

*Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S.*

## **Reconciliation as a Model of Mission**

### CHANGING WORLD, CHANGING MISSION

As we stand at the end of a century and of a millennium, the surge of events sweeping over us has become nearly more than we can comprehend. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, who did not think that a new age of hope and dignity would not soon be upon us? Confident proclamations of a “new world order” and even the “end of history” were sounded. Futurologists like Alvin Toffler and John Naisbitt set forth visions of technological Gardens of Eden in which humanity would flourish and prosper. The dialectics of history seemed indeed to many to be in a penultimate phase, stretching toward a grand synthesis.

But history in fact seldom proceeds so elegantly as history in theory. A global capitalist order has quickly succeeded the bipolar capitalist-socialist conflict that marked most of this century. It has, within a few years, reconfigured the economic map of the world. While enriching many, and creating new centers of wealth for the first time, it has also pushed the very poorest into even greater misery. The old economic system, which had inherited the center-periphery model of capital flow and production from the age of empire, was replaced with a polycentric model that distinguishes between those who are inside and part of the process from those who are excluded and forgotten. This new global economic system, a form of market capitalism, has carried with it a layer of homogenized hyperculture that has settled upon the many cultures where it now operates. The signifiers of this hyperculture are items of consumption: clothing, food, and entertainment.

The global reach of this form of market capitalism is reinforced by a networked communication system that shrinks time and space; a single community of science and medicine and—increasingly—education.

The grand uniformities of a globalized world are not the entire story, however. Precisely because of the polycentric character of this network—with its promise that new centers may begin anywhere—its

grasp of the world is far from uniform. Particularisms are asserting themselves at the very same time—and often in the very same place—where globalization seems to have the upper hand. In some instances, these particularisms are very old ones that had been contained or repressed during the colonial and later bipolar period. The wars in the former Yugoslavia and in parts of the former Soviet Union are examples of such particularisms alive today. Other particularisms are direct protests against the new global reality and represent efforts for communities and movements to redefine themselves in the face of globalization. The struggles in Islam in countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria; religious right-wing movements and parties in Israel and the United States; and competing religious movements in India are all such protest movements. They are mistakenly labelled as “fundamentalist” at times, but actually represent different and complex responses to the homogenizing forces of modernity.

And then there are what might be called apocalyptic particularisms that see themselves as the guardians of a beleaguered truth in an increasingly hostile world. Recent events in Japan and the United States have brought these small groups into the glaring spotlight of public attention by their acts of terrorism in Tokyo, Oklahoma City, and New York. The polycentric process of globalization is strong enough to provoke these various particularisms, but not strong enough to control them.

Even more chillingly, in those parts of the world now ignored, violent forms of such particularisms rage unabated. The horrors of Rwanda are like wounds being constantly reopened.

The spread of global market capitalism, creating new centers of wealth and communication in the world, has also fostered a worldwide migration of peoples, either seeking some share in the wealth in the burgeoning cities, or fleeing the poverty created by the widening gap between rich and poor. In some areas this has led to conflicts as cultures clash and peoples compete for the same scarce resources. Others still are refugees from civil and political violence. The United Nations’ High Commission for Refugees estimates, conservatively, that there are some twenty million political refugees and eighty to a hundred million economic refugees uprooted from their homelands in the world today. This churning of peoples and cultures is unprecedented in world history. Frequently in the past, regions of the world would experience such demographic flow. But never has it been on such a worldwide scale.

In the midst of all this ferment (seen positively) and violence (seen negatively), there have also been profound signs of hope. The end of political dictatorships in the southern cone of South America and across the great Eurasian landmass, the end of apartheid in South

Africa—it was hardly conceivable that such violence could come to an end with such little counterviolence. In so many places it was human decency and integrity that came to prevail. But new societies do not arise phoenix-like from the ashes of morally and politically bankrupt societies. In some instances, as in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, civil societies had been completely dismantled to permit direct state supervision of individuals. In other societies, such as Argentina and Chile, the divisions that had grown up in the dictatorships leave deep chasms after the dictatorship had ended. In societies such as South Africa, blacks and whites are struggling to live together for the first time. In all of these societies, the violence, trauma, and death that marked those savage pasts must still be reckoned with, lest they pull down the fragile new constructions of more just and equitable societies now being built.

All in all, the ending of the century and the millennium is a time of great ferment—a horizon of creativity and hope for some, a burgeoning tide of chaos for others. We need to ask: Where is the Church and its mission in all of this?

To be sure, the Church of Jesus Christ is worldwide movement and organization as well. One-third of the world's population is Christian, distributed among more than twenty thousand identifiable communions and denominations. Nearly half of all these Christians live in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia.

