

Religious Violence, Terrorism and the Christian Theology of Reconciliation

©Christopher D. Marshall

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Over recent decades there has been a dramatic upsurge in terrorist violence in many parts of the world. There is nothing new about terrorism itself; it has been around for a very long time. But whereas terrorist activity in the past was largely local in its impact and intention, modern terrorism is performed on a *global* stage for a *global* audience. It is global in three senses: its targets are spread throughout the world; its instigators are sometimes linked together in elaborate international networks; and its audience includes the world-wide television viewing public, which at times, as in the case of the Beslan school massacre, watches events as they unfold.

It is not surprising, then, that terrorism today is often deemed to be the gravest of threats to world peace and security. It is considered such a serious risk because it scorns international borders and treaties, it exposes the impotence of conventional military might to control it, and it has the potential to unleash weapons of enormous destructive power on civilian populations anywhere on earth. It may only be a matter of time before we witness biological or nuclear terrorist attacks.

As well as its epic proportions, another striking feature of much modern terrorism is its religious character. The proportion of known terrorist organisations that claim a religious identity has increased sharply in the last three decades, and the use of religious language to describe their deeds is now commonplace.

In this talk, I want to offer some reflections on what the epidemic of religious terror means for peace-loving religious believers, and in particular what it means for Christians who still wish to claim, notwithstanding Christianity's own horribly violent history, that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, the one who brings the peace of God to earth.

But first we need to be clear on what we mean by “religious terrorism” and on why it is such a difficult phenomenon to combat (here I offer a 15 min summary of material covered more fully at a previous APF conference).

Terrorism and Religious Terror

The term “terrorism” comes from the Latin *terrere*, meaning “to cause to tremble”. At its most general level, terrorism designates “the intentional effort to generate fear through violence or the threat of violence and the further effort to harness these fears in pursuit of some goal”.¹ This broad definition captures the three key components of terrorism: its reliance on violence, its strategy of fostering fear, and its teleological intent.

Within this broad category, religious terrorism designates those “public acts of violence...for which religion has provided the motivation, the justification, the organisation, and the world view”.² While it shares many common features with secular terrorism, faith-based terrorism is marked out by four distinguishing marks in particular:

a) *Absolutism*: Religious militancy is characterised, firstly, by strong claims to moral justification and by a thoroughgoing dualism that divides the world into “us and them”, truth and falsehood, innocent and guilty, believer and unbeliever, with the fault line dividing the categories being absolute.

After interviewing many violent activists around the world, Professor Jessica Stern of Harvard University writes: “I’ve noticed that the one thing that distinguishes religious terrorists from other people is that they know with absolute certainty that they’re doing good. They seem more confident and less susceptible to self-doubt than most other people”.³

Such people see themselves as caught up in a transcendent battle between good and evil, and consider it their religious duty to purify the world of corruption by force. This results in an unwillingness to make concessions – for how can one compromise with the devil or tolerate apostasy? Accordingly, religious zealots are willing to do virtually anything necessary to overcome the enemy, for evil cannot be transformed or accommodated, it must be utterly destroyed. Historically holy wars have always been notable for their savagery, and religious terrorism is really a contemporary form of holy war.⁴ And one of the most troubling features of holy war is its contagiousness.

b) *Contagiousness and addictiveness:* There is an important sense in which any violence can be contagious. But arguably religious violence is more infectious than any other kind, and more addictive. Faith-inspired terrorism is contagious in two ways. First, its use of religious language expands the pool of potential sympathisers and recruits beyond the immediate battle zone to co-religionists all around the world. Once a holy war has been declared, religious hardliners from far and wide flock to join the contest.⁵ Holy wars, in other words, acquire a momentum of their own. Holy war excites more holy war.⁶ And for those involved, fighting for God becomes an addiction, which is the second reason for the contagion.

Participation in holy war ranks among the most intense of all religious experiences.⁷ Jessica Stern found that only a few of the terrorists she interviewed claimed to be in personal communication with God. But they all described themselves as responding to a spiritual calling, and many reported themselves as being addicted to its fulfilment.⁸ They were, she says, “spiritually intoxicated” by their cause,⁹ and experienced “a kind of bliss”.¹⁰

Such bliss is its own reward – which leads to the third distinctive feature of religious combat.

c) *Heightened Symbolism:* All terrorist acts are symbolic or theatrical events to some degree, but religious violence is almost exclusively symbolic.¹¹ That is to say, its creations of terror are done, not primarily to achieve a strategic goal, but to make a symbolic statement. It is a statement about the *real* condition of the world and about who possesses true power in the universe.

