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Reconciliation: The theological challenge

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that reconciliation is the Christian theological response to the challenge presented by a world of atrocities. While commonly articulated as a doctrine, reconciliation is primarily a *narrative* enacted through *liturgy* within Christian worship. This liturgy shapes a Christian response to a broken world, but is also provoked and challenged by that world. Within this movement, the church confesses that its practices of reconciliation are both *incomplete* and *anticipatory*. And yet these practices participate in the fullness of reconciliation made visible at the coming of the Kingdom. Anticipating this fullness allows Christian theology to articulate *parables* of reconciliation, and one example of this is South Africa's own Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The paper concludes with a reflection on what "the parable of the TRC" says back to the church.

1. A WORLD OF ATROCITIES

An oil spill (fuelled by North Americans' lust for cheap petroleum) threatens the vulnerable ecosystem of the American Gulf coast; squatters in Hout Bay are forced to walk about in their own faeces while less than a kilometre away others live a lifestyle of opulence; and more stories of endemic corruption wherein officials bearing public trust enrich themselves on the backs of the poor. A glance at any morning paper will confirm the view that we live in a world of atrocities. Christian theology¹ claims that the roots of such a world lie in human alienation from God, from other humans, and from creation. The answer to such a world is God's action in Jesus Christ, to which the doctrine and the practice of reconciliation bear witness.

1 There is a remarkable convergence amongst Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic thinking on reconciliation as the mission of God. For representative documents, see Simon Oxley, *Telling the Truth About Ourselves and Our World: A Study Guide to Help Individuals and Churches to Continue to Reflect and Act Together as the 2001–2010 Decade to Overcome Violence—Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace is Celebrated at the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2009); Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, *Reconciliation as the Mission of God: Faithful Christian Witness in a World of Destructive Conflicts and Divisions*, Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 51, Ed. Chris Rice, Lausanne Occasional Papers (2004); Synod of Bishops (special assembly for Africa), *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace*, Instrumentum Laboris (Vatican City, 2009). Thanks to Martijn van den Boogaart of Ekweneni, Malawi for drawing my attention to these documents. A concise history of the development of the doctrine of reconciliation, including the rise of forensic and individualistic theories that separate it from the radically new sociality I'll argue is a crucial component. For that, see John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 57–67.

The perspective taken in this paper is informed by a number of sources, representing Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. The dominant voice pulling them together is that of St. Augustine: an African Bishop who lived in the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries of the Common Era. While usually identified with Latin Christianity, Augustine's thought is now being rethought as a significant African contribution to global Christianity. Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian World: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Christianity* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

I want to unpack this claim in what follows. I will give a brief outline of a Christian theology of reconciliation, then discuss the practice of reconciliation within the church, which is God's reconciled and reconciling people. I will do this in two ways: first, by presenting a sketch of the narrative of reconciliation presented by the Bible; second, by offering a description of Christian worship in the church. In the latter, I will be following currents in contemporary scholarship, which suggest that liturgy, which marks our participation in God's action, shapes theology and ethics. These currents also suggest that all human, communal activity is liturgical. Thus an account of the contrast between Christian and other cultural liturgies will be suggested. Finally, the church as community of reconciliation does not mean that reconciliation remains confined to its walls. A growing consensus identifies reconciliation as *the* mission of the church. Indeed, church theologians and leaders were involved in the debate about reconciliation in South Africa, and were key in forming and fronting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Hence I'll finish by speaking about the TRC – a parable of reconciliation, which speaks both to the world and to the church.

2. THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

John de Gruchy suggests that, for Paul, "reconciliation is the controlling metaphor for expressing the gospel."² The Pauline term for reconciliation is *katallassō*, commonly used in the first century to mean "exchange". Its noun form, *katallege*, was used commonly for currency exchange, but could also speak of the reuniting of estranged marriage partners. For Paul, it denotes "a transformation or a renewing of relations between God and humans" – ultimately for Paul the exchange of enmity for peace.³ The term *allassō* (from which *katallassō* is derived) carries meanings of otherness, alienation, and estrangement. Thus the Christian idea of reconciliation points to the overcoming of estrangement and the establishment of peace.⁴ But what is the nature of this estrangement?

