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Making and Sharing the Space: Initiatives for Story-sharing and Reconciliation among Women and Men in South Africa and Northern Ireland¹

ABSTRACT

In this article I present findings from my earlier research on reconciliation in South Africa and Northern Ireland, together with some issues raised by my current research project on “reconciliation in South Africa from women’s perspectives”. Reconciliation is seen as a process whereby the diverse “moral landscapes” held in a war-torn society are addressed, with the aim of building, rebuilding or transforming relationships between those in conflict. A common strategy is to provide “safe spaces” where people from all “sides” can broaden their “moral landscapes” and find sources of common ground by listening to, and being challenged by, each other’s life stories and personal experiences of the conflict. On the basis of my case studies, I identify some important conditions for such “story-sharing”, as well as certain dilemmas. I also ask critical questions about what beliefs and practices that may silence certain stories, and how space and power are shared between women and men in church and society, in particular in post-TRC South Africa.

MY CASE STUDIES: NORTHERN IRELAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

In my dissertation,² I noted that reconciliation in, or after, armed conflict tends to be identified with *two particular processes*:

- 1) To “*bridge the divide*” of negative attitudes, stereotypes and images held by people in a context of conflict – in order to build mutual trust and new relationships across their divisions.³
- 2) To “*deal with the past*” by healing the damage caused in the course of the conflict, looking at the needs of victimised persons or groups, as well as those of the perpetrators of violence, and seeking to build, restore or transform the relationship between them.

Northern Ireland was primarily an example of the *first type* of reconciliation process. Here “reconciliation work” has basically been equated with providing space for encounters across the

1 This paper was read at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Stellenbosch University in April 2005 when Dr. Maria Ericson was based at Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology as a visiting scholar.

2 Ericson, 2001.

3 According to Lederach (1995:44) this is seen to be the task of “the reconciler” in the process of building peace during, as well as after, an armed conflict.

Catholic-Protestant divide in order to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. Such initiatives, which were the main focus of my study, have been a major task of the Ecumenical Movement in Northern Ireland (of which I have a number of personal experiences⁴) ever since the outbreak of civil unrest (commonly known as “the Troubles”) in 1969. During the paramilitary cease-fires from 1994 onwards, and the political talks leading to the peace agreement of 1998 (the *Good Friday Agreement* or the *Belfast Agreement*), people also began to talk more openly about their personal experiences of pain in the course of the Troubles, and there was an increasing recognition of the need to develop organised initiatives to deal with the past. Some initiatives had been set up at the time of my research visit in 1998, although they were still at an initial stage.

South Africa served as an example mainly of the *second type* of reconciliation process. Here “reconciliation” has largely been about dealing with the past and, according to my impression, very much identified with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). A very common response I received from people I met “on the street” when I told them that I did research on reconciliation in their country was “aha, you are studying the TRC ...” And whether or not they liked the idea of reconciliation often depended upon their personal perception, or personal experience, of the TRC.⁵

However, in post-TRC South Africa, the issue of bridging divides between people in a still very divided society has also come to the forefront.

PEACE, RECONCILIATION AND THE SEARCH FOR A SHARED MORAL LANDSCAPE

When people I met equated reconciliation with the TRC in South Africa, or with cross-community work in Northern Ireland, I tried to explain that I looked at reconciliation in a broader sense: as *building, rebuilding or transforming the relationships* between those in conflict. The aim of this process would be to reach a state of “positive” or “sustainable” peace, which, in line with recent ideas in peace and conflict research, is identified with an egalitarian, democratic, and sharing community, where the basic human needs of the members are being met.⁶ Exactly what is needed to reach such a state would vary from one context and one situation to another. It may entail bringing people of opposite groups together to enhance mutual understanding. It may entail exposing, and eventually seek to transform, abusive relationships. It may entail providing space and resources for people to work through their own painful experiences. It may entail forgiveness, reparation, restitution etc. etc.

One major difficulty is that different parties might give different answers to questions such as: “what does the major divide consist of?”, “what kind of relationships are to be built?”, “what type of peace should one seek?”. For instance in Northern Ireland each and everyone I met said that they wanted peace. *But* they did not want “peace at any price” – they wanted a “just peace”. And for Republicans a “just peace” was a “peace with British withdrawal”⁷ – while for their opponents

4 I visited Northern Ireland, and ecumenical organisations there, for the first time in 1988. From October 1991 until September 1992, I studied for an M.Phil. at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin. Part of that period I lived in the Currach Community, a newly established ecumenical community next door to the so-called “Peace Line” in West Belfast, where I also stayed during my research visit to Northern Ireland in September 1998.

5 So far I have visited South Africa in 1996 (one month), 1999 (3 months), 2001 (two months), 2003 (2,5 months), 2004 (2,5 months), 2005 (3,5 months), and 2006 (one month).

6 Ericson (2001:21-22, 27, 82-86, 98-99, 433). Drawing on for instance Galtung 1997 and Lederach 1995.

7 They saw the partition of Ireland in 1920 as unjust in the first place, and regarded Irish unification as necessary to achieve socio-economic equality between Catholics and Protestants as well as progress for Ireland as a whole. Adams (1995:60, 88-109, 196-197). This stance was obviously modified when Sinn Féin accepted the *Good Friday Agreement*.

a “just peace” was “peace without conceding to Irish Republican Army (IRA) demands”.⁸ In South Africa many people stressed the need for restitution as a necessary component of reconciliation, while others spoke of reconciliation as “to forgive and move on”.

Such divergent interpretations of values such as “peace”, “justice” and “reconciliation” in a particular context would partly be rooted in different experiences and perspectives, depending upon one’s position in society and one’s role in the conflict. In my doctoral dissertation, which was written in the field of ethics, I therefore argued for the need to investigate values and norms not simply in isolation, but within the wider context of what I called a “*moral landscape*”, and I looked at reconciliation as a process in which the following dominant elements of the moral landscapes held in a war-torn society are addressed:

- Experiences of trauma and bereavement, separation and socio-economic inequalities;
- Views of the conflict, its history and its causes;
- Identifications and loyalties;
- Views of oneself and of “the other” (i.e. one’s adversary);
- Norms for interaction in a conflict situation, and interpretations of values such as “peace” and “reconciliation”.⁹

*SOME NOTES ON MY SOURCES*¹⁰

My main sources on the pursuit of reconciliation, came from ecumenical organisations (which in both contexts sought to bring people together across the prevailing divisions), political initiatives (in South Africa the TRC, in Northern Ireland the *Good Friday Agreement*), and finally from victims of violence or from organisations who worked with victims.¹¹ At the time of my dissertation, it was too difficult and sensitive to find primary sources on the personal perspectives of the perpetrators. However, after the completion of the TRC’s amnesty process in South Africa (and my dissertation), a number of such studies were carried out.¹²

8 As in the words of the party official I interviewed from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in September 1998: “We would like peace, but we don’t accept peace at any price, it has to be a just peace. There is a verse in the Bible, you know, [that] ‘they cry peace, peace where there is no peace’, and that would be what we see as happening at the minute. We are totally committed to the peace process but not the peace process that’s involved with terrorism. We’d be happy to work with all constitutional parties and draw up an Agreement”. The DUP, which by now is the biggest party among Protestants (slightly bigger than the other major party, the Ulster Unionist Party) is the party most unwilling to co-operate with Sinn Féin in the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

9 Here I was inspired by Kammer 1988, but I also used various other literature by theologians and peace researchers to develop my theoretical framework. Ericson (2001:Ch. 3).