The presupposition of religious terrorism is that the world is *already* at war, an apocalyptic war between good and evil. This war is being played out on the worldly stage of power politics, though few are aware of it. Terrorist acts dramatise or materialise the spiritual struggle that is invisibly underway behind the scenes. Victims are chosen, not because they are a threat to the perpetrators, or because their elimination is essential to victory, but because they serve as symbols of this larger spiritual confrontation. This leads to the fourth distinguishing feature of holy combat – its indifference to success

d) *Assessment of Success:* Secular terrorists assess the utility of their acts to ensure that their violence will advance their political or nationalist

goals. Sacred terrorists, by contrast, do not measure success in such worldly terms. Their aim is not to gain strategic advantage in a tactical campaign, but to champion God's will, oppose God's enemies, and galvanise God's people.¹² Their campaign is not ultimately about politics, or economics, or even territory. It is about the vindication of their theological vision of the world and the fulfilment of their eschatological hopes. Their sense of achievement comes simply from being involved in the struggle, confident that God is on their side, and buoyed by contemplation of spiritual or heavenly rewards.

Such, then, is the distinctive shape of sacred terrorism. Why such a style of terrorism has exploded in recent decades is still debated by the experts. But religious terrorism seems more likely to emerge when four elements come together: (i) an external situation of real or perceived human suffering; (ii) a set of psychological and emotional responses to this situation on the part of certain individuals within larger cultures of resentment; (iii) the availability of religious resources to explain present experience and justify violent remedies; and (iv) the influence of charismatic religious leaders who exploit feelings of alienation to issue a call to holy war. No single ingredient is sufficient to spawn holy terror; it is the combination that is critical.

Within this deadly cocktail of contributing factors, the most contentious is the role of religion itself. It is this dimension of modern terrorism that makes it such a difficult and dangerous reality to deal with. But it must be dealt with.

Responding to Holy Terror

Since 9/11, the US-led response to terrorism has focused primarily on the job of containment. Huge efforts have been made to hunt down known terrorist leaders, to destroy the material and financial bases of their operations, and to enhance domestic security. The predominant means of containment has been by the use of raw military power. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent, and tens of thousands of lives sacrificed, in the so-called "war on global terrorism".

Now war is always a blunt and bloody instrument for resolving conflict. But the strategy of warring against holy war is a particularly unsophisticated and fruitless way to respond to religious violence.¹³ The problem is not only that large scale military assaults compound the suffering and the humiliation felt by the constituency from which terrorists emerge in the first place, making

future recruitment much easier. The main pitfall of waging war on religious terrorism is that the terrorists' underlying ideology of holy war is actually strengthened every time military power is directed against them.

Military reprisals prove that their diagnosis of the world is correct: a great battle for religious truth really is underway, the enemy truly is a satanic monster, and true believers must now rally to defend God's religion. Displays of massive counter-violence merely help to spread the seeds of burning rage and religious zeal that guarantee the enlistment of a whole new generation of faith-based terrorists, ready and willing to wage a life and death struggle for God's truth.

The very language of waging a "war" on terrorism is also deeply problematic. How we speak of a problem is surprisingly important, for it determines how we conceive of solutions. Lee Griffith bemoans the American proclivity to frame every social problem in terms of waging war, whether it be a "war on crime," or "a war on drugs," or "a war on poverty". The result of doing so is that it shifts the focus away from the social problem needing solved, and on to vilifying those individuals who are perceived to be responsible for the problem – which is why the war on poverty quickly turns into a war on the poor, and the war on crime turns into a war on those caught up in crime. "When there is a problem", Griffith says, "America goes to war because the world is viewed as ripe for conquest rather than ripe for redemption."¹⁴

The same applies to the war on terrorism. Construing it in military terms merely prescribes military "solutions". Perhaps a different set of solutions would emerge if we construed international terrorism in judicial and spiritual, rather than military, terms.

What if we viewed terrorism, notwithstanding its ideological agenda, as a type of organised criminal activity in which the whole global community has a common stake? That would encourage us to employ methods of response that conform to the normative requirements of police work, operating within an enforceable legal and human rights framework, rather than to the anarchistic brutality and indiscriminate destructiveness that characterises modern war-making.

And what if we took more seriously the spiritual dimension of modern terrorism? That would require us to develop spiritual and theological strategies that address the ideological underpinnings of the problem – which ultimately is the only truly effective solution.

I say this because religious terrorism is more than a simple response to poverty, oppression, or humiliation. It is also an acting out of a particular theological world view, which rests upon a selective appropriation of key texts and themes from sacred tradition, and is energised by a determination to defend true religion against forces of apostasy and dilution. That means that efforts at combating terrorism must include attempts to displace the belief system that sanctifies killing in God's name, in favour of theologies and practices that promote peaceful protest and reconciliation.