2.1 The disruption of the world in Adam

While universal, the estrangement Christian theology speaks of is neither original, nor necessary. Its origins are narrated in the biblical story of the fall (Gen 2-3). A good and harmonious creation existed, with humans serving as divinely appointed caretakers. The role of humans was marked out within a primal covenant, which stipulated the generous boundaries within which human flourishing could take place.⁵ But this original harmony is disrupted through humans seeking to assert their autonomy, to stand over and against the boundaries God sets for them, and to redraw those boundaries around themselves. They listen to the "cunning" (*arum*) taunt of the snake, which leads them to think God is hoarding knowledge, keeping it to himself (3:1-4). In the act of violating given limits, they receive not knowledge that liberates but an awareness of their "nakedness" (*arummim*) that drive them into hiding (7-8). The consequences follow: though the man (*adam*) was taken from the ground (*adamah*), and tasked to care for it, there shall be a new relation of antagonism (17-19); though the woman (*ishah*) was taken from the man (*ish*) to be his

2 de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 45.

3 Ceslas Spicq, "Katallassw, katallegv," *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, translated and edited by James D. Ernest, vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) 263.

4 Stanley E. Porter, "Peace, Reconciliation," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 694–99 See also de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 51–55.

5 Brueggemann suggests this primal covenant was characterized by the threefold commandment of Gen 2:15-16: a vocation (to tend the creation); a permission (to eat from any tree); and a prohibition (except for the one tree) Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 46.

partner, there shall be a new relation of domination (16). While the word plays (*adam–adamah; ishshah–ish*) originally denoted harmonic difference (the *ish* and the *ishshah* nevertheless as “one flesh”), or mutually beneficial distinction (the *adam* cares for the *adamah*, the *adamah* provides for the *adam*), they now give way to violent separation, antagonism, and privacy. Soon, humans will be asking, “am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9),⁶ and will threaten *all* boundaries in multiplying violence (23-24). Ultimately, the earth will be filled with violence (Gen 6:11), and the bounds of creation themselves will burst in destructive fury against human corruption.

A rupture is therefore created, tearing humans apart from creation, from God, and from each other. All relationships bear the marks of this rupture in various forms of dysfunction, ranging from wanton acts of environmental exploitation and destruction (humans against creation) to the wars that pit humans against other humans. While environmental disasters and wars are things that capture the attention of mass media, this dysfunction is also manifest in things we take-for-granted, such as the governing of everyday human relations by the distinction between “mine and thine” – a distinction policed here in South Africa with razor wire and armed response teams.⁷ Dysfunction penetrates to the depths of the internal wars raging amongst our conflicted desires. Desperate to regain mastery over the world we continue Adam’s project of remaking the world to suit our interests, our agendas, and ourselves.

Our attempts to overcome this “universal situation of disaster” only make the problem worse, since “every attempt to alter this situation is subject to the conditions created by the disaster.”⁸ We try to consolidate the conflicting desires within ourselves, but by separating-out one desire and suppressing others. In the West this is predominantly sexual desire, which in turn feeds a host of culture-industries which, in turn, transform the good gift of sex – a profound expression of the “one flesh” of human relations – into a tradable, objectifiable commodity.⁹ Our attention alights on things we think can bring order out of the chaos: a national flag, the uniform of a sports team, and the slogan of a political party. We unify the nation, but only by distinguishing ourselves from other nations, and often by threatening those not of our national tribe with violence.¹⁰ We assert human rights, but by claiming the modern, liberal state as the normative form of human community on a large scale. A peaceful, stable world is a world of nation-states.¹¹

6 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

7 Thus Hill suggests that Augustine would have seen the very idea of private property as a manifestation of the chaos unleashed in the wake of Adam’s fall. “The desire for private possession is a kind of mark of Cain, the stigma of man alienated from God.” Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. and Ed. Edmund Hill, O.P., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991) 340n.42.