10 For further details on my choice of sources see Ericson (2001:64-79)

11 I preferred to approach people working with victims, as well as utilising stories already written down by victims, or recounted in publications by other researchers. This choice was made out of a recognition of the vulnerability of many people with traumatic experiences. On the one hand they may be eager to talk about their experiences, especially if they are in the need of personal attention and support. On the other hand, this desire may make them vulnerable to exploitation by a researcher who offers to pay some attention to them. Since I was not in a position to offer a long-term personal involvement that could significantly change their situation, I was therefore very cautious about approaching victimised people, except those speaking out of a leadership position within a victim’s/survivor’s support group. On this vulnerability of victimised people in the respective contexts, see e.g. Colvin 2004 and Fay, Morrissey & Smyth (1997:6-8).

12 Abrahamsen, T & Van der Merwe, H 2005. *Reconciliation through amnesty? Amnesty applicants’ views of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Braamfontein: Centre for the Study of

My choice of ecumenical groups was motivated both by the connection between religion and politics in both contexts, and by my awareness of *the ambivalent role of the Christian religious tradition*. While reconciliation with God, through Jesus Christ, is intimately connected with reconciliation with one's neighbours,¹³ and Christians are even instructed to love their enemies and forgive those who trespass against them (Mt. 5:43-48 and 6:12-15), the churches also tend to mirror the ideas and structures of society, and to harbour divisions within themselves. This can be seen both in Northern Ireland and in South Africa. In *Northern Ireland*, where religious and national identifications are so closely linked that "Catholic" and "Protestant" have become shorthand terms to identify the main "sides" in the conflict, it has been observed that:

A significant religious division in these islands [i.e. Ireland and Britain] is not between Catholic and Protestant but between these two tendencies in each individual, Church, and community. The one fuels conflicts and erects barriers: the other defuses tension and builds bridges.¹⁴

In that context, I was particularly interested in the bridge-building efforts of the ecumenical movement, and especially in the unofficial ecumenical initiatives for reconciliation, i.e. initiatives set up jointly by concerned Catholic and Protestant individuals. Such unofficial initiatives preceded the official cooperation between church leaders which started in the late 1960s, and, given the ambiguity still found within the churches towards ecumenical co-operation,¹⁵ the views of those within the churches who have been particularly committed to such "crossing" are of special interest.

The *South African* scene is even more complex: first of all with a "racial" hierarchy *between* religions (with Hinduism, Islam and African traditional religions drawing their adherents from people subordinated by colonialism and apartheid), and secondly with a hierarchy *within* Christianity, where the African Independent Churches were formed to escape white dominance. Furthermore, the "mainline" churches of European origin faced the challenge of catering *both* for their white members of European descent ("Settler Christianity") *and* for their black, "coloured" or Indian converts ("Mission Christianity"). In practise they came to mirror colonial and apartheid society in terms of separation and inequalities. Members of the same denomination were affected in quite different ways, and took different sides, in the political struggles.¹⁶ The churches are thus "excellent laboratories for reconciliation",¹⁷ faced with the challenge to build, rebuild or transform

Violence and Reconciliation (www.csvr.org.za). Foster, D, Haupt, P & De Beer, M (eds) 2005. *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council.

13 Through the work of Christ, Christians have become a "new creation", entrusted with the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17-19). They are obliged to reconcile with their neighbour before approaching God at the altar (Mt. 5:23-24).

14 Bailey (ed) (1988:148).

15 See the thorough empirical study by Morrow, et al. 1994 (1991), which noted that in some places the churches contained and supported the only people seriously committed to cross-community relationships. Yet, the strongest opponents to any contacts between Catholics and Protestants could also be found within churches (p. 262). Since that study was conducted ecumenical cooperation has increased, although resistance still remains, in particular in certain geographical areas. See further Ericson (2001:255-256).

16 The most notorious example is of course the Reformed Churches of Dutch origin. In practise, divisions did however also persist within the churches that retained a multiracial structure. Due to social custom, reinforced by apartheid legislation, they were normally not integrated at the local level, and far from all their members and ministers supported the active struggle against apartheid. See further "Faith Communities and Apartheid ..." 1999.

17 Van der Merwe (2003:275).

relationships within their own institutions and between their own members, as well as with their neighbouring Christian denominations and other faith communities.

RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THE “MORAL LANDSCAPE”

As a theologian I am particularly interested in exploring the religious dimensions of the “moral landscape”, thereby bringing out the ambivalent role that religious beliefs, people and institutions may play in conflict situations and reconciliation processes.

Applying the idea of diverse “moral landscapes” as a tool to analyse the roles of religion in a particular conflict would first of all involve a recognition that *experiences differ also among women and men, girls and boys, belonging to religious groupings*. This includes their experiences of direct violence, trauma and bereavement. It also includes experiences of separation and inequalities due to established practices and power structures – structures and practices which may well be mirrored by religious institutions.

Yet experiences do not determine everything. It is also a matter of *how these experiences are interpreted*. Thus one needs to take into account *the various religious interpretations of the conflict that may either fuel tension or build bridges*. What are the prevailing images of God and how (s)he has ordered creation (including the relationships between blacks and whites, women and men)? What is seen as “the will of God” throughout history and in the current conflict: whose “side” is God regarded to be on? How, and with whom, do the parties involved identify themselves and to whom do they plead their loyalty? Is for instance their primarily loyalty to “their own people” who are also identified as “God’s chosen people”? Or does their religious faith allow for an overarching loyalty to God who loves everybody (including those from “the other side”) equally? How do they view those of “the other” (“racial”, religious, ethnic) group: as “God’s enemy” or as “God’s image”? as “subhuman” or “nonhuman” or as “a person created by God and hence my equal”?

Other crucial issues are the *norms and values* that religious people claim to adhere to. How do they envision a “just peace” or a “true reconciliation”, or the manifestation of “God’s kingdom” or “God’s peace” (in Biblical terms *shalom*), in their particular context? And what means do they propose to attain these goals? Do they see “their side” as pursuing a “holy war”, or a “just war”? What perspectives do the peacemakers inspired by their religious faith represent, and from what visions, norms and values do they draw their inspiration?

ADDRESSING DIVERSE EXPERIENCES OF THE CONFLICT: STORY-SHARING AS A STRATEGY FOR RECONCILIATION

A common strategy for the reconciliation initiatives that I came across was to give people from opposing “sides” the opportunity to share their life stories and personal experiences of the conflict with each other.¹⁸ This was an important way to enhance mutual understanding by broadening the “moral landscapes” of the participants to include also experiences and perspectives of people from

18 I distinguish between: A) “The truth” as correspondence between *what* happened and what is said about a specific *event*. B) “The truth” about *how* a person, out of his or her position (for instance as victim or perpetrator of a specific violent act) has *experienced and interpreted this event*. This truth is expressed in his or her personal *story* about the event. C) “The truth” about the ultimate principles and powers that govern the world. While full objective truth about these principles and powers may never be found, the truth about what people have done to each other would be attainable, although the personal stories about how the event has been experienced and interpreted might differ. Ericson (2001:126-127).