How is this to be done? In my previous talk, I discussed five ways of working for spiritual and theological change. But here I want to highlight only the fifth, then develop it much further than last time.

My fifth proposal was for every major religion and religious tradition to undertake a terror-audit on itself – by which I mean: a fresh and honest assessment of its own historical, moral, and theological complicity in violence. It would be naïve to think this could happen on any grand scale across all religious traditions. But even if a small percentage of active believers were to accept the obligation to undertake a self-critical assessment of the violence that emanates from their own religious community, it could have a dramatic affect. And such an audit is certainly required of Christians.

The Need for a Christian Terror-Audit

Such is the emphasis today on Islamic terrorism that many Christians conveniently forget Christianity's own long and shameful history of violence and terror.¹⁵ And it is our recent history, not just our distant history, that we need to acknowledge. As Lee Griffith points out: "It was not 'Muslim extremists' who brought horror to Rwanda; it was Christians killing other Christians. It was not some 'demonic' cult groups that planted bombs in Northern Ireland; it was Christians trading brutality with other Christians. It was not 'atheistic communists' who instituted a reign of terror to enforce apartheid in South Africa; it was Christians kidnapping and torturing and murdering other Christians...even in the Balkans, violence

between Serb Orthodox Christians and Croat Catholic Christians has been as vicious as between Christians and Muslims”.¹⁶

On a similar note, British Muslim commentator Yasmin Alibhai-Brown questions whether Christians have any right to feel superior to their Muslim counterparts when it comes to violence. She points to how the foundational teachings of Jesus are daily betrayed by the militarism of the West, by the excessively punitive character of British and American criminal justice systems, by the West’s hostility towards asylum seekers, by its obsession with materialism and its neglect of the poor.

She also observes that most of the world’s weapons of mass destruction are not owned by Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Bahais or pagans. They are owned by Christians. “Christianity seems to me the most redemptive and merciful of all the major religions”, she writes. “But where, oh where, is that essence of forgiveness among the merchants of power today?”¹⁷

A terror-audit on Christianity must address, not only its past and contemporary history of violence, but also reconsider the moral validity of its two dominant ethical viewpoints on war – the Just War Theory and Pacifism. The phenomenon of global terrorism raises new challenges for both positions.

Pacifism has to consider whether non-violent responses are adequate or defensible in dealing with international networks of small groups of extremists who seek union with God through unrestrained violence against defenceless civilian targets.

Just War Theory, on the other hand, has to confront its susceptibility to capture by terrorist ideology, inasmuch as the categories of Just War Theory are easily co-opted by those claiming a divine mandate to kill in the alleged quest for greater justice.¹⁸

As well as examining its history and ethics, a terror-audit on Christianity also needs to consider the role biblical and dogmatic theology have played in underwriting righteous violence. This involves identifying and naming those themes, images, and texts that are so easily and frequently marshaled in support of divinely-sanctioned bloodletting, as well as identifying and naming

those strands of tradition that provide a basis for developing a peace theology.

In the current context, there is a critical need today for all Christians today to see peace theology, not as an optional extra, or as the preoccupation of the loony left, but as absolutely central to Christian identity and mission, and perhaps, even, to the world's survival. Like all theology, peace theology needs to be contextualised. The contemporary context is one of terrorism and counter-terrorism. This means a Christian theology of peace and reconciliation must be shaped specifically to address this problem.

Towards a Theology of Reconciliation and Peacemaking

By way of illustration, let me identify just two features in New Testament thought that provide important clues for how we can go about deconstructing the theological mindset that justifies terror and, especially in the USA, counter-terror in God's name.

1. Jesus as a Normative Role Model

One of the characteristic features of holy war theology is the selection of military heroes from sacred tradition (such as a Joshua, or a Samson, or Phineas, or David) as role models for present conduct, and reference points for Scriptural interpretation. Embedded in the history and sacred texts of all world faiths are sufficient exemplars of redemptive violence to allow contemporary extremists to feel warranted in using violence to exterminate those whom they consider to be evil or dangerous.

Human beings are intensely imitative or relational creatures.¹⁹ We become who we are by desiring to be like what we see modelled by others. If those we admire and strive to emulate employ violence to achieve their desires, we are more likely to do so as well. If they practice peaceable, non-violent ways of living, we will be more inclined to conform our lives to that measure instead.

One of the most striking and consistent features of New Testament teaching is its emphasis on the imitation of Christ as the heart of Christian

living and the touchstone of Christian truth. Christ is not presented as one heroic example among many. He is the normative role model for his followers to aspire to, because he, in turn, is the perfect human embodiment of the perfections of God. To follow Jesus is thus to imitate God.