8 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 160, as quoted by L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 117.

9 Still one of the best theological treatments of this is John Francis Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981).

10 Consider that while intensive nation-building was going on in South Africa during the 1990s, the conditions for the “perfect storm” of the xenophobic attacks of 2008 were being put into place. See South African Migration Project, *The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*, res. rept., series ed Jonathan Crush, Migration Policy Series no. 50 (Cape Town; Kingston: IDASA; Southern African Research Centre, Queens University, 2008). The geographical accident whereby some were born north of the Limpopo meant they were, as non-South Africans, not subject to the same rights and privileges of those who, by another geographical accident, were born south of the Limpopo. It’s no coincidence that faith communities, which have a *transnational* identity, were among those giving shelter to victims of the attacks.

11 For a powerful criticism of the ubiquity of rights discourse in secular modernity, and its reliance upon a

Modern political theory – which has its own doctrine of reconciliation in the idea of the social contract – is characterized by recognition of the tragic inevitability of conflict; something John Milbank terms “an ontology of violence”.¹² All the different ways we assert our need for stability within such ontology are sustained by a refusal to face the truth about ourselves. Enmeshed in webs of self-deception, we “exchange the truth for a lie” (Rom 1:25). And yet, at the heart of each of these strategies of denial is a restless nostalgia for the communion we were originally created for, a restlessness that, as St. Augustine famously stated, finds its rest only in God.¹³

The point of all this needs to be stated clearly: the situation, which the Christian understanding of reconciliation seeks to address, is not simply that of *individuals* antagonistic to God. Neither is it simply that of individuals at enmity with other individuals. Nor is it of rivalry between communities. All these are but local productions of the universal, *human* drama, which has been scripted since that primal act of rebellion.

2.2 The healing of the world in Christ

Christian theology claims that the reconciliation that reconnects us to God, to other humans, and to creation has to come from *outside* ourselves, from something other than the conflicted self or community, from a love that knows no interest except the interest of the other. The source of this love is the Triune God, who exists in an eternal relation of giving and giving back, of offering and accepting, of generosity and receptivity. But while this love is outside ourselves – in the sense that we can neither create nor control it – it is also profoundly *with us* in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In him, the divine fullness (Col 1:19) has interrupted the violence of the world, opening up space wherein may face the truth of our own complicity in violence, and encounter the other our violence has excluded.

When Christians confess that Jesus was “sinless”, they mean that he lived as God originally intended humans to live. This meant a life of trust in God’s abundant provision, “though he had “no place to lay his head” (Matt 8:20), and a life of perfect receptivity to the other. Jesus’ scandalous welcome undoes the exclusions of the world based on religious worthiness, social status, and political patronage.¹⁴ Indeed, his association with those of no social status is a refusal to relate to person in terms of their “usefulness”. His announcement “of a final compassion which confuses all barriers of purity and probity” explodes the categories of the world.¹⁵ Unable to bear Jesus, the world’s conclusion is, “he’s got to go”. Ironically, in its judgment on Jesus, the nation finds its unity. Think of Caiaphas’ “better to have one man die for the people” speech (John 11:49-50), or of the Jerusalem mob that with one voice called for his execution by the hated Romans (Matt 26:20-25). The world also finds its unity in its judgement on Jesus. Think of Pilate and Herod – mortal enemies who, according to St. Luke (23:12), became friends the day they agreed Jesus should die.

“systematic indoctrination” which displaces the possibilities of other kinds of social formation, see Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, “A Timely Conversation with *The Desire of the Nations* on Civil Society, Nation and State,” *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically. A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplain, Robert Song, and Al Wolters (Carlisle, UK; Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press; Zondervan Publishing, 2002) esp. 391.

