by monastic practices. One’s cell was, for monks, a place to be shut away from the world, thus providing opportunity for reflection. This corrective ideal was at the heart of shifts in penal policy and the architecture of prisons. Foucault - *Discipline and Punish*...

²³⁵ Zehr, 38.

²³⁶ Dennis Challeen, *Making it Right: A common Sense Approach to Criminal Justice* (Aberdeen, S. Dak.: Melius & Peterson, 1986). Quoted in Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 250.

²³⁷ Zehr, 24.

the world is “an orderly, predictable, understandable place.”²³⁸ Secondly, the assumption that we have personal autonomy, as Zehr points out “to be deprived unwillingly of personal power, to be involuntarily in the control of others, is intensely degrading and dehumanising.”²³⁹ Crime destroys our sense of autonomy. Zehr’s concern is to highlight the psychological ramifications of crime. Of course he acknowledges that victims of crime may suffer physical violations and be damaged physically in an instance of crime. However, he clearly believes that the essence of what makes crime so traumatic lies in the psychological experience of an unpredictable event taking control of one’s life, rather than broken bones or wounds. Crime raises difficult questions, questions that are similar to those asked by someone diagnosed with a life threatening illness: Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? For Zehr we fail victims if we do not attempt to answer these questions, for it is in these questions that victims assert their feelings about crime.

Conceptualising crime as law breaking will fail to address any of these questions because it fails to acknowledge the victim’s experience of crime. As Zehr notes, “Instead of concentrating on the actual harm done or on what the victim and offender have experienced, we focus on the act of breaking the law. The act of breaking a law, not the damage or conflict, defines the offence and triggers the justice process. Zehr’s account of criminal justice raises five assumptions that he believes we make when we think about crime and punishment: (1) crime is essentially law-breaking; (2) when a law is broken, justice involves establishing guilt; (3) so that just deserts can be meted out; (4) by inflicting pain; (5) through a conflict in which rules and intentions are placed above outcomes.”²⁴⁰ The drama of criminal justice is played out underneath the figure that epitomises justice; in the architecture of our courts justice is conceived as a blindfolded goddess balancing scales. Two foundational ideas are bound up in the statue of justice. Firstly, the metaphor of the scales, justice requires that we correct an imbalance and thus proportionality is given a metaphysical grounding. Secondly, the blindfolded goddess suggests an ideal of equality, justice is blind to external factors, only the hard facts of the case are required and everyone is treated equally. Yet, this naïve vision of equality is easily shattered when one thinks about the actual workings of justice. Two factors are worth considering. Firstly, external factors are not incidental to a crime, social, moral and personal factors are all part and parcel of a person’s participation in an offence. While the law may attempt to be abstract, crime is highly subjective. Secondly, society does not operate on the principle of equality. One

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid. 25.

²⁴⁰ Zehr, 81.

individual may have access to better legal advice and thus the abstract blindness of justice may further inequality rather than promote equality. Moreover while the courts may idealise the blind goddess it is clear that race, gender, class and creed all play a part in one's experience of justice. While the workings of justice may be abstract in the legal sense those who bring the workings of law to fruition are neither blind nor abstracted from the process.

The justice enshrined in the western legal system fails to make a positive contribution to the goal of reconciliation. However, a program of restorative justice would surely help achieve the goal of reconciliation. Marshall *et al* suggest that a concept of restorative justice is much closer to the biblical understanding of justice than the overly punitive strain that many believe the bible teaches. If we are serious about allowing the concept of reconciliation to inform our thinking then restorative justice rather than criminal justice should be the focus of our attempts to incorporate justice into our approach to reconciliation. Criminal justice divides and prevents the restoration of relationships. It is abstract and does not permit the victim or perpetrator to engage in any meaningful way. Restorative justice refuses to abstract the victim from the perpetrator and offers a potential way of addressing past events while simultaneously allowing a conversation to develop between victim and perpetrator.

Conclusion

In the end justice fails. As a means of dealing with the past and healing the deep divisions of the present, justice, as it is normally understood does not contribute positively to the project of reconciliation. Rather than putting the past to rest justice often makes societal divisions more permanent. By becoming fixated on justice as the means of making wrongs right we fail to see that injustice can never be undone, that innocent victims cannot be brought back by punishing perpetrators, that punishing one person does not restore society's equilibrium. The painful fractures of deeply divided societies are pushed further into the fabric of society with every attempt to pursue justice. As we ask these questions it is crucial that we be willing to move beyond mere rhetoric and the assumptions we rarely scrutinize. For example much is said and done on the part of victims who died in a conflict, yet no one can ever know what those victims would want said or done in their name. Secondly, while it is important that the wishes of victims are not ignored, it is equally important that others have a say about the direction of reconciliation, thus enabling reconciliation to remain linked to the past, while always looking to the future.

While we are arguing that justice, as it is normally understood, fails, it is important to face the difficult consequences of such a judgment. Unfortunately it is rarely admitted that reconciliation is a bitter and painful medicine that requires people to deny their most understandable emotions and reactions. While reconciliation is undoubtedly positive and brings with it good and necessary changes to society it frequently brings further pain before the promised peace. It requires that those with the greatest claim to what they understand as justice settle for something that is often less than what they expect or deserve.

After the Violence:

Forgiving, Forgetting and Facing the Past

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

Stephen Dedalus, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The past isn't dead and gone it isn't even past.

William Faulkner

Central to any process of reconciliation is the question of how we address the past. As tentative steps towards future co-existence are taken the challenge of the past is rarely far away. We have seen that the justice represented in our courts and enshrined in our legal systems too easily fails to address the past in such a way that the goal of reconciliation remains central to the process. Justice risks causing division rather than unity and adds permanence to social divisions. In this chapter we turn to an exploration of forgiveness as a possible way of addressing the past. To argue in favour of forgiveness requires that we face a number of conceptual difficulties that appear with the suggestion that forgiveness succeeds where justice fails. The following chapter will further analyse the question of what we mean by the past, assess the viability of forgetting rather than forgiving and attempt to offer a theological response to the question of forgiveness and agency.

Conceptualising “The Past”

Regardless of our personal histories we all have something in our past that we wish we could change. Yet by talking about a regrettable aspect ‘in’ our past we are actually signalling that this event or action is still very much in the present. If it were truly *past* would we still regret it? What would there *be* to regret? While our own complicated struggles with the past may prove disturbing they pale significantly when compared to the challenges faced by divided communities as they attempt to address the painful memories of their violent history. As we think about Northern Ireland’s bitter and divisive history we see that even talking about ‘the past’ is problematic, as at least three different versions of the past emerge.

Firstly, there is the past of a grieving widow or a son or daughter who lost a parent during the many years of internecine violence. This is a highly personalised sort of past, where the absence of an individual person leaves a particular space in the present lives of those left behind. Perhaps the most emotive of the pasts we face, it is the least influential at the political level. Given its highly personal nature it is a delicate and difficult past to address.²⁴¹

Secondly, we face the past of the political activist. This is the past that inspires the politics of the present and is often highly influential on contemporary political development. Marie Drumm, a Sinn Fein leader who was murdered in October 1976, gave voice to this version of the past when she wrote,

We will not take any steps backwards; our steps will be onward; for if we don't, the ghosts of the martyrs who died for you, for me, for this country will haunt us for eternity.²⁴²

While Drumm's statement could be dismissed as poetic political rhetoric it is important to recognise that this highly idealised vision of the past is (a) part and parcel of the way certain quarters of Northern Ireland's population actually view the past and (b) a highly effective way of influencing current political decision making.²⁴³ Similar to the way we use the putative future of our descendents as a means of encouraging peace or the responsible treatment of our natural environment, the 'ghosts' of the past are a potent force in the political imaginations of many. Despite the passing of time these 'volunteers' or 'martyrs' play an important role as political lodestars for contemporary activists. As Malachi O'Doherty observes,

The virtue that is most admired in Republican culture is the tenacity of one who never doubts and who deals with the doubts of others. The dead are honoured for keeping faith with a tradition and passing it on.²⁴⁴

Ignoring this version of the past risks the creation of historical somnambulists, dangerous creatures who stagger into the future never quite waking from the dreams and nightmares of the past. Yet addressing this version of the past presents a complex and highly political challenge. How does one deal with those

²⁴¹ See D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney and C. Thornton, eds. *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1999), for an imaginative attempt to memorialise the victims of 'The Troubles'.

²⁴² Quoted in Malachi O'Doherty *The Trouble with Guns* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1998), 141.