“the other side”. Such encounters could be a source of empathy and relationship-building across divisions by giving the participants the opportunity to discover “the others” as fellow human beings – with similar needs, fears and experiences.¹⁹

I encountered various forms of story-sharing initiatives. The one most well known to the general public is of course the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was intended to be part of a wider “bridge building process”²⁰ in South African society by providing space for people to share their stories. Its public hearings provided a break with the previous years of suppression and censorship. In the words of Michael Lapsley:

Living in South Africa for the last eighteen months has been an extraordinary experience because there is a sense in which the Truth Commission has been like a gigantic mirror put in front of the country. Night after night on television, day after day on the radio, day after day in newspapers, we have witnessed and heard the pain, the pain of what we have done to one another as a people.²¹

Perhaps less well known are a number of other, unofficial, initiatives that I encountered in the course of my research. Some of them were directed towards the general public (i.e. anyone interested in taking part), such as much of the work done by organisations like Corrymeela (the biggest and oldest ecumenical reconciliation group in Northern Ireland) and the Institute for the Healing of Memories (where people were invited to share their stories about how apartheid had affected their lives).²² In Northern Ireland, “reconciliation work” has largely been identified with providing such “safe spaces” for encounters between Catholics and Protestants from different walks of life. Here storysharing was also explicitly identified as a much more powerful tool than mere intellectual debate to challenge established views of the conflict and to address sensitive issues such as policing. In the words of the leader of Corrymeela:

Say one Catholic family from West Belfast [i.e. one of the working-class areas hardest hit by the Troubles] may talk about their view of the police and about their experiences of the army and the police in their area, and that might be listened to by people whose family members, because they are Protestants and Unionists, are members of the security forces. So what we’re actually doing is helping people to confront the truth in terms of interpersonal relationships among people that they’ve got to know and whose stories they hear first-hand, meeting them eye-to-eye so they’re able to hear it in a way which is far more powerful and has a far more lasting effect because it’s situated within a relationship.²³ Story-sharing initiatives could also be directed towards more carefully selected groups, such as local communities and neighbourhoods that had been divided by violence, or

19 Summarised in Ericson (2001:447).

20 *TRC Final Report*, “The Mandate”, Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 5.

21 Lapsley 1998.

22 The Institute for the Healing of Memories (www.healingofmemories.co.za) conducts workshops that are publicly advertised and open to anyone, as well as special workshops for selected groups of people (e.g. within a church). In November 1999, I took part in one of the open workshops. The participants who had lived in South Africa during apartheid (i.e. the vast majority) were invited to reflect on the following questions: what are my experiences of apartheid? what was done to me? what did I do? what did I fail to do? Other participants (like me) could replace “apartheid” with whatever experiences that had been formative in their lives.

23 Interview with Trevor Williams, Leader of the Corrymeela Community, Belfast, 8 September 1998. Throughout the Troubles, the police has been about 90% Protestant, and I am not sure to what extent the police reform stipulated in the *Good Friday Agreement* has managed to increase the number of Catholics in the force.

towards politicians and/or church leaders. After the peak in violence in Northern Ireland in the autumn of 1993,²⁴ there were for instance initiatives to facilitate dialogue with members of the paramilitary linked parties (i.e. Sinn Fein and, on the other side, the PUP and the UDP²⁵). Through such encounters, the participants could, according to one Catholic nun in the ecumenical community facilitating these meetings and one Protestant church minister taking part in meetings with Sinn Fein representatives, discover the person behind the labels, and become more empathetic towards each other's perspectives. These meetings probably paved the way for the cease-fires and subsequent political talks.²⁶

In other initiatives, such as stress and trauma healing workshops, victims of violence (sometimes from different "sides") shared their stories with, and mutually supported, each other. Finally there were also initiatives to bring together victims and perpetrators of violence. Here I noted a difference between Northern Ireland and South Africa. In South Africa the focus was largely on encounters between individual victims and the direct perpetrators of violence. Here the TRC process, where both victims and perpetrators were required to approach the Commission as individuals, probably played a part. Many victims also expressed a desire for such meetings. One psychologist stressed the importance of giving both parties the opportunity to see the humanity of each other. For the victims it was important to see that the perpetrators were not monsters to be feared, to hear them explain their deeds, and to see that they could cry and feel pain (especially the pain of their victims).²⁷

The TRC's amnesty hearings gave some of the victims the opportunity to listen to and speak with their perpetrators. The TRC also facilitated some meetings outside the hearings. Although such encounters were comparatively few,²⁸ I did find some examples of how victims and perpetrators discovered the humanity of each other and were challenged by each other's stories. However, one must also acknowledge that the perceptions differed among victims, sometimes even among victims of the same attack who witnessed the same hearing. While some expressed

24 In 1993 there was an upsurge in Loyalist paramilitary activity aimed at Catholics (or even at pubs where Irish music was played). Then, in the autumn, an IRA bomb killed ten people (one of the bombers and nine Protestant civilians) as it exploded prematurely in a fish shop on the predominantly Protestant Shankill Road close to the "Peace Line" in West Belfast. I had walked up and down that street almost daily when I lived in the Currach Community in 1992, and a friend whom I had stayed with in August 1993 lived just around the corner from the fish shop. Loyalist paramilitaries responded with an attack on a pub mostly frequented by Catholics in the small village of Greysteel, killing six Catholics civilians and one Protestant civilian. A further 13 people were injured in the attack one of whom later died of his injuries on 14 April 1994.

25 The PUP (Progressive Unionist Party) is associated with the Loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) is associated with the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Contrary to Sinn Fein, which throughout the Troubles received about one third of Catholic votes (the rest of the Catholic electorate supporting mainly the Social Democratic and Labour party, SDLP) and is particularly strong in Catholic working class areas, support for the Loyalist parties with paramilitary links has been quite marginal in "their" (Protestant) constituency: in the election to the new Northern Ireland Assembly in June 1998 the PUP won two seats and the UDP none.

26 See further Ericson, (2001:276-277, 279).

27 Ericson, (2001:351-353).

28 Most of the perpetrators did not apply for amnesty and may still be unknown. The TRC received about 20 000 victim statements, but only about 7000 amnesty applications of which around 1500 were recognised to fall within the mandate of the TRC. Slye (2000:85). The rest of the amnesty applications came from people without any clear political motive for their acts, or concerned politically motivated deeds which were not gross human rights violations. Meetings outside of the TRC before the amnesty process was finished (mid-2001) were rare, because the amnesty applicants were reluctant to speak before their cases had been finalised.

forgiveness and empathy, others expressed frustration and anger, doubting that the perpetrators had told the whole truth and being hurt by their primary interest in amnesty rather than repentance.²⁹

In Northern Ireland there was, on the other hand, little stress upon bringing together individual victims and perpetrators, and opinions seemed to differ among victimised people themselves as to whether they would like to meet with the direct perpetrators, or if they would rather met with representatives from the perpetrator organisations. In the story-sharing initiative that I came across, people who had been bereaved through the Troubles were brought together with representatives from the paramilitary organisations responsible for the killings, but not with the direct perpetrators. Those who had been bereaved spoke about the full impact of their loss, and *all* participants shared their respective life stories. In response to my question about what he had learned from such a meeting, one man who had lost several family members³⁰ told me how he had discovered the paramilitaries as “flesh and blood” who “don’t have horns”, and as people with whom he had quite a bit in common living in a working-class area, even though their political aspirations (and attitudes to the use of arms) would differ. The woman in charge of this initiative, who by the way had been inspired by the Institute for the Healing of Memories, also underlined how demanding these meetings were for the paramilitary representatives, since it “raised all kinds of things about themselves and what they did and the full consequence of what they did”. She also told about the emotional stress experienced by all parties involved: “they all had nightmares, they all couldn’t sleep, they were unsettled for days.”³¹ Similar observations were made regarding victims who testified before the TRC.³² *Story-sharing – especially about traumatic experiences – is thus not something to enter into lightly, without the proper support structures.*