These statistics remind us both of the success of the Christian missionary movement in the last two centuries, resulting in Christianity becoming a worldwide Church for the first time; and of the fact that the Christian Church is increasingly a Church of the poor, those whose lives are not improving under global capitalism and, in some instances, are growing even worse. The worldwide movement of Christianity, therefore, is running counter to the globalizing movements of the world economic system.

What is the sense of the Church's global mission in such a world? Where and how should the Good News be preached? The question presses upon us in a special way as we see the people whose lives have been tossed around in the political, economic, and social upheavals that are marking our time; those who have been uprooted from their homelands; those who bear the memories and wounds of violence; those who face profound uncertainty about their own future and the future of their children; those who see no alternative to a life of poverty and oppression.

#### MODELS OF MISSION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In his masterful study of the history and theology of Christian mission, South African missiologist David Bosch spoke of "paradigms" of

mission, borrowing the much-used term of historian of science Thomas Kuhn. While Bosch helpfully discerned a variety of such paradigms of mission throughout Christian history, many feel that he hesitated overmuch in proposing a paradigm for the present time. He speaks in his book *Transforming Mission* of an emerging ecumenical paradigm that is to serve as a meeting place for some fourteen of the trends he saw in late twentieth century mission. If there was any organizing element to which all these trends were responding, it was the “post-modern” condition. His enumeration of the many things that mission had become is useful, but does not present a compelling image or metaphor to galvanize missionary activity. Bosch completed his manuscript before the dramatic events of 1989 and the following years, and so could not have foreseen how the world would change in such a very short time.

Languages of paradigms and paradigm shifts remain very popular in theology and in popular literature, although such language has lost its cachet in science, at least in the Kuhnian sense of the term. Paradigms are rarely as self-enclosed as Kuhn first proposed them over thirty years ago. Nor does the new paradigm so utterly efface the old as Kuhn was read to have argued. “Model” might be a more modest word here, one that I prefer since, in Clifford Geertz’s sense, it can provide both a model “of,” that is a description of what is happening, and a model “for,” that is a prescription for how to act in that world so described.

Before proposing a model of mission for the times we are now in, it may be useful to look at the immediate past, since that most often is the experience against which we gauge our future. I would propose that there have been two principal models of mission operating in the modern missionary period, dating roughly from the beginning of the nineteenth century. These two models were compelling for so many Christians precisely because they took careful measure of the times, providing both a model “of” and a model “for” mission. They each provide a root image or metaphor that helped organize and direct experience. Both models can still be seen today, although conditions and attitudes in any given place will favor one more than the other.

The fact that there have been different operative models of mission in the Church’s history—Bosch’s historical overview gives ample evidence of that—reminds us that mission happens neither in a vacuum nor in a privileged supracultural space. Mission is both challenge and response: a challenge to address a perceived need and a response intended to meet that need.

Throughout the modern missionary period—from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth—mission was

characterized by metaphors of *expansion*. That this form of mission proceeded with the imperial expansion of countries of Europe is no accident. As contemporary debates on the relation between Christian mission and European colonialism indicate, it is a complex history, a history neither purely of mindless collaboration nor of uninterrupted resistance. Missionaries both aided in the subjugation of peoples and in the preservation of their cultures. The history and geography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission is such that generalizations will not carry one very far.

What does seem to be clear, however, is that mission took place within the context of European colonial expansion. That colonial expansion crept into missionary vocabulary, sometimes borrowing the former's military metaphors. Missionaries frequently shared the colonizers' view of the otherness of the people they encountered, seeing them as in need of education and civilization. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:20, which gained its preeminence as a biblical mandate in the expansionist period, sent forth missionaries to baptize and to teach.

The end of the colonial period, from 1945 through the 1960s saw the emergence of a second model of mission, characterized by metaphors of *accompaniment*. While extending the Church remained important, missionaries began to define their task increasingly as one of intense involvement with the changing society of postcolonial times, including nation-building and postcolonial identity. Images of expansion and conquest gave way to images of insertion and solidarity, to contextualization and inculturation, to dialogue, and to commitments to join the struggle for justice and liberation. Luke 4:16-20, with its images of intense involvement, is to this model of mission what the Great Commission was to the first one.

Arguments have persisted through the second half of the twentieth century as to how mission should be carried out (proclamation or dialogue? conversion or solidarity?) and whether there should be mission at all (which usually focussed on the expansionist model). But what all this represents, in some way, is the shift of circumstances under which Christian mission was conducted. The forms of accompaniment that began to emerge clearly in the 1960s (although, of course, forms of accompaniment reach far back into mission history) represent a different (and to my mind, accurate reading) of how times had changed and therefore how God's Good News needed to be communicated and heard.

It seems to me that the way the world has changed at the end of this century calls for a rethinking of mission once again. Not that aspects of mission of previous models must now be abandoned: there are still

those who have not heard the gospel, and the poor and the oppressed are still weighed down. But the changes in the world that I have tried to describe above call out for a model of mission that takes us at once to the heart of the gospel and to the aching heart of the world that needs to hear God's word.