In this respect, it is hugely significant that Jesus is portrayed as one who utterly rejected the sword, and who loved his enemies to the point of self-sacrifice on their behalf. And it is this dimension of the divine activity in Christ that believers are expressly bidden to emulate. We are to be merciful (Matt 5:7), for God desires mercy not sacrifice (Matt 9:13; 12:7; Luke 10:37). We are to make peace, for God is a peacemaker (Matt 5:9; Rom 5:8; 16:20; Eph 2:14-22). We are to serve others, “for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). We are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, for our Father in heaven “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Luke 6:35) and “makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends his rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt 5:45).

We are to forgive, as our heavenly father has forgiven us (Matt 6:14); to be forbearing, kind and tender-hearted to one another, as God in Christ has been towards us (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). We are to endure hostility without retaliation (1 Pet 2:21; Heb 12:3), to live as those who are “always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:10-11; Gal 6:17). Christians are “to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2; cf. John 13:34; 1 John 2:7; 3:11).

Among other things, Jesus exemplifies a complete break with all the standard ideological dimensions of religious terrorism. Holy war ideology, for example, is dualistic and exclusionary. It divides humanity into friend and foe, and foes must either be forcibly converted or destroyed. Jesus never coerced anyone to convert, and he denounced the religious structures of exclusion in his own day (Mark 11:15-19). He welcomed to his table those who were, for whatever reason, marginalised by the dominant social and religious order.

Even more telling is the way he invited mutually antagonistic people to join his inner circle of disciples. He called Matthew the tax collector, a hated Roman collaborator, to be a fellow-disciple of Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15)

and Judas Iscariot, whose very name implied membership in the terrorist underground. Jesus brought these men into fellowship with hated quislings, such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), as well as with disdainful Pharisees (Luke 14:1-24), detested outcasts, and despised prostitutes (Luke 15:1; Matt 21:31; Luke 7:39). These were groups who, in their day, opposed each other with fanatical fury, and some believed that the destruction of the other was the necessary prerequisite for the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus renounced all such dehumanisation, and taught his followers to experience the presence of the kingdom precisely in and through their peaceful co-existence with one another.²⁰

Again, holy war ideology demonises opponents and identifies them with metaphysical evil. Several nationalist movements in Jesus' day located the ultimate source of evil in the influence of foreigners, especially in the rule of Rome. Jesus once barely escaped being lynched for suggesting that Gentile enemies would be accepted in the dawning kingdom of God (Lk 4:24-30).

Certainly he spoke about evil and the human capacity to commit evil. But he did not try to rid the world of evildoers by evil means. In his exorcisms, he targeted the sinister powers that sometimes control and corrupt people's lives in order to restore their inherent dignity (Mark 5:1-20). But he expelled the resident demonic powers rather than destroying their residence!! More than anything else, Jesus saw the demonic potential of the crusading impulse itself and the religious militancy undergirding it (Mk 8:31-33; Matt 7:15; 23:15).

Again, holy war ideology is wrathful and self-righteous. By contrast, Jesus called for love of enemies and refused to bless human anger as an expression of divine judgment. Just as murderers are "liable to judgment" for their violence, so too human anger is "liable to judgment" (Matt 5:21-22).²¹ It is not for human beings to feel divine wrath, or exercise divine judgment; that prerogative belongs to God alone.²²

Holy war ideology visits death and destruction in the name of divine righteousness, often in a highly symbolic manner. Jesus, too, spoke of God's justice, and used highly symbolic, though completely non-violent, forms of street theatre to protest against the abuse of justice by the domination

systems of his day (Mark 11:1-25). Jesus himself was condemned to death as a blasphemer in the name of God's righteousness and was executed in place of a known terrorist. But in his resurrection, he triumphed over the finality of death, and rendered the victory of those who shed blood in search of divine order null and void.

It was this Jesus that the first Christians looked to as their definitive role model for daily life. And the results were striking. The New Testament never portrays Christians as being involved in any kind of military action, hostile plotting, or violent intimidation. Nowhere in the New Testament do believers carry or wield swords. The sole instance when it happens, it is severely denounced by Jesus.²³

Subsequent Christian theology, however, has been markedly reluctant to take Jesus' function as normative role model seriously. It has both questioned its ethical feasibility, and feared the theological consequences of reducing Christ to a mere moral example. But the world has paid a high price in blood and tears for this reluctance.

In the interests of doctrinal orthodoxy and political power, the church has raised armies and waged war, tortured heretics and burned witches, persecuted dissenters and compelled conversions. Christ has functioned more as the central link in the doctrine of salvation than as the primary source of Christian values and praxis.²⁴ Tellingly the church's historic creeds are all but silent on ethics in general, and the radical demands of Jesus in particular.