In the various story-sharing initiatives I nevertheless noted certain *experiences that could serve as a basis for common ground, mutual understanding and empathy*. It could be similar experiences of victimisation and loss of loved ones, the experience of parenthood, or even the experience of having been combatants (albeit on different sides). When there was less of a common ground, *imagining oneself in the position of “the other”* (e.g. a white South African imagining her life being strangled with apartheid legislation) could enhance empathy. In Northern Ireland, common ground across the Catholic-Protestant divide was, as mentioned above, also found in the experience of living in a deprived working-class area hard hit by the Troubles – an experience shared by most of the victims of violence and by most of the paramilitaries from both sides.³³ Being in a *similar socio-economic position* might, however, *not necessarily be a unifying experience*. In Northern Ireland the Catholic and the Protestant working class are competing for jobs. And within South African townships or rural areas divided between the ANC and the Inkatha, competition over scarce resources, such as housing and clean water, fuel further conflicts.³⁴ *Enhancing empathy and understanding of “the other” would thus require a certain amount of safety.*

29 On encounters between victims and perpetrators in South Africa, see further Ericson (2001:351-365). The meetings recounted in that chapter are all related from the perspective of the victim or from the perspective of an outside observer or mediator. As previously mentioned it was too difficult to gain access to the perpetrators’ own perspectives of such encounters at the time of my study.

30 This man, now active in a victim/survivor’s support group with both Catholic and Protestant members, had had a brother killed by a bomb planted by Loyalists, and a sister shot and killed accidentally by the IRA (i.e. the paramilitary group supposed to be on his side) who were aiming at a security force patrol. Several members of his extended family had also been killed.

31 Interview with Martie Rafferty, Kairos Initiative, Belfast, 10 September 1998. On encounters between victims and perpetrators in Northern Ireland, see further Ericson (2001:266-270).

32 Ericson (2001:342-343).

33 Summarised in Ericson (2001:447).

34 Ericson (2001:378-380).

SAFETY AND POWER

One expression which I frequently encountered in my conversations was (the need to create) a “safe space”. Such a “safe space” *for story-sharing* carried various meanings:

a) *Physical safety*, i.e. a space one could enter without being killed or injured. Food, shelter, medical care, etc. would also be necessary. A daily struggle to secure basic needs (which is still the situation for many of the victims who testified before the TRC³⁵) leaves people with very little space to deal with their past or reach out to others.

b) *Psychological and social safety*, i.e. a space where one could speak about one’s personal experiences without being interrupted, ridiculed or disputed. For the unofficial story-sharing initiatives it also meant a confidential space. Other aspects of safety would be the opportunity to work through one’s own trauma and achieve a sense of security in one’s own identity before meeting with “the other side”.

The establishment of safety is integrally linked to *power*, and the struggle for power. The power dynamics between the participants thus need to be taken into consideration. For instance: can you really speak openly with someone upon whom you depend to earn a living? Being in a subordinate position, or losing one’s dominant position, could make people less confident and able to express themselves and/or listen to “the other side”.³⁶

The *unofficial initiatives* in both countries took certain measures to make the participants feel safe, both through the design (and choice) of venue itself and through the design and rules for interaction in the groups sessions. An additional way of ensuring safety and finding common ground was to limit the agenda, for instance by focusing on similar experiences, such as those of trauma and bereavement. One example is from the Stress and Trauma Healing Programme in the greater Durban area (divided by the ANC-Inkatha conflict). According to one of the facilitators:

At one workshop we actually had to put standards for behaviour, because people were sort of revisiting the issue of their political affiliation. [So we had to say:] “No, you’re not here for that reason ... we are all in this thing together, we are all traumatised ... if your house has been burnt down it has been burnt down and that’s it, that means you are a victim whether you are ANC or not. So let’s sort of focus on the issue at hand.”³⁷

When I asked how it had worked out, he said that in the end it had worked out well, since “if your house has been burnt down you experience a similar kind of pain whether or not you are IFP or ANC.”³⁸ In most of these workshops the participants (although coming from both the IFP and the ANC) did, however, come from different local areas, which made things easier.

As an *official initiative* the TRC played an ambiguous role. On the one hand care was taken to provide a safe and supportive environment for the victims who testified, and having their stories publicly acknowledged was important to many of them. On the other hand, testimonies at public hearings were also made before a wider audience (including national and international media) who might not necessarily be so sensitive.³⁹ The tension between story-sharing in the *public arena*

35 E.g. *Iphepa Ndaba*... See also <http://www.khulumani.net/>

36 On “safety and power” see further Ericson (2001:436-437).

37 Interview with Mr. Thobile Madlala, Lamontville Community Resource Centre, Lamontville (Durban), 15 October 1999.

38 Ibid.

39 Ericson (2001:339-343). This ambiguity is aptly illustrated by Henry, 2000. Other victims did not want to testify publicly at all since they were shy of the publicity.

(which implies public acknowledgement) versus story-sharing in the *unofficial arena* (which provides the safety of privacy) thus needs to be considered.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Views of oneself and of “the other”

One precondition for story-sharing would be the recognition of a common humanity: why listen to and take into account the story of someone who you do not regard to be a fellow human being? A major challenge is thus the tendency, in any context of armed conflict, to dehumanise “the other” through enemy images which in turn destroy empathy and severs the human bond.⁴⁰ Northern Ireland and South Africa were no exceptions, as I found strong tendencies to view “the others” as “less civilised”, “legitimate targets for attack”, “terrorists”, “oppressors” etc.⁴¹ In South Africa there was also the notion that a black person is not quite a person in the same way as a white person, not having the same emotional and physical needs. As in a recent conversation recounted by Antjie Krog:

I am visiting a friend in town, someone I have known since Sub A. In her backyard lives a maid. “Doesn’t she miss her children?” I ask, thinking of the large families on the farm. “Maids don’t feel like other people about their children. They like to be rid of them. Anyway, Alina likes me now”. On a previous visit. “Why doesn’t she have a heater?” “Maids don’t get cold like white people.”⁴²

It is difficult to imagine any way in which this woman and her maid could enter into a conversation where they could gain an understanding of each other’s perspectives.

Another important insight that emerged in the course of my study was that in order to be able both to tell their own story *and* to listen to (and be challenged by) people from “the other side”, people needed to be convinced of *their own* human dignity. The experience of dispossession and dependency may create a negative self-image (which inhibits people from talking) and make people prone to practise self-censorship for the sake of survival. It was also observed that within the (previously) dominant community, the experience of losing power could lead to a loss of self-confidence and hence of one’s ability to enter into dialogue.

Within the Christian tradition, the notion of all people being created in the image of God has served as an inspiration to instil self-confidence, to assume a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, and to reach out to people from “the other side”. This notion has inspired ecumenical reconciliation groups in Northern Ireland, and was also behind the ecumenical resistance to apartheid in South Africa.⁴³

Identifications and loyalties

Another important source of inspiration was a commitment to each other and to one’s shared place of residence. Against exclusive and conflicting ethnic or racial identifications and loyalties, initiatives for reconciliation thus stressed *overarching* ones, which might be found both in a religious commitment to the God of *all* peoples, and in a (not necessarily religious) sense of a shared belonging to, and pride in, one’s country or even local town. The identifications and

40 Mitchell (1981:85, 95).

41 Ericson (2001:Ch. 5.4).

42 Krog (1999:190).

43 Ericson (2001:231-232, 306-307, 402-403, 407-410, 437-440, 458).

loyalties proposed to unify the citizens of the “*New South Africa*” symbolised a break with the apartheid past. One such unifying metaphor was the concept of “the Rainbow Nation” or “the Rainbow People” (in religious discourse “the Rainbow People of God”), a notion which had previously been invoked in the struggle against apartheid. According to Desmond Tutu, this unity would be based on a common humanity and a common nationhood with space for a diversity of cultures, races and languages.⁴⁴ The Afrikaner notion of covenant and of being “God’s chosen people” was reinterpreted in an inclusive way, when Nelson Mandela spoke of the South African population as a whole entering into a covenant to build new a society with space for blacks and whites alike.⁴⁵ Another metaphor was found in the African notion of *ubuntu*, as an inclusive community which welcomes the stranger.