12 Defined as “a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force.” An ontology of peace, by contrast, “is the sociality of harmonious difference” which is both the divine origin of the world, and its true destiny. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990) 4–5.

13 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and Ed. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961) 21 (I.1).

14 John Dominic Crossan terms this Jesus’ “open commensality”. John Dominic. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 69.

15 Rowan D. Williams, *The Truce of God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 72.

Jesus bears the full wrath of Rome, the Jerusalem establishment, and the inflamed population. The cross, that instrument of the *pax Romana* wherein Rome keeps its subjects in line, is now the instrument by which humans kill God in the name of maintaining their peace. The cross, it turns out, is the violence and self-deception of the world fully revealed.¹⁶ Here we get as close as we can to “evil unadorned”, and the crisis – and resolution – of the catastrophe we call “history”.¹⁷ For the rupture of the cross is at the same time the rupture that heals our rebellion. “The blood of the cross” is the instrument by which God makes peace (Col 1:20), reconciling all things to Him.

Jesus, then, is the place of exchange between God and humanity. Fully divine, he reveals our creational origin to us; fully human, he reveals our eschatological destiny. He is the “son of man” (Ps 8:4) we were always called – but refused – to be. And he is the God that we in our thirst for autonomy have always wanted to murder. On the cross, God stands in the place of victimage, as we presume to stand in God’s place of judgement. I say, “presume”, because God’s place is revealed not as one of vengeance and punishment, but of mercy and forgiveness. In his resurrection Jesus confronts the world as the face of its victim – indeed, of *all* its victims.¹⁸ But instead of taking vengeance he offers a new way of life. A different justice is shown: a justice that breaks our cycles of vengeance, that heals and restores, that calls forth a new world.

2.3 Embodying a new world in the church

The great transaction that creates a new world is captured in one of St. Paul’s best-known passages on reconciliation:

[Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:15-21).

This exchange, which means that Paul sees everyone and everything in the light of God’s reconciling work in Christ, is at the heart of the Christian understanding of salvation. Far more than a transaction between the individual soul and God, the full, theological and biblical understanding of reconciliation imagines nothing less than a radically new social world.¹⁹ This

16 One could also read the cross as the killing of God in the name of God, insofar as Jesus was accused of blasphemy.

17 “Evil unadorned” and “the catastrophe of history” are references to Prof. de Witt’s paper given earlier in the day.

18 For this insight, see Rowan D. Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2 (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 1982.

19 The individualism with which reconciliation is usually identified is a particularly regrettable trend amongst Protestants, and the misunderstanding of the Eucharist it generates provides one clue as to how apartheid could take root in the church. Chris Loff, “The History of a Heresy,” *Apartheid is a Heresy*, Ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa Vicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 10–23.. I’ll return to this point below. To what extent it continues to inform discourses of reconciliation amongst South African Reformed Christians is an interesting question. Some of the evangelicals at the Truth and Reconciliation Faith Community hearings also assumed this individualistic understanding, and so were ambivalent

new social world “in Christ” is made visible in the way those baptized into Christ transcend the taken-for-granted social divisions in their world: between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female.²⁰ That this reconciliation is more than simply the substitution of one (new) particularity – namely “Christianity” – for the old particularities is the significance of “new creation”. The rebellion that undid the original harmony between humans and creation has been healed. A new creation means a new humanity indwelling “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1).

The embodiment of this reconciliation – horizontal and vertical – is seen in the “mystery” (*sacramentum*) of the body of Christ (Eph 5:32) – something that recalls the “two as one flesh” relation of the *ishah* and the *ish* (c.f. Gen 2:19).²¹ In the body of Christ, God is reconciled to humans; in the body of Christ, humans are reconciled to each other. Differences are now gifts as the enmity that places one particularity against another – the enmity between Jew and Gentile in the Jewish world, and civilized and barbarian in the Greco-Roman world – is overcome. I’ll return to this below.

