

Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

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In this article I will outline briefly some of the dialogue work in which I have been involved in Northern Ireland, and then raise some critical questions about reconciliation.

Dialogue work in Northern Ireland

The most recent phase of the conflict in Northern Ireland lasted over 30 years with over 3,500 deaths in a population of 1.5 million, over 20,000 having gone through the prisons, and probably in excess of 50,000 having served in the security forces. The pain from the conflict is still raw. Segregation in housing is now worse than it was in 1998, at the time of the multi-party Good Friday Agreement. The power-sharing Assembly has deep divisions over issues such as policing, education and parading. Yet our current situation is incomparably better than in the past. Killings have ceased almost entirely and bitterly divided parties are sharing power in the Assembly, however great the difficulty.

After the 1994 ceasefires I was part of an organisation that encouraged dialogue among the most divided groups. The purpose was not to get agreement, but understanding. In fact we banned agreement! Paradoxically, this helped a greater measure of consensus than might otherwise have been attainable.

During the dialogues people often spoke of their own suffering. At the beginning this always involved blaming the other groups. But gradually, they became less defensive, they began to listen to each other, and sometimes they could even talk of how the other side had suffered – in a way that the other side accepted. (It seems a rule of most conflicts that each side, most of the time, excludes all consideration of the suffering of the other side, especially suffering that their own group may have caused).

The outcome of these dialogues was a growth in understanding. There was little forgiving or repenting. Each side continued to believe that they were right and the others were wrong. But they began slowly to focus on the question of *why* the others acted as they did. They began to be aware that in the same circumstances they might have acted as their opponents did. That changed things. They remained opposed to each other but they recognised a commonality between them. This was helped by people beginning to humanise their situation through learning about each other's families. Our hope, as organisers, was that participants could bring this understanding back to their own community.

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Reflection on reconciliation

There are what I would term 'high' and 'other' approaches to reconciliation. 'High' approaches take account of themes like forgiving, or repenting, or justice or truth, all of which make judgements about wrongdoing. 'Other' approaches use the term without that connotation.

The Christian narrative is about God reconciling the world to God by sending the Son among us. The forgiveness offered to us by God and our call to repentance are at the centre of this story and of our spirituality. In the light of this it is natural for us to ask how this reconciliation between God and us can be translated into dealing with our conflicts. But this move should not be taken for granted. It is a jump from the theological to the political. It involves taking a position not on the question of whether God is at work in the world but on *how* God is at work. I tend to be cautious about drawing firm conclusions about the latter, so I am correspondingly cautious about applying all-embracing narratives.

Reconciliation seems to be an all-embracing narrative. It is used in a bewildering variety of meanings, many of which are opposed to each other. Do we need an all-encompassing narrative like reconciliation at all?

For me, forgiving, repenting, justice and truth are important values in themselves, as are attempts to end conflict without referring to any of these themes. They do not need any higher narrative. But I would not put them under the heading of reconciliation. What is gained by doing so? Reconciliation, for example, between estranged individuals is a wonderful outcome, but why do we use it as an over-arching theme, rather than others such as liberation, salvation, freedom or justice? I fully accept that each of these can throw up as many difficulties as reconciliation. For example, in every conflict one side's dream of justice is the other side's nightmare, and objective analysis is unlikely to convince one side to make concessions. But this simply reinforces my scepticism about grand narratives.

In its 'high' sense I think reconciliation is more likely to be useful in interpersonal than in communal contexts. (Caritas in their analysis of reconciliation confine it to the interpersonal: cf *Peacebuilding: A Caritas Training Manual*). If we use the term in its 'high' sense in communal contexts we face a number of difficult issues: in Northern Ireland, I, with others, made statements like 'We must all forgive'. I would not do so now. The statement does not state why we are including everyone, or whom we want them to forgive. It presumes, but does not specify, communal guilt among the wrongdoers. It makes no attempt to say who belongs, and who does not belong, to the wrongdoers' group and why. In the Northern Ireland context statements like this were most often made by people who had suffered little and who were putting burdens on the shoulders of those who had suffered most.