In *Northern Ireland*, one interesting observation of overarching loyalties was made by a leader of the (not religiously based) Peace and Reconciliation Group (PRG) in Derry/Londonderry:⁴⁶

Whether you’re from the Protestant community and you call it Londonderry or whether you’re from the city’s Catholic community and call it Derry the reality is that people have a real pride in the city...they love the place and they want it to do well... That’s why I think we’ve managed to get an agreement between the local [Catholic] residents group and the local [Protestant] marching order this year... Because people do have that sense of identity with the city that goes beyond triumphalism.⁴⁷

The ecumenical groups on their part rejected the “false God of sectarian interest”,⁴⁸ and stressed that “obedience to Christ is more important than Nationalism or Unionism”.⁴⁹ Exactly what, according to them, “obedience to Christ” would mean in Northern Ireland is seen in the next section on “norms and values”.

Norms and values

Against a “culture of silence” and a “culture of violence”, reconciliation initiatives stressed the importance of *non-violence and dialogue*. People involved in the ecumenical movement in Northern Ireland saw an inclusive dialogue as a way of *loving one’s enemies*,⁵⁰ not letting oneself be inhibited by fear of losing one’s identity or being regarded a “sell-out”.⁵¹

In South Africa, apartheid had been rejected as being contrary to the Christian vision of a reconciled humanity where “in Christ, God had broken down the walls of division between God and man, and therefore also between man and man.”⁵² Nevertheless, calls for reconciliation were

44 See two sermons by Desmond Tutu, reprinted in Tutu 1994: “We are the Rainbow People” (preached in 1989) and “A Miracle Unfolding: Sermon on and thanksgiving for South Africa’s first free election” (preached in 1994).

45 Mandela 1994.

46 This is the second biggest town in Northern Ireland. Catholics generally prefer the original name, “Derry”, while Protestants generally prefer the name “Londonderry”, which the town acquired following the Plantation of Ulster (i.e. the large scale settlement of Protestants) in the 17th century. In the academic world, the compromise of “Derry/Londonderry” is used, which is the one I adopted throughout the dissertation.

47 Interview with Tanya Gallagher, Peace and Reconciliation Group, Derry/Londonderry, 3 September 1998.

48 *Breaking Down the Enmity* (1985:§ 1:2).

49 *A Declaration of Faith and Commitment by Christians in Northern Ireland* (1986:§ 4).

50 Kinahan (1995:58).

51 *The Things that Make for Peace* (1995:7).

52 *A Message to the People of South Africa* (1966), quoted in Walshe (1997:387).

contentious during the anti-apartheid struggle. The famous *Kairos Document* (1985) criticised any “premature” calls for reconciliation in such a divided and unequal society as South Africa. Here, “loving the enemy” (i.e. “the oppressors”) was interpreted as fighting the evil apartheid structures that hindered any genuine community and dialogue.⁵³ With the un-banning of the liberation movements and the release of Nelson Mandela, the emphasis did, however, shift from resistance to co-operation and dialogue. Educating for democracy, non-violent conflict resolution, the healing of memories etc. became crucial activities for the ecumenical organisations that I visited.⁵⁴ The TRC stressed that its’ work should foster “values central to a healthy democracy: transparency, public debate, public participation and criticism”.⁵⁵

In the search for a global ethic, *dialogue* has been seen as *an important method to arrive at shared values and norms*, and to address the tension between universalism (stressing certain universal human rights for all individuals) and contextualism (taking different perspectives and cultures into account). Particular attention has been given to discourse ethics and to the model of an interactive, dialogical universalism developed by Seyla Benhabib, according to whom moral discourse takes place between “embodied and embedded” human selves who are “situated” in concrete historical contexts.⁵⁶ However, it has also been argued that ethicists have to become even more concrete by identifying: 1) the material and formal constraints that hinder people to take part in such a dialogue, 2) how, and on what arenas, dialogue should take place, and 3) when dialogue is inappropriate. By such findings one could indicate what would be part of “a culture of emancipatory conversations”.⁵⁷

In my research it was interesting to see how the *unofficial story-sharing initiatives*, in taking measures to make the participants feel safe, encouraged the *joint formulation of norms and values within each group*. In the terminology of discourse ethics, one might say that they sought to create “ideal speech situations” that facilitated “emancipatory conversations”. This was most explicitly expressed in the case of the Corrymeela, where the participants were asked to formulate their rules for interaction on the basis of their answers to the question: “What would help you feel confident about talking about difficult things?” The rules formulated by the group tended to include: confidentiality, mutuality, and asking questions in a way that enabled others to speak. A similar process, actually leading to similar rules, took place also in the Healing of Memories Workshops in South Africa, where *the participants were jointly to ensure an equality of space and power between themselves*. Thus, by the very way in which they were structured, these story-sharing initiatives challenged remaining inequalities in society at large. There was a *basic inclusion* in the sense that it was taken for granted that “everyone belongs in the land”: i.e. people of all gradations of pigmentation in South Africa; Catholics as well as Protestants, Nationalists as well as Unionists in Northern Ireland. *Equal space was given to each participant* (to tell his/her own story) rather than to every existing viewpoint or perspective of the conflict.⁵⁸

53 *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (1985:§ 4:3).

54 These organisations included: The Diakonia Council of Churches (Durban), The Vuleka Trust (outside Durban), The Ecumenical Advice Bureau (Johannesburg), The South African Council of Churches, The Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre (outside Johannesburg) The Institute for the Healing of Memories (Cape Town).

55 *TRC Final Report*, “Concepts and Principles”, Vol. I, Ch. 5, § 5.

56 Benhabib (1992:6). Benhabib in turn stands in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas.

57 This discussion took place at a recent UNESCO Conference held in Lund, Sweden, in 1999. See further Bexell & Andersson (eds) 2002 (especially the contributions by Árnason and by Bexell) as well as an account of that discussion in Ericson (2001:33-36).

58 Ericson (2001:318-319, 419, 436-442). I have no such thorough account of the group processes in the other storysharing initiatives.

SOME MAJOR CHALLENGES

Safety and power in the wider context

The various needs for safety and power would, however, easily come into conflict within the wider society, where the participants pursued their everyday lives. This can be seen in the debate on how to implement the *Good Friday Agreement*, where Unionists stressed the need for decommissioning of paramilitary weapons (and especially those of the IRA), while Republicans stressed the need to reform the (overwhelmingly Protestant) police force. Redressing unequal employment opportunities is another contentious issue.⁵⁹ In South Africa the struggle for safety and power, *within* townships or rural areas divided between the ANC and the IFP as well as *between* the different "racial" groups, present obstacles to dialogue and co-operation. An increased exposure to violent crime (which might be perceived as "racial attacks"⁶⁰) and a decline (or threatened decline) in their living standards were noted as reasons for a resistance among whites to meet with blacks and to speak about restitution.⁶¹ The story-sharing initiatives in both places thus had to work within, and relate to, a society where one had to ask *what safety needs to be given priority*.