This has encouraged a "great amnesia" or forgetfulness about the normativity of Jesus' human life for the community that bears his name. It has allowed us to be seduced by wealth, power and violence, and to forget our distinctive vocation in the world. As simple as it may sound, the memory of Jesus, and continual reference to him as normative role model for Christian conduct, is the single greatest antidote to any falsely christianised ideology of holy terror or counter-terror. Martin Niemöller, the great German Lutheran pastor, attributed his opposition to the Third Reich to a simple question he asked himself – "What would Jesus do?"²⁵

[But is it really that simple? One of the great tragedies of American evangelicalism today is that George W. Bush apparently asks himself the same question, as he orders the delivery of death and destruction on distant lands. 84% of adult Americans claim to follow the Jesus who taught love of enemies, without sensing any tension with their nation's military adventurism. Which Jesus do they follow? What gospel do they read?

Perhaps the question needs sharpening, along the lines of a T-shirt which a friend of mine wore to an anti-war demonstration in Auckland just after the invasion of Iraq. It asked, "Who would Jesus bomb?". Not just "What would Jesus do?", but "Who would Jesus detonate"? Who would Jesus kill? Who would Jesus have me to kill? To that question, there can only be one answer... "but I say unto you, love your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you...so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven."]

Perhaps most telling biblical example of someone who learned to love his enemies and pray for those who persecuted him, in conformity to Jesus, is the apostle Paul. This brings me to the second New Testament resource for developing a biblical theology of reconciliation and peacemaking.

2. Paul as an Exemplary Peacemaker

Prior to his conversion, Paul was a self-described "zealot",²⁶ a term which, at the time, had the specific connotation of one who was prepared to use lethal violence to defend the religious community and to punish apostasy. Zeal was virtually a holy war term.²⁷ Paul speaks expressly of his vicious terrorising of those he deemed blasphemers (Acts 26:11), of how he "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it."²⁸

Consumed with holy indignation, he became, in his own later words, "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence...the foremost of sinners" (1 Tim 1:12-15). One New Testament scholar draws a direct analogy between Paul's violent religious fundamentalism and that of Yigal Amir who assassinated Yitzak Rabin in November 1995 for betraying his people of Israel.²⁹

After his Damascus Road experience and his learning of the “ways of Christ” (1 Cor 4:17; Eph 4:19-21), Paul not only repudiated violence against Gentiles and their Jewish Christian sympathisers, he devoted his entire life and career to defending their rights of incorporation into the family of Israel, and to proclaiming how the “God of peace”³⁰ – a term virtually unique to Paul – had now made peace through Christ between those who are near and those who were far off.³¹

In all this, Paul considered himself to be imitating Christ,³² and he offered himself to his converts as a role model for them to emulate in turn.³³ Paul came to believe that this blasphemer – this persecutor, this man of violence, this foremost of sinners – had “received mercy” from God, and “a grace overflowing with the faith and love” so that (ἵνα) he might become “an example to those who believe in him for eternal life” (1 Tim 1:13-16).

It is surely telling that the most influential person in the early Christian movement was a transformed terrorist who saw his religiously-inspired violence as blasphemy, and his repudiation of it to be a pattern for all other believers.

His personal transformation from terrorist to peacemaker was also what helped birth his great theology of reconciliation. Although he does not use the vocabulary of reconciliation all that frequently, the concept of reconciliation clearly lies close to the heart of his theological outlook. Nowhere is this more obvious than in 2 Cor 5:16-21.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is a highly compressed account of Paul's theology of reconciliation contains several important insights into the nature and task of reconciliation, especially when we bring it into conversation with the other passages where reconciliation language occurs, such as Romans 5 and Ephesians 2.

(i) The first thing to note is that, for Paul, reconciliation is discovered, not manufactured. It is energised by the discovery of divine grace, not by the strength of human will power. That is why in Romans 5:11, Paul speaks of "receiving reconciliation", not of achieving it. Paul reached out in friendship towards those he once persecuted, not because he had grown tired of violence and enmity, but because he had been utterly overwhelmed at the immensity of God's reconciling mercy towards him. He didn't talk himself into tolerating his foes. Instead he found that the love of God, poured into his heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5), overflowed in reconciling hospitality towards others.

This is not to say that Paul found it easy to be a reconciler. Even as an apostle, he had many enemies in the Christian movement, and we know from his letters that he sometimes burned with rage at their destructive actions – not least, their insistence on excluding Gentile believers from full equality in the community of faith.³⁴ But Paul knew that he had no choice but to be committed to the hard work of reconciliation, because of the reconciling grace he had himself experienced.

Moreover he knew that his own experience was not just happenstance, some arbitrary benefit fortuitously bestowed on him. It was a revelation of something far grander at work behind the scenes. It was an initiation into God's transcendent work in Jesus Christ of "reconciling the [entire] world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19; Rom 11:15).