²⁴³ One only needs to look at Northern Ireland's political wall murals to see examples of the differing ways that both sides of the conflict have chosen to idealise Northern Ireland as either the lost province of ancient Ireland or a last bastion of loyalty to the British crown. See Bill Rolston, *Politics & Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (London: Associated University Press, 1991), *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1992) and Jeffery A. Sluka, 'The Writing's On the Wall,' *Critique of Anthropology* 16 (4): 1996, 381-394.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 142

whose status as martyrs may be hotly disputed by a different section of the population? In our present political situation how do we take the wishes of those in the past into consideration?²⁴⁵

Finally there is the past of the 'ordinary citizen'. This individual may not have lost a loved one or taken part in direct action for political purposes. However, their life has been irrevocably shaped by the years of conflict. Their self-understanding, the way they interpret themselves and their surroundings and their attitude towards 'the other' are directly related to the history of Northern Ireland's civil conflict. This person also has a past to face, a less particular past and with less political currency, but a past that requires attention. "The past is tenacious," writes Michael Ignatieff, "simply because it holds so many clues to the present."²⁴⁶ Citizens of Northern Ireland have lived through many years of bitter violence and they also seek to understand what has happened and how that past can inform their present.

By differentiating between these three versions of the past we are able to see the challenge that faces us as we think about the possibilities of reconciliation. It is not enough to talk simply about 'dealing with the past' as if the past could be described in a generic sense, as if everyone's experiences and perceptions of both past and present are somehow similar. It is rather the case that there are particular pasts that need to be dealt with.

Northern Ireland: Four complicating factors

Suggesting that intergroup forgiveness presents a significant opportunity to overcome social and political divisions in Northern Ireland disturbs a hornet's nest of political and emotional problems. As we have seen there is no single generic sense of 'the past' that we can easily come to terms with. Northern Ireland also poses a particularly challenging case when it comes to the practice of forgiveness. Even before we get to a discussion of the act of forgiveness at least four inter-related factors pose a significant obstacle to the easy progress of forgiveness: (1) the passing of time, (2) the economics of suffering, (3) the locus of blame and (4) early prisoner release.

²⁴⁵ Malachi O' Doherty offers an interesting example of the way contemporary politicians sometimes have to 'negotiate' with the ghosts of the past when he recalls a meeting where Sinn Fein's Gerry Kelly presented a lecture to the Bobby Sands Discussion group. "His lecture that night was like an exposition of holy writ. He took the famous lines from Bobby Sands the hunger striker: 'Everyone, whether republican or not, has his or her own part to play.' They are mundane words, the sort of thing a team coach would use, but Kelly derived from them the authority of the republican movement to work alongside constitutional nationalists in the SDLP. Spoken by Sands, the words sounded as if they were meant to extend the campaign to the weak and the weary...Kelly was using the words to explain something Sands could never, in his day, have envisaged. At the end of the hunger strikes, with Sands and nine other hunger strikers dead, the IRA prisoners described the SDLP as 'imperialist lickspittles' who had 'occupied their time trying to make political gain by attacking those who did genuinely endeavour to end the issue honourably.' But now, in 1995, Sands' words offered the key to explaining to republicans that working with the SDLP need not amount to a sell-out." *The Trouble With Guns*, 5.

²⁴⁶ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warriors Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windrus, 1998), 181.

- (1) The period known as the modern ‘Troubles’ runs from approximately 1969 to the late 1990s. The problem we face when attempting to address the many deaths and injuries that were a direct result of the ‘Troubles’ is that these events took place over a protracted period of time. Many of those deeply affected by violence in the 1970s may already be dead. Yet there may be those whose loved ones have faded from our collective memory who long for some sort of public recognition that what happened to their family was unjust and who perhaps want to offer forgiveness to those responsible. The passing of time can threaten the integrity of a process of forgiveness as there is a tendency to make general pronouncements, rather than attending to individual cases.
- (2) A second challenge posed by the situation in Northern Ireland is the practice of offering financial compensation to victims. Recent news reports claimed that as many as 1800 murders from the period of ‘The Troubles’ remain unsolved.²⁴⁷ If the practice of paying compensation to victims and the relatives of victims continues it may be the case that politicians and government agencies lack the political will to shoulder the financial burden of so many claims. A related issue concerns the nature of our attempts to deal with the past. How exactly does a country attempt to remember its victims? Should financial compensation play a part in this process? Does money muddy the waters of memory? Or is it unjust to commemorate the dead and not make a financial gesture to back up our commemoration?²⁴⁸ Restitution or compensation raises difficult questions.
- (3) A third problem highlights the complexity of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The dead and injured came from many sectors of society: paramilitaries, civilians, police officers, government officials, legal professionals and soldiers. A number of atrocities prompted public enquiries, the events of Bloody Sunday being a prime example. The problem this poses is the tendency of enquiries of this nature to deal solely with the institutional nature of the events. While it is important to bring illegal or unjust government policies to light it complicates the question of forgiveness. Can the family of one of the victims of

²⁴⁷ ‘NI Commission could heal wounds’ www.news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/northern_ireland/3499613.stm accessed 18/02/2004.

²⁴⁸ The issue of financial reparations was central to South Africa’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission. Antjie Krog, a journalist who reported on the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Company, observes, “The reparation and Rehabilitation Committee could make or break the Truth Commission. It will help little if the transgressors walk away with amnesty, but the victims, who bear the appalling costs of human rights abuses, experience no restitution. No gesture of recognition or compensation.” Krog’s moving narrative underlines the tension between the impulse to offer financial reparation and the limits of the new South Africa’s ability to offer financial compensation to so many victims. See *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1998) 218-221, 170-172, passim.

Bloody Sunday forgive the British Government of the late 1960s?²⁴⁹ Can that same government ask for forgiveness? What sort of forgiveness are we talking about?

- (4) Finally there are problems posed by aspects of the political agreement that offer the possibility of reconciliation. A number of concessions were granted to political parties as part of the process of the Good Friday agreement. Perhaps the most controversial was the early release of those designated political prisoners. This group represented the majority of Northern Ireland's prison population and included members of all the main paramilitary groups. Many people in Northern Ireland were outraged by this move, yet it would seem that political progress was impossible without this particular concession. Political prisoners have always had a highly significant place in both the lore and activities of the Republican movement, especially since the hunger strikes of the 1980s. Any concessions, such as early release, made to one side would of course have to be offered to the other. We will leave the controversy surrounding prisoner releases to one side. However, it is important to note that the manner of the releases makes the whole question of forgiveness and reconciliation even harder. These 'political prisoners' have been released from their sentences and by virtue of that fact have been informed, albeit implicitly, that their acts were political and perhaps served some purpose in bringing Northern Ireland towards cross-party political agreement. Yet for many their 'acts' involved the killing of other human beings. How do we address their forgiveness when (a) the state has suggested by its actions that they may have had an acceptable motive and (b) the releases mean we have lost the opportunity for victims to confront perpetrators in order to address their feelings, anger and perhaps offer forgiveness?

Demolishing Memory lane: Coping with the past by Forgetting

Given the complexity of facing the past and attempting to talk about forgiveness it is understandable that some have suggested that a form of corporate amnesia might be a more appropriate route to take rather than digging up the past and all the emotional and political

²⁴⁹ See P. E. Digeser's discussion of 'Forgiving the Government' in *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 168-190. Digeser makes some interesting observations, however, he restricts his analysis to what he describes as 'nearly just' governments. The reasons for a government being 'nearly just' are described as "the unavoidable presence of historical wrongs, procedural imperfections and tragic choices." Yet it is difficult to argue that this description covers some of the activities of the British government during the worst years of the Troubles. However, on the other hand, it would be inaccurate to argue that rather than 'nearly just' the British government was wholly unjust, Digeser's alternative. Time will tell us much about the activities of successive British governments in Northern Ireland. However, it seems safe to say that while the government attempted to remain just there were decisions and policies that were unequivocally immoral and this is much more serious than "tragic decisions" or "procedural imperfections".

turmoil that accompanies it. It is helpful to recall that our resurrection of some past event is not merely ‘dealing with the past’ it is in fact creating a new moment in time, even if the details of that new moment have a retrospective concern. History, at least the type with which we are concerned, is not a filing cabinet from which we can withdraw documents and simply return to their appropriate location without consequence. Those who suggest that we should simply draw a line under the past are attempting to avoid this experience.

Instead of engaging in the messy and distressing business of facing the past, forgetting may allow a smoother transition from violence and enmity to a peaceable future. Deliberate amnesia bypasses our scarred history and perhaps suggests a much more sophisticated, even mature, way of coping with the past. Today’s citizens may have ties to the past, but their chief concern should be the future, a future freed from the ghosts of past conflicts. A number of factors encourage the view that forgiving by way of forgetting may be a viable option for the reconciliation of estranged peoples.

One factor concerns the inexorable movement of time. Every day that passes sees us moving away from the past and taking important steps towards the future. While we may have a genetic connection with our ancestors as ‘moderns’ we are preoccupied with the forward reach of time. Advances in technology and economic growth create a discontinuity with what is past. Thus in the aftermath of protracted civil conflicts this discontinuity should encourage the dismantling of historical ties to one’s family or tribe, especially if those ties are blood stained. Decisions in contemporary political discourse prioritise the economic not the historical. Writing about his own country’s history of racism and slavery, the American writer, C Eric Lincoln, recommends that we cultivate a discontinuity with the past.