That model is mission as reconciliation.

#### RECONCILIATION AS GIFT AND AS VOCATION

Because the word "reconciliation" is used in so many different ways, it is important to specify its meaning here. Reconciliation is, first of all, not about forgetting the violence or trauma of the past so that a people or a nation can get on with the business of reconstruction. Appeals to forgive and forget are quite simply misplaced here, since such hastily called truces do not deal with the demons of the past; they are only held at bay, and then but for a time. Such a tactic trivializes the suffering that people have gone through and, in effect, continues their victimization rather than overcomes it.

Nor can reconciliation be construed as an alternative to or substitute for the struggle for liberation. This was proposed on a number of occasions in Latin America in the 1980s as a right-wing stratagem to undercut theologies of liberation. Liberation is a condition for reconciliation, not an alternative to it. If reconciliation is about anything, it is about truth. The lie of oppression must be countered and overcome.

And finally, reconciliation as it will be understood here is not to be equated with arbitration of conflict. Arbitration and conflict management are important and necessary things, indeed often noble undertakings by believers and non-believers alike. But they are not the same as reconciliation, inasmuch as arbitration and conflict management remain beholden in some manner to the terms of the conflict itself and so suspend violence but do not really overcome it.

What, then, is reconciliation as it is being proposed here? First and foremost to remember is that reconciliation is the work of God, reconciling the world in Christ. To recognize that it is God, rather than any of us, who is the agent of reconciliation is to acknowledge the breadth and the depth of pain and trauma that evil and violence wreak on the world. None of us can fathom the terrible impact they make upon us. Nor are we able to assess the persisting damage they may continue to bring to human lives and to communities.

It is through us that God brings reconciliation. But it comes especially through the victim who experiences God's reconciling grace restoring the victim's humanity and so lifting the victim out of victimization. That God would begin with the victim should not surprise

us—God sides with the outcast, the marginalized, those left to feel less than human. But that restoration of the victim's humanity, that enablement of a new subjecthood does not simply return the reconciled person to a prior state. As St. Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians, those who have been reconciled are made a new creation. They stand in a new place, from which they view both what has been done to them and what the future might be.

In reconciliation people frequently focus upon the perpetrators of evil, how they might repent of their evildoing, and how forgiveness might take place. These are the most glaring dimensions of a situation in need of reconciliation. But they are usually also the most intractable. Evildoers are reluctant to come forward, and often show little remorse. Moreover, church people will urge victims to forgive and forget, since that is the "Christian" thing to do. But we must remember that the perpetrator of evil has been diminished in humanity by what has happened as well, which likely makes them less able to repent or show remorse. Perhaps that is why God first restores the victim. The free, reconciling gift of God's love, that restores a damaged humanity, makes it possible for the victim to love others. And very often those who have so experienced God's reconciling love discern in that love not only how to come to terms with the terrible things that have happened to them in the past, but also discover a vocation, a calling from God to be the healers and reconcilers in the shattered world around them. It is they who become agents of God's reconciliation and it is through them that reconciliation takes place.

That reconciling grace does not come in an instant. A long and difficult journey precedes the welling up of God's grace in their lives, a journey that involves untangling the skein of lies that have wrapped themselves around the victim. It involves the reordering of memories so that the past can no longer terrorize the present. And it sometimes requires finding one's bearings again after profound disorientation.

Nor does forgiveness come any more quickly. Well-meaning admonitions to forgive because it is the Christian thing to do are misplaced, and simply lay an additional burden on the victim. Being made to forgive makes a victim even more victimized. Forgiveness arises out of the autonomy of the reconciled victim, when the victim can call upon God to forgive, since the range of forgiveness needed reaches beyond our ken. This would follow the pattern of Jesus asking God to forgive his executioners as depicted in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus does not forgive his executioners, but asks God to do so.

And forgetting? To "forgive and forget" are frequently paired together, as though forgetting is proof of real forgiveness. But forgetting is not part of the experience of reconciliation. What is remembered is

now cast in a different way, but it is not forgotten. To forget such matters is to trivialize them, and so to trivialize the experience (and therefore the person) of the victim. Memories remain, although they are transformed. The rage arising out of them no longer consumes the present. Nor is there vengeance, although the demand for justice remains. For me the most powerful image of this memory is the story of the risen Jesus with the disciple Thomas in John 20. Jesus appears to the disciples in his glorified form. But that transformed body still bears the clear marks of his torture and death. And it is these wounds that heal Thomas. The wounds, the scars are still there, but they become the source of healing. They are not forgotten.

From all of this it should be apparent that reconciliation is no easy road. Nor is it a graduated, therapeutic path. Reconciliation is about a healing, a change of view that cannot be programmed. It is more of a spirituality than a strategy, and one cultivates it as a spirituality and not as a task with a beginning and an end.

