

INTRODUCTION

A Muslim community elder described to me how young Muslim women walking down the road wearing the Hijab scarf are attacked, have the scarf torn off their heads and are spat on. The speaker wasn't describing some far off place or even England, he was telling me about some of the things his community face in Glasgow. I am sure that if you asked your Muslim neighbours in this area you might find similar stories.

I have been asked to talk tonight about religion, violence and reconciliation and I want to do it by pointing briefly to the global context and then focussing on what is within both our local world and our possibility of influence.

But it is not possible to speak of reconciliation without first situating it in the wider context of the violence and division in the midst of which Christians try to embody this dynamic. In the last 40 years the nature of conflict has changed from international wars of the scale of World Wars I and II towards more inter-ethnic or inter-religious clashes. Following the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 and the subsequent so-called 'war on terror,' the inter-religious aspect of clashes has been to the fore, as have issues concerning the relationship between religion and violence. The UK has suffered Al-Qaeda-related terrorist attacks, the best known of which are the London bombings of 7th July 2005 that claimed 52 lives and the explosion at Glasgow Airport on 30th June 2007.

Dealing with religiously motivated terror threats is not new to British people. Britain has a relatively long experience of living with the reality of terrorist violence through the IRA campaigns in Ireland and Britain from the 1950's to the 1990's.¹ During that period, people had become accustomed to extra security when travelling and in crowded areas. The Belfast Agreement and the major steps in the political settlement in Northern Ireland in 1998 gave people across Britain and Ireland cause to hope that it might be safe to relax a little. The heightened security measures across the UK since July 2005, and the recent car bomb in Omagh which took the life of policeman Ronan Kerr, however, have again brought awareness of possible large scale violence into the forefront of ordinary people's consciousness. But the emerging new inter-religious threat differs

¹ Since the 1950's the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its various related organisations have waged an intermittent armed struggle against Britain to try to secure the freedom of political self determination for the people of Northern Ireland. The most recent phase ran from the early 1970's to 31 August 1994 when they declared the current ceasefire. This cessation of hostilities which was broken briefly in 1996 has held continuously since that time and has allowed the signing of the Belfast Agreement and the later establishment of the power-sharing Executive and a locally elected Assembly in Northern Ireland. For an excellent on-line archive on the conflict in Northern Ireland see <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>

from the Northern Irish-related situation because the attacks are mainly aimed at Britain itself rather than the majority of them taking place in the relatively small and offshore area of Northern Ireland.

The nature of the new threat, combining as it does large scale indiscriminate violence with links to people who purport to espouse the Muslim faith, has increased racial and religious inter-group tensions. Muslims, especially young Muslim men of Asian or Arab appearance, are held in suspicion by many of the general public. In the UK, instances of what has come to be called 'faith-hate,' in particular verbal or physical abuse against the Muslim community, increased post 9/11 and increased sharply again after the London bombings.² It has included more attacks on people wearing distinctive religious dress, especially as I noted at the start women wearing the Hijab.³ Understandably, some of the Muslim community, again especially, but not exclusively, young men, react with hostility and suspicion in return. The abuse has prompted yet others to become more proud of their Muslim faith and more ready to wear its distinctive dress.⁴ The issues are not confined to the Muslim community. Asian people from other traditions, in particular Hindu and Sikh men, now regularly find themselves subject to verbal and physical abuse. Whether this is the result of racist hate or of ignorance about the differences between world religions is unclear. In Britain, a society that is recognised to be one of the most religiously diverse in Europe,⁵ this trend towards deterioration in community relationships is really worrying.

A New Public Agenda

Ten years of the global terror threat has brought issues related to reconciliation, especially discussions about racial and religious cohesion, on to the public agenda in a way that more than thirty years of intra-Christian violence in Northern Ireland could not. This new public agenda is one which needs to be addressed by all faith communities, individually and together. Since Christianity is the largest faith community in the UK, Christian Churches could have a particularly important role in reconciliation and building a more peaceful and open civil society.

² See the report of Anushka Asthana et al which claims a 500% rise in faith-hate incidents post the London Bombings. Anushka Asthana et al, 'Bombers, racists, the law: they're all out to get Muslims' - Fear of faith-hate reprisals runs high, *The Observer*, Sunday July 24, 2005.

³ See Cecelia Clegg and Michael Rosie, *Faith Communities and Local Government in Glasgow* (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Social Research Series) November 2005.

⁴ Muslim focus group in Glasgow cited in Clegg and Rosie, *Faith Communities and Local Government in Glasgow*.