In his marvellous little book on reconciliation, Robert Schreiter emphasises that reconciliation is a spirituality more than a strategy. It is not a set of technical, problem-solving skills applied to situations of conflict. It is, above and before all else, a response to God's reconciling action in the world. "We experience God's justifying and reconciling activity in our own lives and in our communities", Schreiter proposes, "and it is from that experience that we

are able to go forth in a ministry of reconciliation”.³⁵ This was certainly Paul’s reality.

(ii) This leads to a second observation. What was most remarkable about Paul’s experience was that he discovered that God had taken the initiative in bringing about reconciliation. “All this is from God”, he writes, “who has reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor 5:18). It was God – the supreme victim of human depredation and rebellion – who had taken the decisive step to embrace his enemies. “For while we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10). Paul hammers this point home repeatedly in Romans 5: Christ died for the “ungodly”, while we were “still weak”, “still sinners”, still “enemies” (vv.6,8,10).

But how can this be? If reconciliation is, by definition, a two-sided affair, where former foes mutually agree to live at peace with each other, how can God unilaterally confer reconciliation on those who are his enemies, on those who remain hostile?

The answer lies, I suspect, in Paul’s understanding of Christ’s representative or mediatorial role. The early Christians believed that heaven and earth uniquely met in the person of Jesus Christ. From the divine side, as the Son of God, Christ represented and embodied God’s peacemaking initiative towards the human race. From the human side, as second Adam, he represented and exhibited humanity’s willing acceptance of God’s gracious offer of reconciliation, displayed in a steadfast obedience to God that endured even to the point of death on the cross (Rom 5:19).

In Christ, divine mercy and human faithfulness came together, and peace was secured between God and humanity. That which blighted humankind’s relationship to God was exposed and dealt with. “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (v.21). No longer then does God count humanity’s trespasses against it (v.19). For “through our Lord Jesus Christ”, Paul proclaims, “we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:11; Phil 2:8).

God’s work of reconciliation is, of course, unique, not something we can simply copy. But there are still profound lessons we can learn from God’s endeavour.

That God has taken the initiative in Christ, for example, underscores the truth that reconciliation depends, finally, on the willingness and capacity of victims to forgive. Even if the first move comes from the perpetrators of violence, torture, and brutality (and this is rare), it is only victims who have the power to reconcile. And victims can only do so if they know that the sins perpetrated against them will not be ignored, but will be confronted and dealt with.

That for Christ to expose and deal with sin meant enduring the horrors of bodily torture, humiliation and death underscores that reconciliation is never cheap. It not only requires us to address the physical and emotional consequences of violence upon victims; it also requires us to confront the malevolent epicentre of violence itself.

It calls us to face up to the structural and systemic nature of violence, to recognise the extent to which its poison permeates all of life, a poison which seeps deeply into the very bones of those directly embroiled in it. This is precisely what God did on the cross, achieving what Paul believed to be the reconciliation of all things to himself – an objective, trans-historical shift in the actual order of things.

(iii) Yet Paul knew from his own experience that in order for anyone to benefit from this cosmic transaction, there must be answering response of faith on the part of each individual, which is a third feature of Paul's understanding of divine peacemaking.

Reconciliation between persons can never be coerced; it can only be invited and received. This is what Paul considered to be the "ministry of reconciliation" (v.18) – the extending of an invitation to all people to recognise and appropriate the reconciliation that God had already accomplished. "So we are ambassadors for Christ", he explains, "since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (v.20, cf. Col 1:23) – viz., enter personally in to what God has already done in Christ.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce this ministry of reconciliation to a purely evangelistic level. It is not simply a matter of summoning isolated individuals to get right with God. It is inviting them to be reconciled with a reconciling-God; to be reunited with a God who is unceasingly engaged in the business of the healing and restoring and reconciling all creation. "So if

anyone is in Christ”, Paul explains, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (v.17).

Again the apostle is not just talking here about personal regeneration. He is affirming that God’s work of reconciliation is all-embracing in scope, and transforms the entire created order, although it is only those who are “in Christ” who can see and understand, and begin to make their own, what God is doing.

(v) This brings us to a fourth point. For Paul, the most obvious and pressing implication of being caught up in God’s new creation was an urgent commitment to peacemaking between hostile human communities, in particular between Jews and Gentiles. Perhaps this is what he means when he says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (1 Cor 5:16).

The categorising of people as friend and foes on the basis of secondary human distinctions – such as gender, class, nationality and race – no longer governs God’s new creation. A new humanity has been inaugurated, “where in there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). This is spelled out with unmistakable clarity in Ephesians 2:12-16

Remember that you [Gentiles] were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Eph 2:12-16).