What was remains in fact what it was. But we can and we must separate ourselves from the psychological trauma of a history we did not commit and which does not require our endorsement for its justification. The justifications for the dehumanization and enslavement of the Africans were invented before the fact. They were institutionalized in the fact, and they died with the fact. Let them rest where they are. They belong to another time, another order, another civilisation. They do not belong to us, or to our children. We are beyond the past. It is irrevocable, and our chief loyalties must be to the future, to a new beginning.²⁵⁰

We do not share the concerns of our ancestors and our way of life has insured a loosening of the bonds that connect us to the past. Thus Lincoln calls for a “no-fault reconciliation” as the only possible way for America to overcome racial tensions. In an inversion of Faulkner, Lincoln assures us that the past is indeed dead and gone and very much in the past.

²⁵⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, *Coming Through the Fire: Surviving Race and Place in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 132-133.

Yet it is important to note that this version of forgiving amnesia is not simply the creation of a blank space, but is in fact a forgetting with content. As Hauerwas writes, “Money is but another name for loss of memory in modernity.”²⁵¹ Examining reactions to the questions of America’s past, Hauerwas detects a strong economic element in the desire to forget. Summarising the commentary of one of America’s most respected journalists, George Will, Hauerwas writes, “From Will’s perspective, the wonders of capitalism combined with liberal democracy mean that the battles of the past are just that, battles of the past that we are foolish to continue to fight. In a society that promises to make us all rich, all free, what is a little slavery between friends?”²⁵² Hauerwas admits that this may seem like an unfair characterisation. However, Will himself in a previous article demonstrates the accuracy of Hauerwas’ summary. Reviewing a Church-State decision made by the Supreme Court, Will observes,

The Founders, like Locke before them, wished to take and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe. They aimed to do so not by establishing religion, but by establishing a commercial Republic – capitalism. They aimed to submerge people’s turbulent energies in the self-interested pursuit of material comforts.²⁵³

Hauerwas concludes by pointing out that Will and others believe that “what worked for domesticating religion...will also work for ending the conflicts between the races in America.”²⁵⁴

So forgiveness by way of forgetting requires not so much the deletion of the pain of the past, but rather the substitution of the material comforts of the present and future as a means of covering the pain of history. Why risk the benefits of a liberal democracy, when it offers so much in the way of individual comforts? Norman Porter touches on similar issues in his analysis of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In a summary of various versions of reconciliation, Porter describes capitalism’s forgetting as assimilation. According to Porter the assimilation version of reconciliation argues,

As a consequence of the emergence of capitalism, modern societies are organised in terms of an economy based on growth and change. To function effectively such societies need a centralised homogeneous culture...accordingly sources of say, cultural difference between citizens must be deprived of any central role in public life.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal: Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History But Time has Been and Can Be Redeemed* (Belfast: ECONI, 1999), 21.

²⁵² Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 19.

²⁵³ George Will, ‘Scalia Missed Point But Made Right Argument on Separation of Religion,’ *Durham Morning Herald* (Sunday, April 22, 1990), Section F. I. Quoted in Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 19-20.

²⁵⁴ Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 20.

²⁵⁵ Norman Porter, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), 47.

The point of this shift away from shades of cultural difference or what Ignatieff describes as “the narcissism of minor difference,” is to pave the way for an efficient and prosperous society. Thus reconciliation involves “transcending the sources of our differences through assimilation; that Unionism, Nationalism or any other local variant of cultural and political identification should be exchanged for a kind of modern cosmopolitanism.”²⁵⁶ Porter’s response to this cosmopolitan version of reconciliation is to question both its inner logic and its claims to neutral superiority. He finds it implausible to suggest that the “best route to [common] ground lies in trying to transcend the obstacles that block its path.”²⁵⁷ Attempting to ignore cultural difference, especially in a situation of political conflict fails to make these differences any less real. Porter goes on to criticise the “unacknowledged bias” inherent in the idea that all our differences should be assimilated into one homogeneous culture. This culture, it is claimed, exists in a neutral detachment and has only our best interests at heart. However, Porter strongly objects to this tone, claiming that “we are not dealing with a strictly neutral ideal...[but one] with an unavoidable claim to superiority over local cultural variants.”²⁵⁸ Finally, Porter asserts that the link between homogeneity and cosmopolitanism is a fiction. While the ideal exists, it has yet to be realised. Citing the example of the United States of America, Porter points out that a particular brand of American patriotism is central to social cohesion. He continues, “The point is that inasmuch as homogeneous cultures exist within specific societies, they depend upon particular forms of patriotism or nationalism rather than upon cosmopolitanism.”²⁵⁹ The prevailing political culture in contemporary societies is not neutral, but typically reflects the dominant ethos. For Porter, assimilation means, “buying into” this ethos and “sacrificing the public ambitions of a minority culture is the price it exacts.”²⁶⁰

It should also be noted that the benefits of cosmopolitanism are typically construed in a financial sense. Yet, these benefits are unlikely to be made available to those who suffer most in deeply divided societies especially those who live along the fault lines of the conflict, who are typically the weakest financially, politically and whose homes and places of work have been marked by violence. The beneficiaries of a market driven reconciliation are not those who populate the interface areas of Belfast.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Porter, *The Elusive Quest*, 48.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Analysis of the distribution of the sources of violence has highlighted the disproportionately high levels of violence located within working class neighbourhoods. See Fay, M.T., Morrissey, M., Smyth, M., *Northern Ireland’s Troubles: The Human Costs* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

It is in the work of Michael Ignatieff that the idea that we can overlook the past finds its strongest challenge. In his analysis of protracted civil conflicts Ignatieff does not bring the solutions of an enlightened western democrat, but rather listens to the rationale of those who fight and suffer the consequences of political violence. In doing so Ignatieff describes a radical discontinuity between perceptions of history. As we have seen for many in the west history is irrelevant and can be cut off and prevented from encroaching on the present. However, for those actively involved or simply caught up in civil conflict, the divisions between past and present are not so stark. Those in places of conflict “are not living in a serial order of time,” writes Ignatieff, “but in a simultaneous one, in which the past and the present are continuous, an agglutinated mass of fantasies, distortions, myths and lies.”²⁶² So, in a widely reported example from the Balkans, journalists who were told about atrocities were uncertain whether the accounts they heard related to events that took place yesterday or in 1941 or 1841 or 1441. Ignatieff explains, “Simultaneity is the dream time of vengeance. Crimes can never be safely fixed in the historical past; they remain locked in the eternal present, crying out for blood.”²⁶³ Ignatieff does not find such reactions surprising and in fact goes on to challenge what he describes as “morally superficial” modern sensibilities. In our haste to dispense with the past and move on to a prosperous future we become superficial people. For Ignatieff, “Good people, morally substantive people, rightly want revenge.”²⁶⁴ While modern sensibilities condemn contemporary conflicts as immoral, Ignatieff is raising the possibility that far from being morally inferior, these people may in fact be the opposite: a group of people who care deeply about the past and are willing to kill or be killed for the sake of their people. While we need to take care to avoid idealising political violence there is a depth to the empathetic analysis carried out by individuals like Ignatieff that one does not find in the suggestion that we should forget the past for the sake of material comfort.²⁶⁵ As Hauerwas puts it, “Warriors, as well as peacemakers, will have their

²⁶² Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windrus, 1998), 186

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ There is an important link here between the way we treat the past and the potential for social cohesion. Modern western societies struggle to find a way to bind their populations together despite unprecedented levels of prosperity. A large amount of ink has been spilled in both newspapers and scholarly articles on the breakdown of community in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. Politicians frequently lament the way society has taken a ‘turn for the worse’ during the last one hundred years. It seems clear that Ignatieff’s reflection on the lack of moral substance of modern westerners and our willingness to cut our ties with the past are connected to the impoverished nature of contemporary social cohesion. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

fair share of cruel and sociopathological people...irrespective of how conflict may be misused by some, the conflict itself is morally worthy.”²⁶⁶

Porter, Ignatieff and Hauerwas all in their own way challenge the assumption that amnesia is the best route to forgiveness. What unites them is their assertion that there seems to be something immoral about either forgetting for the sake of financial reward or insisting that we should downplay our ethnic differences for the sake of a ‘neutral’ cosmopolitanism. Rather than dismissing those who take the past seriously as primitive they suggest that perhaps these are individuals of serious moral substance.

God, Memory and Redemption

Having explored one version of forgiveness as forgetting we now turn to a highly theological account of why forgetting may be a crucial aspect of any process of forgiveness. Miroslav Volf’s important work, *Exclusion & Embrace* attempts to come to terms with the problem of memory and forgiveness. In an important divergence from our previous versions of forgetting, Volf has a different perspective on the issue of forgetting. Rather than seeing forgetfulness as a means to forgiveness, Volf believes that forgetfulness completes the process of redemption. Once we have forgiven our enemies and made space for them, reconciliation will only be completed by the act of forgetting the evil suffered. In order to do justice to Volf’s account it is important that we acknowledge the caveat he places at the beginning of his account of forgetting.

[This is] a forgetting that assumes that the matters of truth and justice have been taken care of, that perpetrators have been named, judged and (hopefully) transformed, that victims are safe and their wounds healed, a forgetting that can therefore ultimately take place only together with the creation of all things new.²⁶⁷

While we are placing Volf’s version of forgetfulness alongside that of secular pragmatists such as Eric Lincoln and George Will, it is clear from this quotation that his conception is qualitatively different.