A further problem in our context is that the divided groups do not agree at all about what is right or wrong: if Nationalists forgive Unionists, Unionists will respond that it was the Nationalists who did all the harm. Focusing on right and wrong may work in a context where one side is defeated (or it may be that the defeated side will accept their guilt until such times as the context changes and they can get revenge). In the absence of defeat such a focus is likely to increase separation, except at the very end stages of a conflict when it may highlight the fact that the conflict is over.

There is also the considerable danger that focussing on right and wrong encourages people to interpret their pain as due to the bad motives of other individuals and groups, not to something impersonal such as 'the war'. That is likely to lead to more victimhood, which is bad for those who have suffered.

We can of course respond to these arguments by using reconciliation in communal contexts in its 'other' sense without any reference to right or wrong. I have less of a problem with this as long as people make clear what they mean. But I still ask: what is gained by using reconciliation in this context rather than some of the other themes mentioned? Why not talk more simply and directly about 'trying to stop people killing each other', or 'working out ways to share diminishing water resources without violent conflict'?

There are ways to make peace without any apparent forgiving or repenting, such as letting go of personal or communal resentment, growing in understanding, or introducing new political structures that change the balance of power and address the basic needs of groups. (This latter was a major factor in Northern Ireland).

One answer to the question, 'why use reconciliation?' is that it focuses on relationships. In my experience however this is not always the most useful strategy for dealing with conflict. On the contrary, I found it helpful if people could get their mind off their opponents and focus on their own needs by asking 'what is it that I/we really need?' If they can focus on this question they are paradoxically much more likely to be open to listening to the real needs of their opponent. Secondly, the answer to some conflicts is not a new relationship, but separation. There is also a danger that by focussing on reconciliation we buy into an identity-based politics that freezes the conflicting groups and thereby keeps the basic causes of the conflict in place for longer. At times there may be no alternative to this: in Northern Ireland our 1998 Agreement gives political rewards for defining oneself as a Unionist or a Nationalist. I agreed with this approach, but as a necessary strategy, not as a virtue. It would be much better if we could find a way in which people emphasised other identities. Furthermore, forgiving and repenting can both be undertaken by an individual without developing a relationship with the opponent. To argue to the contrary is to confuse forgiveness and repentance with reconciliation, which requires mutuality.

Communal reconciliation as an immediate aim may make more sense in other contexts, such as Rwanda where there may be little alternative to dealing with problems like human rights abusers who return to their own village.

Jewish writers sometimes accuse Christians of engaging in 'cheap forgiveness'. Ultimately I think they are incorrect, but perhaps we need to listen to them. Practical judgements need to be made about what should be aimed for in the immediate future. One could, for example, ask if Jews should be reconciled to the Nazis. 'Nazis' refers to people, not to the ideology. My judgement is that if Jewish people are able to let go of resentment and bitterness they have done something extraordinary. Perhaps reconciliation in some cases should be left to the moment each of us will face when we encounter, before God, all those we have harmed in our lives and see the full consequences of our sin. That moment will also be in the context of seeing our loving God face to face, which will be quite different from our current context. This view of course depends on where we stand on the spectrum between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of eschatology.

Clearly I enthusiastically support many of the efforts that others put under the umbrella of reconciliation. Indeed, I would ask why the Society has such a strong and effective group in JRS but no equivalent organisation to deal with the conflicts which are a major cause of there being refugees in the first place.

Not long after World War II a German ex-soldier approached Jean Monnet, one of the original group who influenced the start of the EEC (surely the greatest conflict management mechanism in history). The soldier wanted to work with Monnet on the project but he wanted Monnet to know about his past before accepting him. He told Monnet that he had been in the German army, that he had supported his country's war aims, and that he had been one of the troops who had occupied Paris. He was not apologising for any of this. Monnet, a Frenchman, responded: 'If you believe in our ideals for the future and want to commit yourself to them, then you are welcome to join us.' There was no forgiving or repenting, but there was a commitment to the future. A lower moral threshold produced a great outcome.

I am inclined not to use grand narratives in the area of conflict; my greater concern is that we need to examine any concepts we use. Past experience should make us cautious about focusing on a single over-arching concept.

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