This mention of “one new humanity in place of the two” does not mean that all human distinctions are abolished in Christ, with Jews somehow ceasing to be Jews, and Gentiles ceasing to be Gentiles. It means, rather, that distinctions between people groups no longer fuels rivalry and odium.

But it means even more than that too: it means that the lived-experience of each community is now incorporated in the shared experience of both, so that together both become a new, inclusive form of humanity. Gentile Christians now find their identity shaped by the story of Israel. Jewish Christians find their Jewishness enriched and completed by their embracing of non-Jewish believers in Messiah as brothers and sisters.

There is a profound practical truth here. When former antagonists are reconciled with one another, both sides are changed forever.³⁶ A new creation comes to pass. Reconciliation is not the restoration of the parties to some former state, minus the antagonism. It is the start of something different, a *creatio ex nihilo*, a new type of human experience.³⁷ It is the commencement of a new kind of relationship between the parties, stemming from the fact that the personal identity of each side has been transformed by their acceptance of the other's concrete experience. Both sides, separately and together, come to a new place.

The sufferings of victims and the atrocities of victimizers, on both sides of the divide, are not simply forgotten or denied. They are taken up into this new creation, integrated into the experience of both sides in a transforming, restorative way, so that a new identity and a new future is opened up both. No wonder Ephesians calls the transformation afforded by the experience of reconciliation a "mystery", indeed the very "mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:3-5)

Conclusion

Paul's theology of reconciliation is profound and searching. It was birthed in his own Damascus Road experience of God's reconciling grace, and fundamentally shaped his subsequent missionary practice. Paul's life and teachings show that those who have been reconciled with the reconciling-God have no choice but to be committed to working for reconciliation between human communities divided by enmity, violence or hatred. This is no easy task, for if it cost God the suffering and death of his beloved Son, it may be no more free of cost for those who follow in his footsteps.

But the responsibility to practice reconciliation is inescapable. To fail to do so is to throw the Christian community into a profound identity crisis.³⁸ For the good news of the gospel is that God has acted in Christ to vanquish sin and transform the very structures of reality, entrusting to his people the

responsibility to proclaim this reconciling event “to every creature under heaven” (Col 1:23).

It is because he knew this to be true that Desmond Tutu could confidently say to the white South African government, in sermon preached on February 29, 1988: “You have already lost! Let us say to you nicely, you have already lost! We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!”³⁹

If Paul were to time-travel into our own day, and could witness not only the Christian church’s failure to reach out in reconciliation across the bitter divisions that afflict the human family, but also our proclivity to sanction, sometimes even to bless in God’s name, the use of violence and terror by our nations to achieve selfish goals, I am sure he would snap at us with the same words of rebuke addressed to the church at Ephesus: “that is not the way you learned Christ!” (Eph 4:20).

For reconciliation is nothing more than giving hands and feet to what we see modelled in Christ, what we have learned of Christ, what Christ has done for us. For, as Paul reminds the Ephesians, “the truth is in Jesus...therefore put away your former life...and clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God”. This new self requires us to “put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:17-31). That is true reconciliation.