Entitling this section of his discussion ‘Paradise and the Affliction of Memory’ Volf predicates his argument on the assumption that the memory of suffering will prevent a victim from full participation in the joys of redemption in heaven. Thus Volf begins by questioning the normative view that “remembering is always good and nonremembering (*sic*) is always bad.”²⁶⁸ Developing his understanding of memory, Volf writes, “When it comes to the complex and

²⁶⁶ Hauerwas, *A Time to heal*, 15.

²⁶⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 131.

²⁶⁸ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 132.

ongoing relationship between friends, complete restitution of the past is not only impossible; its very thought is terrifying. Memory is much more complex than simple retention; its opposite is not oblivion.”²⁶⁹ The complex nature of memory requires us to see that memory and forgetting are intertwined. We remember some things and forget others, the important things are remembered the less important forgotten. Thus Volf asserts, “Forgetting is itself therefore not so much our enemy; rather, it is those who would rob us of the right to decide for ourselves what to forget and what to remember, as well as when to do so.”²⁷⁰

While Volf admits that there is a positive aspect to memory his views in this section are on the whole negative. This is illustrated when we note his reference to memory as a “shield”.²⁷¹ While a shield can be understood in a positive sense, it can protect against attack; when we place this metaphor within the context of Volf’s exclusion and embrace paradigm we see that a shield is wholly negative, for while it protects, it “inserts itself between me and the enemy; it shelters by redoubling the boundary between the self and the other.”²⁷² Thus memory becomes the final barrier to reconciliation. Yet Volf’s use of the metaphor of the shield as a way of characterising memory raises questions about his conception of memory. By describing memory as a shield he makes memory something external; emotional armour that can be picked up or put down. However is this an accurate characterisation? Is memory best described in externalist terminology? Is memory not better understood in an internal sense? Rather than something we can pick up or put down surely memory is part and parcel of the very fabric of our identity. We recall the popular metaphor of the ‘scar’ of memory. Describing negative memories as a scar rests on the idea that scar tissue becomes part of us; it changes us and can even be used as a unique mark of identification. Only invasive medical procedures can cover a scar, yet even those procedures usually leave a scar elsewhere on one’s body. The purpose here is not to begin a competition to develop the most profound metaphors for memory. However, Volf’s decision to describe memory as a shield alerts us to the way he understands memory, in particular the externalist perspective he brings to the debate. In an extension of his metaphor Volf writes, “Though we would be unwise to drop the shield of memory from our hands before the dawn of the new age, we may be able to move it cautiously to the side by opening our arms to embrace the other, even the former enemy.”²⁷³ This quote makes clear that Volf views negative memory as a potential barrier, yet it also shows that memory is something we can “move to the side.”

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid. 132, 139.

²⁷² Ibid. 132.

²⁷³ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 139.

In an attempt to summarise his argument Volf offers a densely packed paragraph that is worth quoting in full,

Since no final redemption is possible without redemption of the past, and since every attempt to redeem the past through reflection must fail because no theodicy can succeed, the final redemption is unthinkable without a certain kind of forgetting. Put starkly, the alternative is: either heaven or the memory of horror. Either heaven will have no monuments to keep the memory of the horrors alive, or it will be closer to hell than we would like to think. For if heaven cannot rectify Auschwitz, then the memory of Auschwitz must undo the experience of heaven. Redemption will be complete only when the creation of ‘all things new’ is coupled with the passage of ‘all things old’ into the double *nihil* of nonexistence and nonremembrance.²⁷⁴

This quote contains a great deal and an exposition of it allows a greater understanding of Volf’s argument. We note first the mention of the failure of theodicy. This failure occurs on two fronts for Volf. On the one hand attempts to make sense of suffering will fail. Evil, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, remains a “permanent aporia.”²⁷⁵ For Volf there can be no eschatological rationalisation of suffering, as this would lend justification to evil. On the other hand to say that evil can remain a “non-sense” is equally disturbing, “In the glory of God’s new world – especially there – the ‘non-sense’ of past suffering will be insufferable – as insufferable as would be its sense.”²⁷⁶ If neither sense nor non-sense are acceptable and theodicy finally fails, Volf concludes that the only way to ‘solve’ the problem of past suffering is “the nontheoretical act of nonremembering.”²⁷⁷ We see now why Volf introduces the stark either/or choice when it comes to the question of memory and redemption. Heaven cannot memorialise suffering lest redemption be undone by the memories of suffering. If redemption is to be complete then rather than rationalising, i.e. making sense of, suffering, redemption brings about the final forgetting of the pain of the past. Put bluntly, the nightmare of the past presents an insurmountable obstacle to redemption; the only possible ‘solution’ is to forget that past.

There are a number of difficulties with Volf’s logic at this point in his argument. Firstly, the way he presents the discussion in the format of a stark either/or makes it very difficult for him to resolve the issue in any other way. Methodologically he has painted himself into a corner. However, more importantly, some of his assumptions are highly questionable, for example his discussion of the ‘sense’ and ‘non-sense’ of suffering. While we agree with Volf’s rejection of crass and insensitive attempts to rationalise suffering, there is surely another way, aside from

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 135-36

²⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology.’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (3 1985), 644.

²⁷⁶ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 134.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

theodicy, to understand suffering. The approach of theodicy is typically an attempt to reason with suffering, to find some way of making sense, as Volf says, of what has happened. However, despite Volf's aversion to the term, there is surely a need to retain language that speaks to the 'non-sense' of suffering, the tragically surd reality of suffering, where there is no point or wider purpose served by the suffering and death of an individual. An energetic search for meaning in suffering can sometimes obscure the pointlessness of an incidence of suffering. Talk of the non-sense of suffering does not necessarily devalue the life of that individual. It may well allow us to grieve and galvanise attempts to prevent other 'pointless deaths'.

However, from the perspective of Christian theology it seems that Volf's either/or is not the only option. One does not have to search for wider meaning to recover from the 'non-sense' of suffering. If we reject Volf's assertion that redemption is undone by suffering, unless suffering is forgotten, we can say that redemption is that which makes the memory of suffering potentially bearable. Not by erasing our memory of suffering or by offering a way for us to understand the 'sense' in suffering, but simply by redeeming it. Saving it from both the horrendous mathematics of 'God's wider purposes' and the frightening nihilism of a pointless suffering.

Hauerwas offers a second theological objection to Volf's argument by questioning an aspect of his doctrine of God. Aside from concerns about the impact Volf's suggestions about forgetting may have for people, Hauerwas detects problematic implications for the life of God. According to Hauerwas, Volf's belief that God forgets sin seems to call into question a central aspect of how God's relationship to the created order is normally understood. Rather than forgetting, Hauerwas suggests, "God remembers because if God does not remember then God is not the timeful God we find in Israel and the cross and the resurrection of Christ. That God, the God of Israel, the God that raised Jesus from the dead, is the God that makes time, makes memory, possible."²⁷⁸ By suggesting that God forgets, Hauerwas believes Volf's argument relies on a 'false eternity' where God's eternity is the "simple contradiction of time."²⁷⁹ Hauerwas employs an insight from Robert Jenson to develop his point,

What [God] transcends is any limit imposed on what can be by what he has been, except the limit of his personal self-identity, and any limit imposed on his action by the availability of time. The true God is not eternal because he lacks time, but because he takes time. The eternity of Israel's God is his faithfulness. He is not eternal in that he secures himself from time, but in that he is faithful to his commitments within time."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 24.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 217-218. Quoted in Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 24.

By stressing the timefulness of God Hauerwas is attempting to draw a close connection between God, time and memory. Redemption includes, for Hauerwas, the redemption of time and therefore the redemption of memories embedded in time past. Where Volf sees no way for future joy while the memory of suffering remains, Hauerwas sees God's redemption of time in Christ, time future and time past. Christian forgiveness, according to Hauerwas, "is not that our sins no longer matter, but that our sins are now made part of an economy of salvation for the constitution of a new community otherwise impossible."²⁸¹ Therefore forgiveness cannot be understood as an isolated event whereby an individual has his or her past 'dealt with'. For Hauerwas God's forgiveness of humanity is a community building reality where forgiven individuals meet, not with blank spaces in their personal narrative, but as forgiven and redeemed members of timeful community. While the past may not be gone in the sense of forgetfulness, the past has been redeemed which for Hauerwas is a much more significant reality than the form of amnesia suggested by Volf. The 'way forward' for Hauerwas is "not forgetting, but having our memories transformed through the discovery that our sins cannot determine God's will for our lives."

In summing up his argument Volf makes one final connection between divine forgetting and human forgetting.