⁵ "The UK is now one of the most religiously diverse areas of Europe in terms of the number of different faiths with substantial communities here." *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey* (London: Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2003), p 1.

Christian Reconciliation

So let me turn now to reconciliation. It is, of course, a very large and complex topic. There is already an extensive and distinguished body of Christian literature on the subject. For centuries the theological framework for talking about reconciliation tended to deal largely with the relationship between human beings and God; reconciliation was thought of as the act of God bringing humanity back into loving relationship with Godself through Christ.⁶ It was not until Liberation Theology began to raise questions about structural sin and how far the salvation of any human being was bound up with all other human beings⁷ that theologians began to look at relationships between human beings and between humans and creation.

For me Christian reconciliation means:

the processes and structures necessary to bring all the elements of the cosmos into positive and life-giving relationship with God and with one another.⁸

Reconciliation is an intensely relational dynamic out of which and into which Christians live. Reconciliation is about real, open, vulnerable relationship which reaches out to embrace the other. It is about the scary and heart-wrenching work done by people I worked with in Belfast of sitting across the room from someone who has really damaged your family or community and deciding to listen to them, to find out why it happened, how they feel about it now, and what you have to say to one another that will make fruitful life possible for both of you in the future and not leave you crippled by hate or resentment or regret.

Preparedness of Churches to address a reconciliation agenda

So how prepared are Christian Churches to engage with this emerging public agenda of reconciliation prompted by the rise in religious violence? The Christian Church in general should be well equipped because reconciliation has long been recognised as being at the heart of Christian life through God's gracious offer of salvation in Christ. The

⁶ It is not necessary here to rehearse the whole history of this approach but simply to note that in more recent times it was exemplified by Karl Barth's monumental work on reconciliation which is pre-occupied with Christology and the event of Jesus Christ as reconciling. This approach still exerts huge influence in theology today. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958) Vol 4.

⁷ Guttierrez

⁸ This is the definition which I developed with my colleague the Mennonite historian and conflict theorist, Joseph Liechty, in our work on sectarianism and was originally published in Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001) p292.

Apostle Paul reflecting on the saving event of God in Christ regards the work of the Church as a continuation of that movement of reconciliation: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."⁹

Much depends, of course, on how the concept of 'reconciliation' is understood. If it is viewed as exclusively about reconciling human beings with God, leaving the levels of reconciliation between human beings and between humans and the rest of creation more or less out of account, then it opens the door to distinctly non-reconciling attitudes and actions. These can include trying to annihilate those considered to be infidel or heretics or to trying force conversions by physical threat. Some of the deepest stains on the conscience of Christian Churches are associated with the use of various forms of lethal force to impel people to convert to Christianity or to the aggressor's particular understanding of Christianity.

An understanding of reconciliation has been the wellspring for the involvement of many Christian groups and organisations around the world in efforts to establish peace and reconciliation in areas ravaged by violence.¹⁰ Much of this activity is going outwards from the churches towards other bodies. There is a clear understanding of, and a brave, even costly, commitment to the mission of the Church in ending violence and transforming conflict.

The churches, then, have tremendous resources and both the theoretical concepts for, and the practical experience of, reconciliation among peoples and with the earth. In this general sense they are, at least in theory, fairly well prepared for the new public agenda of reconciliation. What is different and potentially more problematic about this agenda is that it requires the establishment of open and dialogical relationships with other faiths. There are certain of the more conservative groups across the Christian spectrum that will resist such a course of action on the grounds that it may open the Church to what they consider to be a compromise of its beliefs or contamination by non-believers. While this is not a majority view among Christians, it reminds us that there are differences of approach within the range of Christian churches which require careful and respectful dialogue. This issue points to the reality that whatever the quality of the work for reconciliation being done by the Christian Church

⁹ 2 Cor 5:18 All biblical references are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1989).

¹⁰ Among the multitude of stories and examples see the edited collections by Gregory Baum and Harold Wells, eds., *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches* (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) and Mary Ann Cejka and Thomas Bamat, eds., *Artisans of Peace: Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003).

outside the Church, in terms of the life of the Christian churches themselves, the picture of preparedness for the new public agenda is somewhat different.

At the macro level, despite 100 years of the ecumenical movement and some progress in bi-lateral conversations denominations are still divided in a number of different ways and over important issues.¹¹ Progress towards greater mutual understanding seems painfully slow. Indeed, the tone and content of a 2007 publication from the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF): "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church" suggests that the lines of separation between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations may in fact be deepening and hardening.¹² This in itself is an interesting dynamic when the global situation reveals a deep and urgent need for more inter-religious understanding not less.