A shared view of the conflict, its history and its causes and the question of neutrality

Despite the focus on story-sharing rather than mere intellectual debate, one can also not escape making at least *some* judgements about the conflict itself. How is one to evaluate the different views of a conflict and how much room can there be for dissent?

Here "forgiveness" and "apology" might be loaded words, as they imply an assessment of the conflict which might not (yet) be fully shared by the parties. A need to uphold a positive self-image, or a genuine belief in the justice of their cause, might make it difficult for people to come to the point of apologising. The political context, with its' power struggles, would also play a part. In Northern Ireland the ongoing political struggles in connection with implementing the *Good Friday Agreement* (with attendant arguments about "who is right") might discourage critical self-examination among the main protagonists (Sinn Féin and the Unionists).⁶²

In *South Africa* there appeared to be an agreement among almost everybody that apartheid had been bad in practice, and that institutionalised racism was not the future for South Africa. Yet the TRC's judgement that apartheid had not merely been a failure (as F.W. De Klerk had stated in his submission), but a "crime against humanity"⁶³ was not well-taken by many whites (who saw the TRC as a "witch-hunt" against them). People from the ANC (and the PAC) were satisfied that the TRC had stated that they had clearly been fighting for a just cause,⁶⁴ but dissatisfied that the TRC criticised *all* sides in the conflict, i.e. also the liberation movements, for having committed acts of gross human rights violations according to the criteria of just means.⁶⁵ They argued that *their* struggle had been just, and saw apartheid as ultimately accountable for any actions that they might have got into, including actions that by the TRC were declared gross human rights violations.⁶⁶ The

59 Ericson (2001:146, 207-210, 244-246). The person I interviewed from Sinn Féin saw the Unionist stress on decommissioning as an excuse to avoid sharing power with Sinn Féin.

60 Arnold (2000:84-86), who also noted that while whites experience a greater vulnerability to crime now than they did during apartheid, blacks are on the whole still the ones most affected by crime.

61 Ericson (2001:372).

62 Ericson (2001:450-451).

63 *TRC Final Report*, "The Mandate", Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 70.

64 Ibid.

65 *TRC Final Report*, "The Mandate", Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 77-79; "Findings and Conclusions", Vol. V, Ch. 6. Meiring (1999:366-368).

66 Mabizela (2000:119); Meiring (1999:368).

ecumenical organisations and the NGO's working with victims that I visited were basically supportive of these stances taken by the TRC, although they might be critical of certain practices (such as the support available for victims).⁶⁷

In the discourse on reconciliation in *Northern Ireland*, "safe spaces" were frequently equated with "neutral venues". Yet the reconciliation initiatives were also themselves guided by certain views of the conflict and visions for the future. The ecumenical groups sought to pursue a middle road between Nationalism and Unionism. Violence to achieve political ends was seen as neither necessary nor legitimate. Thus they did not agree with the Republican notion that the IRA (analogous to the ANC in South Africa⁶⁸) was fighting a just, anti-colonial war. But neither did they agree with the Unionist opposition to *any* kind of contacts with the Irish Republic.⁶⁹ They distanced themselves from any exclusively Nationalist or Unionist aspirations and definitions of a "just peace". Inspired by the concept of *shalom* and the notion of reconciliation as the restoration of "right and just relationships", they argued for a parity of esteem and treatment and the sharing of power, responsibility and resources.⁷⁰ This would include respect for the human rights of everyone, respect for different cultures and national identities, and socio-economic reforms. They also sought to be balanced. They did not support affirmative action on behalf of the historically disadvantaged group (i.e. Catholics), but stressed that neither side should be discriminated against in the labour market and that the (Catholic and Protestant) middle-class had a responsibility towards the (Catholic and Protestant) working-class. The safety concerns of all sides were taken into account with the stress on *both* police reform *and* decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.⁷¹ These elements were also part of the *Good Friday Agreement*, for which Corrymeela issued a public statement of support. The Peace and Reconciliation Group in Derry/Londonderry remained neutral in order to be able to provide neutral venues where the Agreement could be discussed and debated.⁷²

The limits of inclusion?

Another dilemma was that of *inclusion versus exclusion*. As previously mentioned, one way of ensuring safety and finding common ground was to limit the agenda, for instance by focusing on similar experiences of trauma and bereavement. Another way of limiting the agenda was to refrain from taking part in public campaigns. This was particularly the case in Northern Ireland, where taking a public stance on controversial issues, such as policing, was avoided since it could make some of the potential participants feel excluded or inhibited in sharing their stories. Any such limitations to the agenda might, however, make the story-sharing initiatives irrelevant to people with other priorities.⁷³

These above observations also raise the question as to what extent people who do not agree about the facts, or who interpret and experience events from another perspective, can be (and feel) included – and indeed if everyone should be included everywhere. In practice, the "minimum criteria" for inclusion appeared to be the recognition of "the others" as human beings from whom

67 Ericson (2001:394-395).

68 On analogies made between the two conflicts, and contacts between the ANC and the IRA see Guelke 1996.

69 *Understanding the Signs of the Times...* (1986:§ 6:1-3). *The Things that Make for Peace* (1995:8-17).

70 Love (1995:114-115, 129).

71 *Doing Unto Others...*, 1997; Ericson (2001:281, 325-326).

72 Ericson (2001:287).

73 Summarised in Ericson (2001:284-285, 442-443).

one could learn something. Those who were not prepared to interact with the other participants as equals and to listen also to their stories were excluded by the rules for interaction within the group and by the way in which the venue was organised. In South Africa this, in itself, was a break with the apartheid past.

Sharing spaces and building, rebuilding or transforming relationships between women and men

Finally I wish to raise the question about how the space and the power are shared among women and men in a society seeking reconciliation: *what personal stories are heard and acknowledged?* What inhibits people from sharing their stories? Are there different challenges for men and women? With regard to the last question, post-apartheid South Africa, where women have now begun to raise their voices, is a particularly interesting case in point and also the focus of my present research project.⁷⁴

With regard to making space for victims' stories in general, one has to acknowledge that the TRC has only scratched the surface: *both* because it did not have time and resources to reach everyone (especially in remote areas), *and* because quite a few of the victims choose not to come to the TRC for various reasons. These reasons included: suspicion of the TRC (for instance among Inkatha and some white victims); fear of the perpetrator; regarding oneself as an active freedom fighter and therefore being alienated by the term "victim" (which was seen to imply passivity); dissatisfaction with the amnesty provisions; not wanting to take up the Commission's time since they thought that other cases were more urgent; not feeling ready to talk about one's traumatic experiences (or finding it too humiliating and painful).⁷⁵ The TRC mandate also excluded "purely racial" (i.e. not "politically motivated") violence, as well as violence related to labour conflicts (typically the abuse of farm labourers), and killings or injuries of active combatants (which were not defined as "gross human rights violations" according to the Geneva Conventions) although there was a Special Hearing on Compulsory Military Service.⁷⁶ Furthermore the TRC limited its' definition of "gross human rights violations" (and hence its mandate) to encompass only "bodily integrity rights" in the form of killing, abduction, torture or severe ill-treatment,⁷⁷ but not other violations suffered under apartheid legislation (such as forced removals). Hence it was criticised for not giving adequate space in the official discourse for the vast amount of black experiences and obscuring the collective responsibility of those who had benefited from this systematic dispossession.⁷⁸ Furthermore, rape was not highlighted as a particular kind of human rights violation, despite evidence of the use of rape as a way to assert male power in various armed conflicts around the world (including South Africa).⁷⁹

74 This research project is funded by the Swedish Research Council (www.vr.se) which funds research based at Swedish universities.