But Paul goes even further: in this new body, the division between the private world of the household (where women, children, and slaves found their place) and the public world of the city (where men found their place) is undone. This made (and makes) the church as *ekklesia*²² as much a challenge to its context as Jesus was to his. For now women and children, slaves and foreigners, had the status of citizens in God’s *polis* (Eph 2:19). And their ethnic or class origins mattered not. This meant that they are no longer subject to the social control of the Empire.²³ Hence we can understand the apprehension in which the first Christians were held. Just as Jesus could not fit the agendas of the world, so the church as body of Christ will never fit comfortably in the world – or at least if it *does* fit comfortably in the world, it should wonder why. As the second century letter of Diognetus stated,

For the Christians are distinguished from other people neither by land, nor by language, nor customs; for they do not inhabit cities of their own, nor use a particular language, nor lead a life that is unusual.... But inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according to each person’s lot... they display to us their wonderful and admittedly paradoxical ways of life. They inhabit their homelands, but as strangers... Every foreign land is their homeland, and every homeland a foreign land.²⁴

towards “horizontal”, interpersonal reconciliation if it did not include “vertical” reconciliation. Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, “Faith Communities and Apartheid: The RICS Report,” *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Ed. James R. Cochrane, John W. de Gruchy, and Stephen W. Martin (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999) 64.

20 Though as Richard Longenecker pointed out several years ago, it’s taken 2,000 years for the church to realize this kind of reconciliation concretely in class and gender terms). *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984).

21 I side-step the question of Pauline authorship, since Colossians (and Ephesians) if not by Paul certainly represent a continuity with his thought. I’m happy to say they are “Pauline”, even if not from Paul’s hand.

22 In choosing this term, the early Christians were doing two things: firstly, they were identifying themselves with the *qahal*, the assembly of the people of Israel called by YHWH to submit the entirety of their lives, whether social, economic, or political, to God; secondly, they were deliberately describing themselves not as a *koinōn* (a private association in the Graeco-Roman world) but as the assembly of citizens, gathered to debate important matters of public life. See Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 138–45.

23 Richard A. Horsley, “I Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul’s Assembly as an Alternative Society,” *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1997).

24 *Epistle to Diognetus* 5, as translated by Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001) 96.

At the same time, because the church – if it really *is* the church – does not compete for space in the present world-that-is-passing-away,²⁵ it can become a place where people representing opposite viewpoints have genuine encounter. That is, insofar as the church is a reconciled community, it can function as reconciler. But the word *can* ought to be underscored here. The church to which Paul addresses his message of reconciliation was a community where factional rivalries (1 Cor 1:10-17), lawsuits (1 Cor 6:1-11), sexual impropriety (1 Cor 5:1-5), and class divisions (1 Cor 11:17-22) made it far from an exemplary model. Indeed, the church has throughout its history more often than not sought détente with the world, thereby securing its existence, but at the cost of its identity and mission. As Rowan Williams puts it,

The Church cannot begin to claim that it consistently lives by this; its failure is all too visible, century-by-century. But its credibility does not hang on its unbroken success; *only on its continued willingness to be judged by what it announces and points to*, the non-competitive, non-violent order of God's realm, centred upon Jesus and accessible through commitment to him.²⁶

In the final section of this paper, I'll discuss how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which emerged in part from the South African churches' discourse of reconciliation, also functioned as a mechanism for self-evaluation and repentance for them.

3. THE PRACTICES OF RECONCILIATION

I've tried to show that reconciliation in the New Testament is not simply the creation of a peace between individuals, or between individuals and God. Reconciliation is *incorporation* in a new social body, the church, which is called to bear witness to the reality of a new world. This incorporation is *performed* (and the church re-formed) through a rehearsing of the biblical narrative in liturgy, and through the sacraments, which concentrate the key moments of that narrative: baptism and Eucharist. In rehearsing that narrative, and in enacting it in the sacraments, the church holds open the invitation to all humans to be reconciled.