- 1 Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6.
- 2 Juergensmeyer, *Mind of God*, 7; also Lee Griffiths, *War on Terrorism*, 179.
- 3 Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 26.
- 4 On the phenomenology of holy war, see Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 17-48. See also Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace. A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon 1960), 44-52, 56-57, 109-116, 143-151, 204-10
- 5 Stern, *Name of God*, 83-84, 117, 233 (the label "Jihadi International Inc." was coined by Eqbal Ahmad).
- 6 Griffith, *War on Terrorism*, 107, 110.
- 7 Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 21.
- 8 One terrorist operative told Stern, "I am spiritually addicted to jihad", *Name of God*, 200, cf. 217, 221
- 9 Stern, *Name of God*, 281-82.
- 10 Stern, *Name of God*, xxvii.
- 11 Juergensmeyer, *Mind of God*, 125
- 12 Selengut, *Sacred Fury* 224-26. Cf. "Terror Mastermind Pledges His Loyalty to Osama Bin Laden." *New Zealand Herald* 19 October, 2004: B1.
- 13 See Jon Basil Utley, "Thirty-Six Ways the U.S. is Losing the War on Terror". Available from <http://www.antiwar.com/utley/?articleid=3234>. Accessed 3 August, 2004.
- 14 Griffith, *War on Terrorism*, 76. Stern, *Name of God*, 238.
- 15 For brief summary, McTernan, *God's Name*, 55-137.
- 16 Griffith, *War on Terrorism*, 46.
- 17 Alibahai-Brown, Yasmin. "Christians' Role Often Destructive: Are Christians Really Better Than Muslims?", *New Zealand Herald* (reprint. from *Independent*), March 30, 2004.
- 18 Just War theory has similar features in all three Abrahamic traditions; see Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 19-45, Juergensmeyer, *Mind of God*, 19-84, McTernan, *God's Name*, 53, 64-75
- 19 See the helpful discussion in Redekop, *Violence to Blessing*, 257-71.
- 20 Jewett & Lawrence, *Captain America*, 242. Griffith, *War on Terrorism*, 268-70
- 21 On Jesus' teaching on anger here, see Jewett & Lawrence, *Captain America*, 190-91.
- 22 Matt 7:1; Lk 6:37; Rom 14:3,10,13; 1 Cor 4:3-5; Rom 12:19; 1 Thess 4:6; Heb 10:30; Rev 6:10; cf. Acts 7:24.
- 23 Mark 14:47/Matt 26:52/Luke 22:49, cf. v.38
- 24 The *Soldiers Pocket Bible*, compiled by Edmund Calamy in 1643, disposed of the Sermon on the Mount by placing together the following verses:
- *Matt 5:44*; "But I say unto you love your enemies"
 - *2 Chr 19:2* "Wouldst thou help the wicked and love them that hate the Lord?"
 - *Ps 139:21f* "Do I not hate them, O Lord, that hate thee?"
- The summary is that the soldier must "love his enemies as they are *his* enemies, and hate them as they are *God's* enemies", from Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace. A Historical Survey and Critical Re-Evaluation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1960), 149-50
- 25 Cited in Victoria Barnett, "Beyond Complicity: The Challenges for Christianity", in *Must Christianity Be Violent?* 97-106 (at 105). Barnett observes that Christian rescuers of Jews was usually spontaneous and unreflective, "a kind of straightforward ethical simplicity" such as characterises Jesus in the gospel accounts
- 26 Gal 1:14; Philippians 3:6, cf. Romans 10:2; Acts 21:20; 22:3. For a brilliant discussion of the "paradox of zeal", see Jewett & Lawrence, *Captain America*, 149-66.
- 27 Dunn points out that:
- The ideal of such zeal was Phineas, who preserved Israel's separateness by killing the Israelite who took a Midianite into his tent (Num 25:1-15). In Ecclesiasticus 45:23f, this action is attributed to Phineas' "zeal"
 - In Ps 106:30-31, this act is "accounted to Phineas for righteousness". "Then Phineas stood up and interceded, and the plague was stopped. And that has been reckoned to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever" (Ps. 106:30-31)
 - It was Phineas' zeal which inspired the Maccabees to armed resistance
 - It was from Phineas's zeal that the Zealots took their name - the freedom fighters who led the fight against Rome in AD 66

- Paul apparently thought of himself as a Zealot in the same tradition (Gal 1:13-14; Ac 22:3), ready to take up the sword in expression of such zeal.

That can only mean that he had regarded the followers of Jesus as posing a serious threat to Israel's covenant status and distinctiveness. He must have seen the openness of these first Christians to receive Gentiles into their gatherings as something which broke down the protective barrier of the law and undermined Jewish set-apartness (23)

J.D.G. Dunn & A. M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 23-25.

28 Galatians 1:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:9-10; Philippians 3:6; cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 22:4; 26:9-11

29 Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Oxford: Lion, 1997, 28-29.

30 Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; cf. Hebrews 13:20

31 See esp. Romans 9-11; 15:7-13; cf. Ephesians 2:11-3:21

32 1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Corinthians 4:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-6; Galatians 6:17; Philippians 2:5-11. On Paul and Jesus, see C.D. Marshall, "Paul and Jesus: Continuity or Discontinuity?", *Stimulus* 5/4 (1997), 32-42.

33 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; cf. 1 Peter 2:21, cf. 1 Tim 1:16.

34 See, for example, Gal 1:6-9; 2:11-14; 5:12; 2 Cor 2:17; 11:4-5, 13-15; 12:11.

35 Robert J. Schreiner, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 60, cf. 26-27.

36 "Victims do not just rediscover their humanity; they discover their humanity in a new way. Part of their new way of being human is the astonishing care that victims can provide for their own oppressors", Schrieiter, *Reconciliation*, 56

37 "If we really believed in a God who creates *ex nihilo* we would practice restorative justice more often, realizing, like the psalmist, that even in hell God seeks our salvation", Battle, *Reconciliation*, 70.

38 "The church finds itself in an identity crisis when its members do not practice the messiness of reconciliation on a regular basis. In fact, one may argue that until Christians understand reconciliation as our primary work in the world, we will never understand Christian identity", Michael Battle, *Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 78

39 Quoted in John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Simon & Shuster Free Press, 2006), 291.