75 Ericson (2001:338). As previously mentioned, the number of perpetrators approaching the TRC was even less, presumably for reasons such as: mistrust of the Commission and the process, fear of exposure, denial of guilt, or hoping that they would not be discovered anyway.

76 *TRC Final Report, "The Mandate"*, Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 126–127. Ericson (2001:336.)

77 Although acknowledging that some of the submissions to the TRC suggested that all persons whose rights had been violated by apartheid should be regarded as victims of "severe ill-treatment", the TRC limited its definition of "gross human rights violations" to encompass violations of "bodily integrity rights", as enshrined in international law and the new South African constitution. This entailed violations of "the right to life; the right to be free from torture; the right to be free from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, and the right to freedom and security of the person, including freedom from abduction and arbitrary and prolonged detention." *TRC Final Report, "The Mandate"*, Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 54–56 (quotation from § 56).

78 E.g. Maluleke 1997, and Mamdani 2000.

79 Mulheir & O'Brien (2000:19–20, 42–44); Sørensen (1998:54). From the South African scene I have found accounts of sexual violence perpetrated by the state forces (in Namibia, when policing the

With regard to making space for various voices, the TRC was also criticised for not fully capturing *women's experiences*. While women were in the vast majority among those who testified before the TRC in the Human Rights Violations Hearings, most of them spoke about violations done to male relatives (above all husbands or sons).⁸⁰ To encourage women to speak more openly also about what they themselves had experienced (including sexual violence) the TRC also organised three Special Hearings for women held behind closed doors.⁸¹ Despite these efforts, many women's experiences still remain unrecorded.

Yet, paradoxically enough women do appear to be quite prominent, and according to my indications often in the majority, in some of the unofficial story-sharing initiatives and victims/survivors support groups formed in the wake of the TRC process.⁸² A suggested reason for this was that it might be more culturally acceptable for women to show emotional vulnerability, while men who had experienced trauma were (because of the idea that "men don't cry") more likely to withdraw and keep their pain to themselves or deal with it by drinking.⁸³

This suggestion, which still needs to be further explored, brings to the fore how interaction (and power dynamics) in public and private spaces may be shaped by certain *gender roles and norms*. According to traditional gender socialisation in (not only) South African society men are to be leaders, authority figures, independent, strong and aggressive, sexually assertive, ambitious and competitive. Thus, even though they are expected to dominate the public space, they may not easily share certain parts of their life stories (i.e. stories that brings out their vulnerability). "Good girls and women", on their part, are to be dependant, obedient, weak and passive, chaste, gentle, nice and kind.⁸⁴

Another crucial issue is that of *identifications and loyalties*. Stories of abuse and discrimination committed by people within one's own community tend to be silenced as long as unity is required (or even enforced) against an outside enemy. Women are often expected to keep the home fires burning, and if they challenge gender inequalities within their own group or (even worse) accuse "their own" men (and "protectors") of violence they risk being branded as "traitors", especially if they join forces with women from "the other side" and become involved in

townships and against anti-apartheid activists in detention), in the ANC-IFP conflict, as well as some accounts from within the liberation movements. Cock (1991:215-217); Ericson (2001:175); Ross (2000:75-79); *TRC Final Report*, "Regional Profile: Natal and KwaZulu", Vol. III, Ch. 3, § 410-423, and "Special Hearing: Women", Vol. IV, Ch. 10, § 64, 67-68. According to Cock (1991:145), some cases of sexual harassment towards women, and even rape, *within* the state forces have also been reported. Ross, however, also warns against highlighting rape as *the* gross human rights violation suffered by women. In a number of accounts she shows how various experiences of victimisation (e.g. loss of loved ones, torture, harassment, deprivation) are often intertwined within the life stories of concrete women and their experiences of apartheid.

80 A majority (at least 61%) of the gross human rights violations reported to the TRC had been done to men, 24% had been done to women and in 15% of the cases the victim's gender was not stated. *TRC Final Report*, "Methodology and Process", Vol. I, Ch. 6, Appendix 2 "Who came to the Commission?", § 22-24. For more detailed breakdowns, see Ross (2000:21-22).

81 In Cape Town (8 August 1996), Durban (24 October 1996), and Johannesburg (29 July 1997).

82 In the Stress and Trauma Healing Programme of the Diakonia Council of Churches (Interview with one of the facilitators, Mr. Thobile Madlala, Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban, 23 October 2001). In the Khulumani Support Group (Interview with Polly Dewhirst, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Braamfontein, 13 August 2003, as well as *Iphepa Ndaba...* on the membership in Khulumani Western Cape where 3 out of 5 members counted in their survey so far were women).

83 Interview with Mr. Thobile Madlala, Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban, 23 October 2001. Ericson (2001:442).

84 Maluleke & Nadar (2002:14-15).

the public sphere traditionally reserved for men.⁸⁵ What struggle they themselves want to give priority would of course also depend on how they *view the conflict* and with whom they regard themselves to have the most in common: the men from their own group or the women from “the other side”?

In the anti-apartheid movement for instance, “women’s concerns” tended to be subordinated to the higher aim of overthrowing apartheid.⁸⁶ There was a fear that addressing gender discrimination would lead to “unnecessary” divisions in the common struggle. Not until the late 1980’s and early 1990’s (i.e. with the end of apartheid in sight) did black and white female theologians (together with sympathetic men) more vocally begin to challenge this attitude.⁸⁷

In this post-apartheid South Africa, the new Constitution has non-discrimination between women and men as one of the founding principles,⁸⁸ but the struggle to realise this principle in practice is far from over. Reconciliation would, in line with feminist (or rather more inclusive) definitions of a “*just peace*”, go well beyond the work of the TRC. It would include an end to violence against women *both* in the public sphere *and* in the private, domestic sphere and overcoming not only the legacies of apartheid but also the patriarchal structures and attitudes that make women of all “racial” groups (and especially poorer women) vulnerable and dependent on men.⁸⁹

The question of “*cross-racial*” *female solidarity* is, however, still a challenging one. It was, with some notable exceptions, a rare phenomenon in the apartheid era.⁹⁰ Even though quite a few women from all “racial” groups, interviewed from the mid-1980s until 1990,⁹¹ expressed a sense of powerlessness and inequalities in relation to “their own” men, few of the white women interviewed expressed any deeper understanding of the situation for their black “maid” and other black women. Existing alliances, between black⁹² and white women were also not unproblematic. Given the history of “madam-and-maid” relationships, it is not surprising that, in the late 1980’s, it was observed that such alliances tended to be “characterized by silence and dependency on the part of black women on white women”.⁹³ The discussion on to what extent it is possible to find

85 Cf. Mulheir & O’Brien (2000:14-17, 26-27, 152-153, 165-166). It is striking that the women (from all sides) interviewed in Cock 1991 (i.e. at the heat of the struggle) were quite reluctant to mention sexism within their own (state or liberation) forces. In a later interview one of them (Thandi Modise, a leading ANC/MK woman) was more outspoken (Curnow 2000). Cock 1991 also mentioned a newspaper article which told of cases of sexual harassment (sometimes even rape) within the SADF, even though the SADF women she interviewed stressed that they had “no problems with the men” but only (in the words of one of them) with “lesbians and loose women”. Cock (1991:98, 145). See also Ericson (2001:251-252) on the experience of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition.