3.1 Performing reconciliation: modernity

A new generation of theologians, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, is rediscovering Christian liturgy as the presupposition of theology and ethics.²⁷ I say *Christian* liturgy because accompanying this recovery is an anthropology that identifies the human person as *homo liturgicus*.²⁸ We are created beings whose subjectivities are formed and reformed through liturgical practices. The

25 This is a profound theme in the theology of Rowan Williams, and deserves much more attention than I can give it here. See for starters Rowan D. Williams, "Faith Communities in a Civil Society--Christian Perspectives," address, Christian-Muslim Forum Conference (Cambridge, 2007).

26 Williams, "Faith Communities in Civil Society."

27 Most significant in theology are those who contributed to Routledge's *Radical Orthodoxy* series. See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), and the volumes that followed. For an example of the fruitfulness of this approach in theological ethics, see Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004).

28 Most helpful as an introduction is James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) A 2005 issue of the journal *Liturgy* explored, from a number of angles, the liturgical practices of "the church" and "America", arguing that societies are enacted performances of an imagined world. See especially William T. Cavanaugh, "The Liturgies of Church and State," *Liturgy* 20.1 (2005): 25–30.

great Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes that *leitourgia* denotes “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.”²⁹ Bodies politic are therefore liturgically constituted and maintained. In particular, liturgy “enacts and maintains community by the ritual remembering or representation of foundational narratives, thereby helping to construct the perceived reality in which each member of the community lives.”³⁰ Liturgy is that process whereby a “multitude” becomes a “people” or *res publica*. By implication, then, liturgies are processes of “conciliation”, or perhaps even “re-conciliation”, whereby the many discover their common interest, agreeing to share their “common objects of love”.³¹ Hence, it’s not *only* Christians that perform liturgies. Indeed, while a previous generation was fascinated by American civil religion as a set of ideas,³² currently that religion is being fruitfully examined as a set of rituals, as a national liturgy, as ritual sacrifice.³³

William Cavanaugh has shown that ontologies of violence also try to enact narratives of reconciliation. The modern, western narrative provides an example, where “the war of all against all” is identified with “the state of nature” – individual competing self-interests in which there is no common good, and which self-preservation is the social goal. For the sake of self-preservation, the many agree to give some of their power over to a sovereign, which allows them to realize a measure of freedom without endangering or being endangered by others. The sovereign “protect[s] the freedom of individuals from interference.”³⁴ This is how, at least in Thomas Hobbes’ view, the many are reconciled within this “artificial man”, this “body politic”,³⁵ which Cavanaugh claims is a monstrous parody of the body of Christ. For John Locke, the fear of death is subordinated to the search for sustenance. “From this search arises private property, the right to which is the most fundamental right and the foundation of the political order.”³⁶ Locke’s paradigmatic man is “the industrious and the rational”, who is able to convert property and perishable goods into currency (“imperishable gold”).³⁷ This process of conversion is the true state of nature (different from the state of war), though we still need to adjudicate “mine and thine”. For that we need the state. For Locke “there is no room in the political arena for the discussion of common goods, but only the management of varied civil interests.”³⁸ However, “the priority of freedom over the good... makes conflict inevitable: since there is no common good to adjudicate competing claims, all that remains is the force of will against will.”³⁹ Thus the

29 Alexander Schmemman, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988) 25.

30 Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” 25.

31 Here the insight is Augustine’s. See St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984) XIX: 24. An extended commentary on this is Oliver O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community: The 2001 Stob Lectures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002).

32 The classic work is that of Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

33 In addition to Cavanaugh’s work, see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999).

34 William T. Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, PA: Blackwell, 2004) 198.

35 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan. Or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (London: Andrew Croke, 1651).

36 Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” 198.

37 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, The Works of John Locke (London: Tegg, Sharpe, and Son, 1823) V:34.

38 Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” 199.

39 Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” 200.

drama of history is a tragic one.