How can God forget the wrongdoings of human beings? Because at the centre of God's all embracing memory there is a paradoxical monument to forgetting. It is the cross of Christ. God forgets humanity's sins in the same way God forgives humanity's sins: by taking sins away from humanity and placing them upon God's self. How will human beings be able to forget the horrors of history? Because at the centre of the new world that will emerge after 'the first things have passed away' there will stand a throne, and on the throne there will sit the Lamb who has 'taken away the sin of the world' and erased their memory.²⁸²

There are two aspects of this quotation that are troubling. Firstly, while Volf is right to concentrate some of his reflection on forgiveness on the crucifixion of Jesus, it seems strange to speak of the cross as a monument to divine forgetting. If we speak of any 'monument' in heaven surely we have to focus our attention on the risen Christ, rather than the cross. If this is the case then the locus of any memorial will be the scars on Jesus hands and side, rather than the cross. These scars were clearly evident in his resurrection appearances and one sees in them a strong means of connecting redemption and the memory of suffering. However, the memory clearly does not prevent Jesus from bringing about a full redemption for the world. A second and related

²⁸¹ Hauerwas, *A Time to Heal*, 25.

²⁸² Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 140.

problem with Volf's quote is his focus on the Lamb who has taken away the sin of the world. Elsewhere in his vision John describes the lamb "looking as if it had been slain,"²⁸³ an observation that Volf conveniently overlooks! Christian theology doesn't tend to recommend forgetfulness, but rather promises forgiveness and redemption, a redemption that somehow deals with the messy business of memory. Many would claim that they have experienced redemption in this life, a form of redemption that balances forgiveness and memory. One can only assume therefore that God's final redemption and solution to the problem of memory bears some resemblance to what we currently understand of redemption.

The Sunflower: Forgiveness and the Problem of Agency

Who forgives? Another difficulty that an emphasis on forgiveness as part of any process of reconciliation raises is the question of agency. Deeply divided societies, like Northern Ireland, face a challenge on two fronts. On the one hand they are involved in a struggle to work towards reconciliation for contemporary and present generations, on the other hand they attempt to face their divided past and come to terms with the bloodshed that has been part and parcel of life. As we talk about forgiveness and even recommend that people need to forgive and move beyond destructive patterns of enmity and vengeance we realise that the difficulty of forgiving events in the past is compounded by the question of agency. The most obvious victims of civil conflict are dead, their deaths occurring as a result of political violence, who forgives on the part of those who are dead? Who forgives perpetrators who are dead, dying before they could face up to their crimes? This difficulty is heightened by the importance we have placed on the personal aspect of forgiveness. As we have seen the most 'successful' moves towards forgiveness occur as part of a process whereby those intimately involved in the events that require forgiveness are involved in the forgiving. Elected officials or community leaders may attempt to offer or seek forgiveness on the part of their community, however, this short-circuits the process of forgiveness and disallows individuals the opportunity to meet face to face and move towards the place we are calling reconciliation. By shifting the centre of gravity away from a general forgiveness to individuals we make the challenge of agency even more acute.

The classic study of the problem of forgiveness and agency comes not from a Psychologist or Theologian, but from the pen of a concentration camp survivor. In his celebrated work *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal tells the story of his encounter with a dying SS soldier

²⁸³ Revelation 5:6

who seeks forgiveness for his involvement in the murder of Jews.²⁸⁴ Wiesenthal's story is a powerful and profoundly challenging reflection on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness.

As part of their daily work Wiesenthal and his fellow prisoners are helping with waste disposal at a local hospital. Not long after he arrives a nurse calls him to one side and asks if he is a Jew, when Wiesenthal confirms he is Jewish she leads him into the hospital and into a private room. Inside this room lies a dying man covered in bandages. The injured man is a 21-year-old SS soldier who had taken part in the murder of a large number of Jews. The young soldier is haunted by the memory of a particular family who were among the murdered Jews. In a town called Dnepropetrovsk the SS had forced nearly two hundred Jews, including many women and children, into a building into which they had placed drums of gasoline. After the doors of the building were locked the SS men were ordered to throw grenades into the building and stand with their guns ready to shoot anyone who tried to escape. As the fire began to consume the building and the people cried for help the young soldier noticed a man with a small child in his arms standing with a woman by a window. With one hand gripping the child and the other covering the eyes of the child the man and woman jumped into the street below only to be shot dead by the SS soldiers who surrounded the building.

As the young man tells Wiesenthal his life story and recounts in detail the events he took part in he moves towards the reason for their conversation. Wiesenthal narrates the soldier's testimony in painful detail, "I cannot die...without coming clean. This must be my confession."²⁸⁵ Aware of the importance of what the young man is telling him Wiesenthal notes, "In his confession there was true repentance...the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance." As their meeting draws to a close the young man makes his plea, "I know that what I have told you is terrible...I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him...without your answer I cannot die in peace. After reflecting on what has taken place during the hours that have passed, Wiesenthal makes his decision, "At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room."²⁸⁶ We learn that the young soldier dies the next day and witness the genesis of a question that haunts Wiesenthal for the rest of his life, "Did I do the right thing?" The final line of *The Sunflower* asks simply that readers change places with Wiesenthal

²⁸⁴ Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976.) The title comes from Wiesenthal's observation during the book that the graves of SS soldiers were marked with sunflowers. This is contrasted with Wiesenthal's experiences of the brutality of the concentration camps and the utter disregard for the dignity of Jewish prisoners who were routinely executed and 'buried' in mass graves. At one point Wiesenthal observes of the young man "Did he know already that he would get a sunflower when he was buried. The murderer would own something even when he was dead...And I?" 51.

²⁸⁵ Wiesenthal, *Sunflower*, 52.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 54.

and ask themselves “What would I have done?”²⁸⁷ It is hard not to see the morality of Wiesenthal’s reaction, George Steiner’s comments are instructive

Only those who actually passed through hell, survived Auschwitz after seeing their parents flogged to death or gassed before their own eyes (like Elie Wiesel), or who found their own kin amid the corpses from which they had to extract gold teeth, a daily encounter at Treblinka, can have the right to forgive. We do not have that right. This is an important point, often misunderstood. What the Nazis did in the camps and torture chambers is wholly unforgivable, it is a brand on the image of man and will last; each of us has been diminished by the enactment of a potential sub-humanity latent in all of us. But if one did not undergo the thing, hate or forgiveness are spiritual games – serious games no doubt – but games none the less. The best now, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable.²⁸⁸

The strengths of Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* as a work of literature are manifold. At first it strikes us as a intensely moving piece of autobiography; Wiesenthal does not forget the emotional turmoil of life in a death-camp and his ability to simultaneously convey fear and moral outrage makes *The Sunflower* a disconcerting read. Yet, surely the most important aspect of the story is the way Wiesenthal gets to the heart of the question of forgiveness. By focusing his attention on the questions of agency and scope Wiesenthal’s work is required reading for anyone involved in reflecting on the nature and practice of forgiveness. Dostoyevsky offers an equally challenging reflection on forgiveness and agency in his *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov narrates the story of a General who has his dogs kill a peasant boy as punishment for injuring the paw of his favourite dog. Ivan is offended by the suggestion that anyone other than the boy could forgive the General. Reflecting on whether the boy’s mother could forgive on behalf of her dead child Ivan comments,

I don’t want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs. She dare not forgive him. Let her forgive him for herself, if she will. Let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother’s heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him.²⁸⁹

In an attempt to take Wiesenthal and Karamazov seriously we will first isolate the key challenges and then move on to offer an analysis and possible response to the dilemma of *The Sunflower*.

²⁸⁷ Later editions of the book included a symposium on forgiveness where well-known figures did exactly what Wiesenthal asked by offering their own reactions to the events described and responding to the dilemma of the sunflower.

²⁸⁸ George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 163.

²⁸⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Signet Classics, 1957), 223-226.

In thinking through the issues raised by *The Sunflower* Alan Torrance adds an insight gleaned from Plato's *Phaedo*. The question of agency in forgiveness clearly concerned Plato; the *Phaedo* offers a potential solution. A murderer who has killed in a fit of passion and yet lived a life of repentance thereafter will be cast into Tartarus, one of the four rivers of the underworld. After a year has passed those in Tartarus will be swept along to a point near the Acherusian Lake from where they call to those whom they have slain or spitefully used, begging and beseeching them that they would suffer them to come forth into the lake and give them a hearing. If their beseeching is successful they come forth into the lake and find an end to their trouble, if not they are swept into the river again. Their woes will continue until they prevail upon those whom they have injured, for such is the penalty appointed by their judges. The point of turning to Plato is to note that he clearly believes that only the victim can forgive the perpetrator of an offence and that an offence retains the character of offence for eternity or until such times as the victim allows the perpetrator to come forth.