But it is at the psycho social level that the preparedness of the churches is questionable. Apart from the larger denominational divides, divisions within denominations are also still significant. Many leaders find themselves treading carefully through a veritable 'minefield' of divergent attitudes and opinions in an effort to hold together disparate factions in their congregations.

Certainly, some churches, especially but not exclusively the historic peace churches, make concerted efforts to provide services like conciliation and trained assistance with issues of conflict and division, not only for their own members but also for other churches and organisations.¹³ But there is only so much progress that outside conciliation can achieve in a local situation and none of it can be made against the will of the participants. The starting disposition; psychological, social, cultural and theological of parties to conflict is crucial to its outcome.

Herein lies the crux of the matter in terms of how unprepared Christian churches are in their own lives to meet the emerging public agenda concerning 'reconciliation.' The efforts and activities of conciliation to

¹¹ W.C.C, *Growth in Agreement II: reports and agreed statements of ecumenical conversations on a world level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications) and (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2000).

¹² CDF, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church* available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2 accessed on 25 July 07.

¹³ The Mennonite Central Committee's Office on Justice and Peacebuilding offers trained assistance to congregations <http://mcc.org/us/peacebuilding/> accessed on 31 July 07; and the Mennonite Bridge Builders programme offers training for local work as well as support to Church leaders: <http://www.mennonitemission.net/Resources/Publications/UrbanConnections/story.asp?ID=970> accessed on 31 July 07

which I have referred are for the most part external to or added on to the normal life of a local worshipping community. They are actions aimed at attitudinal and behavioural change which are taken in times of special need. They are not part of a basic ethos and way of relating within a local church which is rooted in healthy psychological relationship, openly and continuously promoted.

Moving towards Reconciliation

What is needed for Christian churches to begin to overcome violence and move towards reconciliation, individually and corporately, is work to *allow* the psychological principles which inform and contribute to personal development towards wholeness to become the principles which permeate all levels of the communities' way of being and acting. The force of the word *allow* in the last sentence is important. This is not for the most part a description of yet more things to be 'done' or 'fitted into' the life of an individual or community. Rather it is about the delicate and often difficult service of helping people to become aware of the movements both psychological and spiritual in the depth of themselves and in their community collectively. With awareness comes the possibility of discerning and then choosing the most loving and life-giving path for the individual or the group. This movement of attaining awareness requires openness, engagement with grace, and perseverance. It involves a deep and sensitive attention to the psychological as well as the spiritual, intellectual and emotional aspects of the person's and the communities' life.

I contend that attention to reconciliation *within* individual persons, rather than the more usual focus on inter-personal reconciliation, is paramount in the creation of reconciling communities. The two, of course, can only be distinguished not separated. But the way to develop a communal ethos of reconciliation that allows members of the community, be they children or adults, to be drawn into a reconciling way of being is to encourage all individuals to embody reconciliation. For the moment, however, I want to look more closely at what happens often in Christian churches when people are living unaware of the force of the unconscious in everyday life.

Churches as Communities living in Self Contradiction

My emphasis on individual in contrast to inter-personal interaction is not an argument that a community is merely the sum of its parts. Rather, it is a recognition of the fundamental interdependence of human beings and their capacity for mutual influence for good or ill. This became very clear to me a number of years ago when a friend and very experienced Christian leader told me that within a couple of hours of being in a parish

or congregation he could tell roughly in whose hands the power lay and where the fault lines in the community were likely to appear. His work which involved facilitating parish development was made all the more difficult, he confided, because people simply would not talk openly about breakdowns in their relationships even when they appeared blatantly evident. This is a scenario which will be familiar to many within the Christian Church. In such circumstances there often are histories of antagonism which have festered for extended periods and have long departed from the original hurt and become generalised to all aspects of the relationship concerned. In some instances, especially where the conflict involves a group such as a choir, new people joining the group absorb the antagonism and perpetuate it without even knowing what the conflict was about originally. Perhaps successive ministers and others have tried with more or less success to address the issues, but ultimately the majority of the congregation have opted to simply draw a discreet veil over the whole situation. The veil here being a very potent symbol of studied unawareness or outright denial.