#### RECONCILIATION AS A MODEL OF MISSION

So how might reconciliation be a model of mission today? What would developing such a spirituality involve, and how might it be translated into a ministerial praxis? Is the ministry of reconciliation, of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 5, indeed given to us and open to all?

To begin, one cannot really speak of a "right" to be a reconciler. Church people sometimes arrogate this ministry to themselves, but this is something that comes to one through the reconciling experience of God's grace and calling to be a reconciler and healer. Or one may participate in the ministry of reconciliation by having stood by the victims in their struggle, and being accepted by those victims. To come in after the struggle and appoint oneself a minister of reconciliation lacks any credibility. Church people sometimes do this, and so impede the process of reconciliation rather than foster it.

What might a ministry of reconciliation look like? As has been already said, it is God who makes reconcilers. Yet we can create a ministry around such people that supports and extends the work of reconciliation. This might be achieved by creating communities of memory and communities of hope.

Communities of memory bear the narrative of a people, the fount and source of their identity. They struggle to maintain that narrative in the face of the lies propagated about that community by acts of violence and oppression. When persons and communities have been traumatized by violence and oppression the narratives of who a community is and has been need to be rebuilt and restored. A community of memory is first of all a community of *hospitality*; that is to say,

it sees in the victim a person, a subject, not just a victim degraded by violence. A community of hospitality gives a space of recognition and safety wherein damaged personhood might be restored. In such a place persons and communities might tell their stories and restore their narratives.

Secondly, a community of memory is a place of *truth-telling*, where the lies of violence, injustice and oppression are overcome. They are not just safe enclaves where shattered lives may be restored, they advocate and struggle for truth in the public forum as well. Here is one of the places where the ministry of reconciliation continues the struggle for justice, for full reconciliation requires justice. Without full justice, the lie still finds a place in a society.

Third, a community of memory is a place of *connection*, forging bonds in many directions. It connects the shreds of stories of violence and trauma into the larger narratives of individuals and communities, stories shorn of their power to consume the present but stories that are part of the larger narratives of our identity. A community of memory reconnects those who have been separated out and reweaves them into the fabric of the community. And perhaps most importantly, a community of memory connects the story of the community with the narrative of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, in order (to echo Philippians 3) to be so conformed into the pattern of his death as to come to know the power of the resurrection.

A ministry of reconciliation also fosters communities of hope. The call to reconciliation is not only one of coming to terms with the past. Reconciliation cannot occur without that. But reconciliation is also about coming to a new place from which a new society is constructed. Communities of hope work, first of all, to give shape to the vocation that grows out of the reconciling experience. The vocation grows out of the gift, a gift meant to be shared further with others. But concrete programs and projects must be formed to help make this happen. A community of hope manifests its hope by looking to the future, the building of a new and just society.

Secondly, by being a community of hope, the reconciling community shows its conviction that there can be an alternative to the present order. It is suspicious of inevitabilities that constrain the creative spirit. It holds fast to the vision of the Colossians hymn of all things being reconciled to God in Christ.

#### A NEW MODEL OF MISSION?

Having attempted to describe reconciliation, both as an experience and as a ministry, we are left with the question: can it be the model of mission we need at this point in our history? Is this the form the Good

News of Jesus Christ takes at the end of the century and of the millennium?

I would propose that it is. The message of reconciliation seems especially apt for so many of the situations we encounter in our world today. When one surveys the profound brokenness growing out of violence, trauma and oppression that must be overcome in the construction of a new society in places like South Africa, Argentina, El Salvador, and Cambodia, a ministry of reconciliation is urgently needed. Where societies have seen their civil life for so long ruled by lies, such as in Eastern Europe, communities of truth-telling and memory are so necessary. Where long-seated hatreds have boiled over into civil war in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, a restored humanity and community are called for. And in societies that suppress violently the contradictions that allow some to prosper and the rest to sink in poverty and degradation, or call such contradictions necessary and inevitable, the truth needs to be told. Reconciliation is about the healing of humanity, the pursuit of justice, telling the truth. It is about connecting together the shreds of broken lives, and a vision of a healed planet.

Reconciliation may well be the response to a time where globalization permits no alternative to itself, and for that reason gives some forms of particularism a special virulence. A ministry in which one can hold on to hope against the apparent odds of broken lives and communities; in which the truth will not be stilled by webs of lies; in which the human community can be imagined from a new place: this is surely the Good News of Jesus Christ in our time. News of one who has known our suffering, who now knows glory but still bears the scars of his torture and death: this is the mission, at the end of the century and the end of the millennium, to which we are called.

---

*Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., founding editor of New Theology Review, teaches systematic theology at the Catholic Theological Union. Author of Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order (Orbis, 1992), he is an international expert in cross-cultural dimensions of theology.*