Informed by Plato the sunflower dilemma is thrown into high relief. Put succinctly, "the implication of *The Sunflower*," writes Torrance, "is not only that the right to forgive belongs exclusively to the one against whom the offence has been perpetrated but that any forgiveness offered by the victim can only relate to that element of the offence of which he or she was the victim."²⁹⁰ This latter part of Torrance's summary of the dilemma becomes particularly problematic when we think about what constitutes a 'victim'. It soon becomes evident that it is very difficult to say definitively who the victim of an offence actually is. An offence committed against a single individual has repercussions for more people than one individual. For example if a woman is assaulted the assault affects her parents, siblings, friends and colleagues. It could even be argued that the assault affects all of the women in the locality, robbing them of a sense of security. Beyond this level we could say that the entire community is affected as women feel unsafe and men feel under suspicion. Because of this one assault that at first seems to have only one victim numerous relationships, important social ties and community relations are negatively affected. Reflecting on the question of how we describe victims forces the realisation that if there can be no response to the questions raised by Wiesenthal's dilemma then forgiveness of any sort is actually impossible. Even if the 'primary victim', in the case above the assaulted woman, forgives the offender there remains a large number of people who might equally claim that they have suffered due to the offence. While some of these claims are stronger than others the point remains that the 'ripple effect' of suffering/crime creates a surplus of victims. Each of

²⁹⁰ Torrance, 309-310

these individuals has the right to forgive that element of the offence that relates to their particular experience of the offence, yet to forgive beyond the boundaries of their own particular experience of the offence would be to violate the rights of another and thus compound the original offence. Thus the parents of the victim of an assault who forgive on her behalf “commit a further sin against her personhood and dignity.”²⁹¹ However, if even one of these ‘victims’ withholds their forgiveness we are presented with a situation whereby it cannot be said that the perpetrator is forgiven. “Do we not have to acknowledge,” asks Torrance, “a further principle of solidarity which suggests that the forgiveness of every victim requires to be seen as contingent upon the forgiveness of the perpetrator by every other victim?”²⁹² After unpacking the implications of Wiesenthal’s story Torrance teases out the social implications by noting

“Unless the ‘Sunflower dilemma’ can be addressed, we can never be in a position to forgive the Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust, nor those associated with the Rwandan atrocities...none of us has the right to forgive or adopt an attitude of forgiveness towards anyone for any crime which is not perpetrated exclusively against me and the scope of which is limited exclusively to me.”²⁹³

However, this is only one aspect of the dilemma. A second problem occurs when we see the theological implications of the ‘sunflower dilemma,’ for along with the question of forgiveness at the social level it poses an important question concerning God’s ability to forgive sin. According to the logic of the argument one wonders how it is possible for God to offer forgiveness for sins that contain an element of sin against others. Upon reflection we see that aside from sins associated with blasphemy and idolatry it is difficult to see how the majority of what we classify as ‘sin’ does not contain an element of sin against others. If we stay faithful to the insights about agency we have gleaned from Plato and Wiesenthal we are forced to ask how God can forgive sin or on what grounds God forgives human sin? Can God’s forgiveness extend beyond that aspect of the sin that is an offence against God and God alone?

In an attempt to offer a theological solution Torrance steers towards familiar territory as we find him making use of aspects of the theological approach we explored in chapter two. He constructs an argument that contains the following steps. Firstly, he reminds us that the Christian tradition affirms that “God became incarnate as a marginalized Jew and vicariously in an act of solidarity with humanity took to himself the suffering of the sinned against – the brutality, the physical and psychological (even sexual) abuse, the sadism, the torture, the humiliation and the

²⁹¹ Ibid. 310.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

inconceivable pain associated with death by crucifixion.”²⁹⁴ Jesus Christ, as the One on behalf of the many is in perfect solidarity with the sinned against. This implies that “sin against a fellow human is not simply sin against that human but additionally and in parallel sin against God...the sin against the victim requires to be seen, first, as sin against God conceived as one and the same object as the victim. Second, it requires to be seen as the same sin against both.”²⁹⁵ The solidarity that exists between humanity and Jesus Christ works in both directions, as we are, Christologically and pneumatologically conceived, *en Christo* and he is in us. Thus it is in the vicarious humanity of Christ that we see a way around the twin dilemmas of agency and scope.

Torrance goes on to point out that it is in the vicarious humanity of Christ that Christian theology finds a way beyond mere exhortations to forgive based on the example of God, what Torrance calls an ethic of forgiveness and what we have described as an example of the ‘ethics of self-improvement’. By configuring an understanding of forgiveness based on the vicarious humanity of Christ and his solidarity with humanity we are able to speak of an ontology of forgiveness.

In God crucified we have the One who alone is entitled to forgive on behalf of the victim because the victim is ‘in him’, and he ‘in the victim’. But not only does he, in forgiving, do what he is entitled to do, he does it as the one who does not dishonour the victim in this act, but upholds the eternal dignity of the victim not least those who are dead. Indeed, for reasons, which should hopefully be clear, God’s forgiveness is not only compatible with upholding and affirming the dignity of the victim, it is intrinsic to it.²⁹⁶

By drawing on the resources of the vicarious humanity of Christ, Torrance suggests a way round a number of the challenges presented by the ‘sunflower dilemma’. Firstly, he allows us to see one possible way of talking about forgiveness when the victim is dead; secondly he demonstrates the possibility of a theology of forgiveness that sees God making forgiveness available on horizontal and vertical levels without violating the rights or dignity of the individual victim. While the theological lines of Torrance’s argument are neatly drawn it is important to note that this is a provocative and potentially controversial suggestion. If we turn again to *The Sunflower* with this perspective in mind we could say that had Simon Wiesenthal known of the vicarious humanity of Christ he could have approached the situation in a different manner. Of course this is not to make a judgement on Wiesenthal’s behaviour, but rather to push

²⁹⁴ Torrance, 311. Torrance points out that it has been suggested that there was customary sexual abuse of prisoners prior to crucifixion. The New Testament’s description of Jesus being ‘stripped naked’ alludes to what historians believe to have been a common practice. See David Tombs, ‘Crucifixion, State Terror and Sexual Abuse,’ *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 53, (Autumn, 1999), 89-108.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. 312.

the logic of Torrance's argument. It is in fact a response to Wiesenthal's despairing challenge "Change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, 'What would I have done?'"²⁹⁷ Rather than leaving the young SS soldier in the understandable silence of judgement, Wiesenthal could have said,

Regardless of my Jewish ethnicity and the potential ethnic ties I have with the people you killed, I cannot forgive you for what you have done. However, another Jew can. A marginalised Jew who is not only inextricably tied to other Jews, but to humanity as a whole; Jesus Christ can forgive you for your sins, for when you murdered innocent Jews you murdered him. It is Jesus Christ who so identifies with humanity that he can say 'In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me'. He alone can heal you from the nightmarish memories that haunt you and he alone can uphold the dignity of those you cruelly killed. My ties to other people are an accident of birth; his ties are fundamental and an intrinsic part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

Obviously it is problematic and potentially controversial to place an overtly Christian version of forgiveness in the mouth of a Jewish victim of Nazi death camps. However, this version of Wiesenthal's response is merely the logical outworking of Christ's vicarious humanity. It is important to recognise that Wiesenthal's symposium poses the question in a context completely abstracted from the horror of Wiesenthal's original situation. Any answer we give to his dilemma is not so much what we *would* have done but what we *hope* we might have the courage to do. Interestingly these words are not unlike those of another Jew asked to respond to Wiesenthal's dilemma. With the benefit of hindsight Milton Konvitz suggests the following as a possible response to the dying SS man,

I cannot speak for your victims. I cannot speak for the Jewish people. I cannot speak for God. But I am a man. I am a Jew. I am commanded, in my personal relations, to act with compassion. I have been taught that if I expect the Compassionate One to have compassion on me, I must act with compassion toward others. I can share with you in this hour of your deep suffering, what I myself have been taught by my teachers: "Better is one hour of repentance in this world than the whole life of the world to come" (Avot, IV, 17). "Great is repentance, for it renders asunder the decree imposed upon a man" (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana, 17b). It is not in my power to render to you the help that could come only from your victims, or from the whole of the people of Israel, or from God. But insofar as you reach out to me, and insofar as I can separate myself from my fellow Jews, for whom I cannot speak, my broken heart pleads for your broken heart: Go in peace.²⁹⁸

The Christological response we have offered is not unlike the thrust of Konvitz's suggestion. It is important to note that common to both responses is a denial of the obligation for the individual to offer his particular forgiveness. The confessor is pointed to the goodness of God

²⁹⁷ Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 98.

²⁹⁸ Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 160. Quoted in Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 287.

and the ability of God to forgive and deal with the man's sin. This is more constructive than withholding forgiveness because it seems inappropriate or immoral. The violence that has brought about the need for forgiveness has had a wider impact on the two ethnic groups involved and as George Steiner has observed on humanity as a whole. While we agree that it is problematic for an individual to forgive on the part of another there is still something very important about that individual choosing to forsake vengeance and pursue forgiveness. In the very least this allows for the possibility of a move towards reconciliation between the two sides of a conflict and offers hope to those who survive. Although Wiesenthal's dilemma is highly instructive for any serious consideration of forgiveness its strength is found in the extremity of the situation. We know from the story that the soldier dies the next day and thus his forgiveness was centred on a deathbed experience. Later in life Wiesenthal manages to track down the soldier's mother and finds that she knows nothing of the nature of the atrocities her son took part in. Wiesenthal does not shatter her perceptions and leaves her with good memories of her son. In both these cases there is no 'life' for the individuals beyond their brief meetings. The soldier dies and Wiesenthal never sees the soldier's mother again. Yet in situations of violent conflict where individuals live in close proximity there is a 'life' beyond the moment of confession and forgiveness, both at an individual and group level. Wiesenthal's story tends to focus our minds on a momentary instance of forgiveness, perhaps in its most extreme manifestation as a deathbed confession. The problem with this momentary understanding of forgiveness is its failure to set forgiveness within its proper context as a journey towards the recovery of positive social relations, a journey that may take many years, or even a lifetime. "The goal of forgiveness," writes Jon Sobrino, "is not merely the alleviation of guilt but is the goal of all love – positive reconciliation."²⁹⁹

Embodied Forgiveness

L. Gregory Jones qualifies the concept of forgiveness by insisting that we move beyond an understanding of forgiveness based on a one off statement of sorrow or a fixed moment of contrition. For Jones forgiveness must be embodied; in other words, forgiveness is not spoken, but lived. This requires us to see forgiveness as a way of life rather than an isolated point in time. Jones' insistence on "embodied forgiveness" is in part informed by his belief that forgiveness is a craft, a lifestyle that he frequently associates with woodworking.³⁰⁰ The craft of

²⁹⁹ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 63-64.