86 Bennett (1999:82).

87 E.g. Ackermann, Draper, & Mashinini (eds) 1991, with contributions mainly from women but also from some male theologians.

88 Bennett (1999: 82).

89 On a more inclusive definition of “peace”, see Brock-Utne (1988:63-64, 71-72, 123); Van Schalkwyk (1999:3). In writing about the South African situation, Van Schalkwyk uses the Biblical notion of *shalom* in the same way as peace researchers use the concept of “positive peace”.

90 Cock (1991:47).

91 I.e. women interviewed in Cock 1989 and Cock 1991.

92 In this article I use “black” as a generic term encompassing people from all of the “population groups” not classified as “white” under apartheid, i.e. “Black Africans”, “Coloureds”, “Indians or Asians” (in the terminology of the South African Census 2001). However, I am also aware of the debates regarding identity and (self) definition in South Africa today, as well as of the question of solidarity versus conflict between women (and men) from these three population groups.

93 Wittenberg (1991:18) quoting Lenka-Rennert in Shefer, T & Mathis, S 1991. “The search for sisterhood”. In *Work in Progress* 73. Braamfontein: South African Research Service, p. 16.

common ground and build “cross-racial” alliances continues. While speaking of such alliances as being beneficial, some black women have argued that they also need “separate spaces of freedom” since integrated environments tend to be “defined by structured inequalities of power” which force them to “operate on the defensive”.⁹⁴ Again, the issues of *safety and power* come to the forefront

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Ironically enough, churches and other religious faith communities might have a potential to promote a common female solidarity by providing women across *all* other barriers with a source for common ground, namely *the experience of religious ideas and institutions as being oppressive*. Such experiences have ranged from being assigned the role of the “natural housekeeper” (whatever one’s own personal talents and interests), to not being taken seriously as a theological student (or not getting a placement in a congregation after finishing one’s theological training), and even pastoral counselling instructing women to submit to an abusive or unfaithful husband.⁹⁵

This observation prompts us, again, to take a critical look at *the churches as “sites of struggle”*. It has been noted that “women’s issues” tend to be de-prioritised especially if the prevailing social and cultural values legitimise ideas of female subordination.⁹⁶ This has actually been the case in both of my case studies. In Northern Ireland issues like child care, reproductive choice and protection against domestic violence were de-prioritised, and the churches, in line with the major political parties, tended to promote conservative views on family and sexuality, reinforcing notions of female deference and obedience.⁹⁷ In South Africa, the prevalence of the belief in the subordinate status of women seemed to unify *all* churches (and other religious faith communities) despite their opposing views on apartheid.⁹⁸

Here prevailing *images of God and how (s)he has ordered creation (including the relationships women and men)* are crucial, since the structures and attitudes that condone violence against women (so endemic in South African society) are often legitimised by the idea that God intends men to dominate and women to submit, and by the idea that women are morally inferior to men and cannot trust their own judgement (and therefore are in no position to criticise their men). Another striking observation was that not only the religious *norms and values* that fuel conflict (such as ideas of a “holy war”), but also the Christian ideals of *forgiveness and reconciliation* can be problematic. The belief that suffering is a desirable quality for a Christian (and that women in particular have been chosen to be “suffering servants”) as well as the belief that God commands Christians hurriedly to forgive and reconcile with those who sin against them, may promote abusive relationships by telling a woman that she should repeatedly forgive, and continue to stay with, a man who repeatedly abuses her and shows no signs of conversion.⁹⁹ Calls to forgiveness and reconciliation were actually identified as *problematic from a “victim’s perspective”* also in the

94 Abrahams (2002:62-63).

95 Contributions in Ackermann, Draper, & Mashini (eds) 1991; Ackermann, Getman, Kotze & Tobler (eds) 2000; Maluleke & Nadar 2002; Phiri 2002. I have also come across such stories in the course of my present research project, but I have not yet had the time to transcribe and analyse all the interviews. That will be done in some future publications.

96 Cf. Mulheir & O’Brien (2000:33, 150, 157, 162, 174).

97 Sales (1997:4-5,127-135). Cf. Mulheir & O’Brien (2000:12-13).

98 Cochrane (1991:22).

99 This paragraph on Christian beliefs identified to promote abusive relationships is based on Phiri (2002:21), who in turn refers to a study by Carolyn Holderred Heggen “Religious Belief and Abuse”. In Clark Kroeger, C & Beck, J R (eds) 1996. *Women, Abuse and the Bible: How Scriptures Can be Used to Hurt or Heal*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. Religious or cultural ideas that legitimise violence and abuse would in the terminology of Galtung (1997) be called “cultural violence”.

TRC process, which (although being a political initiative) was quite strongly influenced by Christian ideas, with people previously involved in the ecumenical struggle against apartheid playing important roles. Some of the victims who testified found calls to forgiveness and reconciliation helpful while others felt that the TRC censored their feelings of anger and grief by expecting them to reconcile too hurriedly. Christians working with victims also stressed that victimised people initially needed to be allowed to express *all* their feelings in a contained (or “safe”) space, not suppressing anger but channelling it into something constructive.¹⁰⁰

Yet there are also numerous testimonies of how South African women have found *solace, strength and inspiration in their Christian traditions*: for instance in the belief that women and men are equally created in God’s image, the idea of God (through the incarnation in Jesus Christ) as the compassionate fellow-traveller and liberator, and in the stories of how Jesus’ broke with his contemporary patriarchal culture and treated women as equals.¹⁰¹ Thus the *ambivalent role of religion*, with its’ *tension between oppressive and liberating elements*, needs to be recognised, and how it plays itself out in the everyday life of women from various backgrounds is another crucial area for further exploration. A *similar tension* between oppressive and liberating elements was, interestingly enough, also found in a study of wife battery in *Muslim communities in the Western Cape*. On the one hand wife battery was condoned by theological arguments that women should be subordinate and submissive to men, but the author also pointed to “alternative egalitarian and liberatory Quranic definitions of humanity and gender relations”.¹⁰² These similarities point at prospects for finding common ground among women not only from various Christian churches but also from diverse religious faith communities.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

In post-TRC South Africa the challenge to create “safe spaces” for story-sharing is an ongoing one. When taking on this challenge one needs to ask questions such as: What persons and what stories are heard and acknowledged in the public spaces? What is the character of the spaces that already exist (such as schools, universities, workplaces, churches and schools of theology) in terms of safety, power dynamics and rules for interaction? How can they be more actively utilised as spaces where women and men from various walks of life can meet in order to broaden and challenges their diverse moral landscapes? What additional spaces, and support structures, are needed? In what ways can existing religious beliefs and institutions play a liberating and empowering role in building, rebuilding and transforming relationships in post-TRC South Africa? I hope that my observations and reflections will promote a continuing dialogue among all parties concerned.

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100 Ericson (2001:345-346), referring to, among others, Van der Merwe 1999, and Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation & Khulumani Support Group 1998.

101 E.g. Draper 1991; Fröchtling, 2002; Phiri, 2002. I have also come across a number of such stories in the course of conducting my interviews (not yet transcribed).

102 Shaikh (1996:199).

103 Among the contributors in Ackermann, Getman, Kotze & Tobler (eds) 2000, were two Muslim and one Jewish woman.

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KEY WORDS

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