The question is what is being veiled? Given the centrality of reconciliation to the life of the Church an inability to open up areas of conflict to the possibility of healing is not just regrettable it indicates a community living in contradiction. This contradiction is a deep wound in the life of the Church. At its most basic it is a failure to live out the Christian baptismal calling to a ministry of reconciliation, individually and as a group. This is radical self-contradiction. Failure to strive to address areas that need reconciliation *within* the Christian community is an abandonment of what it means to be Church just as much as failure to address areas that need reconciliation outside it. We may strive and fail through frailty, or brokenness or sin. It is not achievement which is at stake here, but rather the ongoing struggle to be true to who and what the Church is called to be.

The self contradiction is often compounded by a tacit agreement between members to deny conflict situations which are poisoning the atmosphere and ethos of their Christian community. A negative atmosphere, especially one which in Christian Churches is hidden beneath a veil of politeness, is not conducive to supporting people who want to work at their awareness and their development as whole human beings. A church which is in denial about conflict is not a safe place to try to live the mission of reconciliation.

Reconciliation through the Cross

There appear to be at least six sets of factors which make individual leaders and members of Christian churches vulnerable to getting sucked into a dynamic of denial about issues of conflict either within their parishes

or between their parishes and other groups or religions. First, there is unease or embarrassment that they are not living as peaceably as the gospels demand. Second, there is a lack of understanding among leadership and membership about principles of psychologically healthy relationship, both with self and others, that would help people to identify and work with relationship breakdown. Third, Christian Churches have, for the most part, not invested in conflict transformation or psychologically-based training for leaders or members so there are few people who really understand how to foster an ethos that would make it more likely that conflict could be handled safely and still fewer who are technically equipped to address conflict situations positively. Fourth, the psychological paralysis which overtakes people when faced with a conflict they cannot manage means that they often try to pretend that it is either not happening or is not as bad as it is in reality. Fifth, they find themselves prey to the very reasonable fear that if they admit it and try to do something about it, they might make the situation worse. This is particularly true if the leader or members feel ill-equipped. Last, they know, somewhere deep in their unconscious, that to actually address conflict in a community, to undertake a ministry of reconciliation, requires a total commitment and a total transformation in their way of being – *metanoia* – in its truest sense.¹⁴ There is a radicality about the demands of Jesus in the gospels which terrifies any right thinking individual not because we have cause to be afraid of God, but because the way that Jesus mapped out for his followers was the way of reconciliation through the cross.

The call to the path of reconciliation through the cross may seem more obvious for Christians engaged in situations like Iraq, Palestine, or Afghanistan which have an incentive to action produced by regular violence on a massive scale. The task is clear and there is an urgency and immediacy about the work which drives it forward.

In most situations in the West and certainly in Scotland, however, which have no such incentive Christians can be tempted to lose sight of the mission of the Church. The lack of driving imperative, the daily round of struggling to live ordinary, decent lives means that Christians can easily miss the point that reconciliation through the cross is the vocation to which they are called. The 'cross' can take many forms: bereavement, unemployment, mental or physical ill health, poverty, abuse, exclusion – the list is endless. Among those forms the painful, searing work of letting

¹⁴ *Metanoia* is often translated as 'repentance' as in Mt 3:8 "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (ποιήσατε οὐν καρπὸν ἀξίον τῆς μετανοίας) It literally means to change our minds or to change our whole perceptions.

our deep personal or communal brokenness surface so that it might be touched by grace is one of the most difficult, hence the flight into denial. As human beings we shy away from anything which reaches into the very depths of who we are and threatens to change us. This is true even when that change is one of healing, because in being healed we are not, as Robert Schreier points out, restored to where we were before, we are made new – and that is a scary process. The awareness needed to engage in allowing our brokenness to surface also means that we experience the pain intensely because we are listening deeply, seeing more clearly and trying to face the truth of our lives.

It is very appropriate that we are engaging in this reflection together in the run up to Easter. Lent is traditionally the time for allowing the light and reverberation of the resurrection to resound in our lives in order to help us to face the truth and repent.

Violence is an ever present reality in large and small ways in our lives. Our religious faith calls us to be reconcilers. But the path to the openness, vulnerability and intensity of relationship that reconciliation implies is one which requires faith, courage, generosity and determination.

Let me end with a story that a friend who works in South Africa told me:

A White Afrikaner young man was imprisoned for killing the son of a black South African man. After 15 years the old man decided to visit his son's killer who had been asking forgiveness and asking to see him for some years. They talked. When the old man came out of the meeting he was very moved and distressed. He said that he had discovered that the family of the prisoner had disowned him when he was convicted and had never come to see him. He said that he was going to visit him and added 'because he is now my son.'