³⁰⁰ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995). See also Jones' reading and analysis of Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe* in 'The Craft of Forgiveness,' *Theology Today*

forgiveness requires a process of life-long learning, a combination of becoming an apprentice under the tutelage of those who have become exemplars of forgiveness and an ability to understand one's own particular place and circumstances.

Methodologically Jones combines a Barthian insistence on the priority of theology with an Aristotelian-Thomist emphasis on the continuities of habits, crafts and traditions. The Aristotelian-Thomist emphasis allows Jones to stress that forgiveness be “understood as a human practice, one that is best understood as a craft within an ongoing tradition.”³⁰¹ Jones notes that it is interest in Aristotelian moral philosophy and its attendant themes of virtue, character and emotion that has brought about a renewed interest in the philosophical significance of forgiveness.³⁰² Yet philosophical treatments of forgiveness typically focus on forgiveness as an act and “pay only minimal attention to notions of forgiveness as a specific practice or trait of character.”³⁰³ Jones points out,

From the Christian perspective, forgiveness is not primarily a word that is spoken or an action that is performed or a feeling that is felt. It is a way of life appropriate to friendship with the triune God. As such it includes within it appropriate words, actions and feelings. But it cannot be confined to any one of them. In this light, it would seem that insofar as philosophical accounts attend to forgiveness, they might more fruitfully do so within a broadly Aristotelian-Thomist perspective that emphasizes forgiveness as a craft in the context of learning virtue.³⁰⁴

Jones believes there are a number of advantages if we begin to see forgiveness as a craft. In particular it relativizes the question of when forgiveness has been accomplished.³⁰⁵ For Jones forgiveness is not something we intuitively “know” as if the only question that remains is whether forgiveness is a good or a bad thing to do, or whether forgiveness is appropriate in this situation or that. According to Jones, forgiveness must be learned as any craft, such as woodwork, must be learned. Those who forgive in a dramatic fashion, such as Jo Berry who forgave her Father's killer, don't forgive on impulse.³⁰⁶ For Jones they are an example of successful apprentices, their reactions to a crisis are “determined by the habits and practices [they] have developed leading up to a crisis.”³⁰⁷ While forgiveness is never easy for Jones, those

50 (October 1993) 345-357. Tyler develops an analogy between learning the craft of forgiveness and the craft of woodworking. See George Elliot's *Adam Bede* for another example of this analogy.

³⁰¹ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 210.

³⁰² Particularly influential in the renaissance of Aristotelian moral philosophy is the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See especially MacIntyre's, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984).

³⁰³ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 218.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 233.

³⁰⁶ Jo Berry's Father, Sir Anthony Berry MP, was amongst those killed in an IRA bomb attack on the Grand Hotel Brighton in October 1984. Berry's journey to forgiveness and eventual reconciliation with Patrick Magee the IRA bomber is well known and a series of their meetings were recorded as part of the BBC's 'Everyman' series. The program "Facing the Enemy" was shown on Thursday 13 December 2001 at 9pm.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 234.

who are schooled in the practice of forgiveness will find it much easier to discern and embody appropriate forgiveness.”³⁰⁸ Jones’ observation that we do not intuitively ‘know’ about forgiveness is helpful as we think back to our initial observations regarding the challenge of forgiveness. The first obstacle we face is not simply the question of whether we can bring ourselves to forgive or be forgiven, but rather the challenge of ‘thinking’ or conceptualising forgiveness.

For Jones we err if we rush forgiveness and overlook the importance of what he calls the “timefulness” of forgiveness. C.S. Lewis’ claim that it took him thirty years to forgive a particular individual is seen as a favourable example of an honest appraisal of the nature of forgiveness.³⁰⁹ This sense of timefulness “indicates the significant yet limited relevance of performative declarations such as “I forgive you.” “Forgiveness cannot be confined to a moment,” writes Jones, “even a moment at the conclusion of a long, timeful process.”³¹⁰

For our own purposes Jones’ model offers a number of challenges to an understanding of forgiveness. Firstly, his insistence on a shift away from the elocutionary aspect of forgiveness to an embodied forgiveness presents a fresh way of thinking about forgiveness in a deeply divided society. Proclamations of both contrition and forgiveness are liable to misinterpretation and a healthy dose of scepticism. Jones does not prohibit an annunciation of forgiveness, but by shifting the centre of gravity to a long-term embodiment of forgiveness, rather than a statement of absolution, he provides a way to protect forgiveness from both misinterpretation and scepticism.

Jones’ description of forgiveness as a craft also offers a great deal to a situation where large sections of a population face the challenge of forgiveness. The danger of a wholesale recommendation of forgiveness is that we throw people back on themselves, perhaps assuming that they are in possession of the requisite moral resources. By insisting that forgiveness is a craft, Jones makes no presumptions about people’s abilities to forgive. He acknowledges the need for forgiveness, but crucially does not believe that we all know how to forgive. By characterising forgiveness as a craft, Jones acknowledges the inherent difficulty of forgiveness. An apprentice woodworker will make many attempts in the early part of his career. Yet, while acknowledging difficulty, Jones offers hope. Forgiveness may be a demanding craft to learn, but

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters To Malcolm: Chiefly on Paper* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 106. Quoted in Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 236. See also C.S. Lewis ‘On Forgiveness,’ in W. Hooper, ed., *Fern- Seeds and Elephants* (London: Collins, 1975), 43.

³¹⁰ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 230.

practice, patience and discipline will create people who will know how to forgive when the time comes.

Conclusion

While it is uncontroversial to conclude that forgiveness is an essential component of reconciliation this chapter has attempted to develop a number of caveats.

Firstly, as we have seen talking about ‘the past’ is beset with difficulties. Where social divisions have been exacerbated by conflict there is no concord when it comes to the question of history. In fact a great deal of effort goes into contemporary efforts to exert control over the ‘facts’ of history. This issue presents a serious challenge to the process of forgiveness whereby some form of agreement about what happened in the past is required.

Secondly, the question of agency represents a challenging obstacle to any attempt to talk about forgiveness for actions in the past. If the victims cannot speak for themselves we fail to honour their memory by speaking words of forgiveness on their behalf. Even more troubling is whether any pronouncement of forgiveness made by anyone other than the victim has any meaning? Even those closest to victims can only speak from their own experiences and forgive what they have suffered.

Thirdly, the memory of past sufferings has troubled many of those who have taken time to think seriously about the question of forgiveness. Yet, the suggestion by some that this difficulty might be resolved by a final amnesia raises more questions than it seeks to answer and in the end represents an unacceptable resolution of the problem.

It is perhaps helpful to observe that many of these difficulties arise when forgiveness is lifted from the sphere of interpersonal relationships and spoken of as something that communities can engage in or even whole societies. It might be suggested that forgiveness loses much of its power when it is no longer the attempt of victim and perpetrator to come to terms with what has happened.

The chapter began by suggesting that forgiveness offers a potentially constructive way to address the past, a way that coheres with the goal of reconciliation. Yet while this chapter has argued in favour of forgiveness it is important that we do not ignore the inherent difficulty of forgiveness. In reality forgiveness presents the harder path. Once we overcome the challenge of marrying radically divergent interpretations of the past, settle the question of agency and understand the far-reaching implications of a process of forgiveness we are left with the even greater challenge of bringing victims and perpetrators together, of constantly protecting the fragile integrity of forgiveness, an integrity that is particularly vulnerable when forgiveness enters the political arena. Forgiveness offers no easy answers or quick fix solutions. The

prospect of forgiveness may in fact seem deeply offensive to those who have suffered injustice. Yet those who have forgiven report that forgiving one's enemy brings about changes that are essential to the success of reconciliation. Forgiveness allows the naming of injustice, but also opens the circle of dialogue and relationship that is closed by violence and narrow political personalities. Where legal processes remove the victim and make the state central, forgiveness is painfully intimate and promises to change both victim and perpetrator. Forgiveness is a step on the road to something else, something greater; namely the reconciliation of a damaged relationship. We don't simply forgive an individual and then carry on as normal. Forgiveness opens up the channels, where an event or act has caused a breach in a relationship; forgiveness allows one to overcome the breach. In situations where individuals have been driven apart by violent political conflict, forgiveness needs to be understood as a means of overcoming past enmity and paving the way for a move towards a reconciled society. Forgiving allows conversation, it brings us over or around the obstacles that prevented interaction and allows individuals to face one another. There is a need for this understanding of forgiveness to incorporate a space for anger, a space for confusion and fear. Forgiveness need not follow the simplistic metaphor of wiping the slate clean. One can forgive and still have questions to ask, one can forgive and still remain confused by events in the past. However, forgiving one's enemy allows one to revisit this past, to uncover one's own story and the story of those who hurt us.

The practice of forgiveness presents a robust challenge to this narrowing of identities and cultural insecurity. To take part in a process of forgiving one's enemies necessitates that one looks beyond the narrow perimeter of one's own identity and cultural norms. It requires an empathy that allows one to begin to view the world from the perspective of the other. Rather than narrowing identity, forgiveness expands one's identity to include the 'other' and results in a broadening vision of the self and one's place in society. Rather than seeking security by redefining boundaries forgiveness attempts to overcome insecurity by making oneself vulnerable enough to view life from the perspective of the other. When this happens it is possible that the process may impact the macro level political process. The politics of conflict feeds off insecure populations and an exacerbated sense of conflict between culture and religion. If members of conflicted communities begin to take part in a process of forgiveness and open themselves to each other the politics of fear and insecurity will no longer make sense, their changed perception of the other will allow them to substitute facts for myth and personal experience for the vicarious experience of political representatives.

Forgiveness can take divided communities to places that the pursuit of justice cannot. Where justice perpetuates the process of division by merely policing the boundaries between

communities, forgiveness questions the necessity of boundaries and is willing to forego our typical understandings of justice for the sake of something greater. While forgiveness calls for truly extra-ordinary behaviour it should be high on the list of priorities of any theological approach to reconciliation. By high on the list of priorities we mean that the business of forgiveness or even merely working towards forgiveness should be central to any discussions about reconciliation and not seen as a peripheral issue and relegated to the extra-curricular aspects of the process of reconciliation. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was by no means perfect, yet it represents a brave attempt to marry a highly public process of dealing with the past with the deeply personal activity of forgiving and seeking forgiveness. Such a project will never be neat and tidy and will sadly rarely succeed in satisfying the expectations of all those involved. However, the end result presents an opportunity to address the past and move towards the possibility of a shared future.

Conclusion

The importance of reconciliation in Northern Ireland is confirmed by the tension that exists between positive political developments and the reality of current social divisions. Pressure from Westminster has recently offered the prospect of a return to power sharing and the renewal of the Northern Irish assembly based at Stormont. If agreement were reached the DUP and Sinn Fein would have to cooperate as the principle players in Northern Irish politics. Yet, for all the symbolism of old enemies working together, social divisions in Northern Ireland are at an all time low. Writing in *The Observer* the Northern Irish journalist Henry McDonald notes

Social survey after social survey since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement has shown that sectarian attitudes and lack of interaction, most strikingly among males under 18, has increased. The men, including politicians, who started the Troubles almost four decades ago have never been challenged over their actions. Instead, they are venerated as heroes of Ireland or Ulster...On such unstable social foundations a lasting power sharing settlement is unlikely.³¹¹

Reconciliation addresses the issue of unstable social foundations, yet in Northern Ireland an enduring social division continues to affect large portions of the population. One particularly worrying trend is the attitudes held by the generation of young men mentioned by Henry McDonald. These young men grew up in the 1990s and unlike their parents have little memory of the dark days of Northern Ireland's past, yet sectarian attacks and behaviours continue. It would seem that Lederach's definition of a deeply divided society remains an accurate description of Northern Ireland, despite the period of political development since 1998. While the ambiguity surrounding the Northern Ireland Assembly and its long period of suspension may have contributed to the longevity of social divisions, the analysis of this thesis is less sanguine. Politicians in Northern Ireland have no history of framing political debate and leading their constituents towards fresh interpretations of social realities. Rather, politics in Northern Ireland is an excellent example of Plato's allegory of the 'large and powerful animal,' which the shrewd politician learns how to manipulate.³¹² The current generation of politicians have built their careers on the basis of the politics of narrow identities and understand Northern Irish society as a place where social divisions can only be managed and never overcome. The need for a wide-ranging move towards reconciliation has never been greater, yet the current political climate offers little hope.

However, despite the discouragements of the current situation the strong desire for reconciliation and the unwillingness of many to tolerate sectarian attitudes and behaviours

³¹¹ Henry McDonald, *The Observer* 14th May 2006.

³¹² Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 1955).

suggests that community leaders, politicians and church leaders will have to grapple with the question of reconciliation. In the hope that that is the case this thesis offers a number of suggestions to those attempting to construct a theological response to the challenge of deeply divided societies.

Firstly, it is clear from chapter one that the language we employ when attempting to describe both the goals and processes of reconciliation must be careful, precise and balanced. Much of the work of reconciliation involves conversation, description and explanation. Careless use of terminology or thoughtless language can prove to be an enormous obstacle to reconciliation. A theological understanding of social reconciliation must work hard to accurately portray the social implications of God's reconciliation of humanity. Using language that prevents these implications from being clearly understood risks losing sight of the social implications of the message of the Christian gospel.

Secondly, as we have seen there is an inherent flexibility with the term reconciliation where it can be understood as a process or a goal or a combination of both. Regardless of the which version of reconciliation we feel suits our particular context it is crucial that the goal of reconciliation, that is, the conquering of the deep divisions that damage societies, constantly informs the activities that take place in the name of reconciliation. Thus if reconciliation is the overarching goal then each discrete step towards reconciliation must be analysed and tested to see if it makes a positive contribution to the putative goal of reconciliation. As we have seen in our discussion of 'justice' some of the central assumptions we make about justice and punishment may be found wanting when weighed in the balance of reconciliation. It is encouraging to see that recent legislation in Northern Ireland takes seriously the deep division affecting every aspect of social life. This legislation is written with the intention that reconciliation also affects every aspect of social life. The Government's *A Shared Future* document, published in the spring of 2005 and recent 'Good Relations' legislation will attempt to ensure that decisions taken by public bodies, and regional and local government reflect the intent of *A Shared Future*. Obviously this will take time to 'trickle down' and bring change. However, it is an encouraging step in the right direction.

Thirdly, while it is clear that the process of reconciliation is a positive activity it requires a great deal of negative and frequently painful activity if it is taken seriously. Those whom we invite to take part in reconciliation need to be reminded that this is a potentially painful journey that is unlikely to yield short-term gain. To promise otherwise would be untrue and unfair. Like forgiveness, reconciliation has a fragile integrity that is constantly under threat when it is propelled into the political arena. The temptation to use reconciliation to remove skeletons from

a political closet or expedite the success of a new set of political arrangements runs the risk of failing those who live in cycles of deep division. The work of reconciliation is complicated, arduous and protracted. Those involved in reconciliation are required to think in terms of generations not electoral cycles. It seems wise that in some situations, in particular Northern Ireland, political representatives should not be the primary actors in the move towards reconciliation, at least not for a generation.

Fourthly, a reconciliation that is not merely piecemeal requires that deeply divided societies are willing to take drastic measures if they are to successfully break with negative patterns of division and narrow identities. While local projects are helpful and working with people on an individual basis is important, a society like Northern Ireland can only be different in the future if reconciliation is allowed to impinge on all aspects of society. This will sometimes require taking decisions that are highly unpopular; the early release of paramilitary prisoners is a case in point. The question of justice is another good example. As this thesis has suggested, normative criminal justice does not help the cause of reconciliation. Therefore if we are truly serious about reconciliation we need to wrestle with normative patterns of social behaviour and perhaps be willing to experiment. Yet this requires legislators to make controversial decisions. It is at this stage that the public will for reconciliation may falter, when people realise that the good of reconciliation has a difficult price. At this juncture it is crucial that the good of reconciliation is highly publicised, but also that those who have doubts about reconciliation or those who feel that it is doing more harm than good should be heard.

Reaching definitive conclusions about reconciliation is difficult, as each particular context generates its own particular version of reconciliation. However, it would seem that making reconciliation a major social and political priority is central to its success. Until reconciliation becomes a priority its potential will always be checked and other concerns will eclipse the goals of reconciliation. Perhaps the society that does not make reconciliation a priority is not ready for reconciliation and all it entails. There is surely some wisdom in refraining from forcing reconciliation upon those who are not yet ready for it. However, it seems unwise to put reconciliation off indefinitely. There is a need to address the past, especially in situations where social life has been shaped by long-term division. For long periods of Northern Ireland's recent history divided social relations have been normative. The consequence of this situation has had a negative impact on life in Northern Ireland. From the administration of basic council services to the way people relax, worship and explore their communal identity, every facet of life in Northern Ireland has been shaped by deep-seated social divisions. Political

developments alone will not bring about a reversal of this situation; only a concerted effort towards the goal of reconciliation can challenge social division.

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