Locke and Hobbes are key figures in narrating modern liberalism's account of origins.⁴⁰ While there are significant differences in their accounts, they share a common creation myth that understands humans as by nature in competition. The world they imagine is not a world of abundance, but a world of scarcity. In such a world, violence is inevitable – even if undesirable. The state (or the sovereign) is that body which polices and orders the clash of interests, thereby allowing for a space of human freedom within the chaos. The state is “saviour”. But the insertion of this saviour into history is also an act of violence, suggests Cavanaugh. The so-called “wars of religion” – which are typically narrated in such a way as to provide warrant for the de-publicization of religion – were necessary to the conciliation of interests and the consolidation of territory both within and between states.⁴¹

The modern nation-state also has its liturgies, from the annual commemorations that form its patriotic imagination to the sacred calendars that mark moments in its salvation history.⁴² Its sacred text takes the form of constitution public officials is sworn to protect. Its saints are those who have paid with their blood defending its precepts. Catechetical instruction is given to the youth, highlighting not only the essential, distinguishing features of the “national character”, but seeking to so form their subjectivities that they would also, if called up, be willing to make the same sacrifice. The modern nation-state also has its sacred hymns, symbols, and creeds. While no place serves as a better example of all this than the United States of America, it's been interesting to note South Africa's own debate around a pledge of allegiance. Notable also in the US context is its motto, *e pluribus unum* (“out of the many, one”), which contrasts somewhat with South Africa's “rainbow” identity. But for all modern nation-states – and granting important differences among them – the single act of national participating in nation making is the election. Here the single, discrete actions of millions become the single act of “popular will”. The people speak.

I dwell on this point to extend the idea that discourse on reconciliation is not a matter of “theological” vs. “political” ideas. The Christian theological understanding of reconciliation I'm sketching here is *political*, because it also forms a “body politic”. But the “secular” or “political” view of reconciliation is also based on a *theology* enacted liturgically. The question, then, is not theology or politics, but rather *which political theology* makes most sense of the brokenness of the world and the need for healing.

3.2 Performing reconciliation: church

The biblical story of reconciliation is also enacted in a liturgy that begins with gathering – a gathering that repeats God's gathering of Israel in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' gathering of his disciples as reconstituted Israel in the Gospels. The gathering of the *ekklesia* is in response to God's call, which is echoed in many churches by a “call to worship” at the beginning of the liturgy. James K. A. Smith suggests that the call to worship echoes God's original “let us make humans” in Genesis one, in which the creation of humans as divine image was aimed at placing

40 Cavanaugh also discusses Rousseau, whose understanding of the state of nature is more optimistic than that of Hobbes and Locke. Nevertheless, “all agree that the state of nature is one of individuality; individuals come together on the basis of a social contract, each individual entering society in order to protect person and property.” William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002) 17.

41 Cavanaugh's seminal article in this regard is “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11.4 (Oct 1995): 397–420. It is also published as chapter one of *Theopolitical Imagination*. There's much more to be said about Cavanaugh's work, though space does not permit it.

42 On what follows, see the essays in *Liturgy* 20:1 (2005), as well as Marvin and Ingle.

them as priests in the cosmic sanctuary.⁴³ In gathering to worship, Christians are doing nothing other than enacting bodily what it means to be human – not simply true to their origins, but to their destiny as part of that multitude gathered “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev 7:9).

The second act of the Christian liturgical drama has the church listening. As in the first, this act positions members of the *ekklesia* as primarily *addressed*. But here the address concerns the order for which humans are created – something that contrasts sharply with modernity’s “rejection of teleology”.⁴⁴ If the accounts of Hobbes and Locke leave us with an empty freedom (freedom *from* the imposition of the desires and interests of others), the reading of scripture in the church demonstrates that the freedom for which God has created humans is a freedom *for* relationship with God, humans, and creation. Smith continues,

[W]e inhabit not “nature” but *creation*, fashioned by a Creator, and there is a certain grain to the universe – grooves and tracks and norms that are part of the fabric of the world. And all of creation flourishes best when our communities and relationships run with the grain of those grooves. Indeed, the biblical vision of human flourishing implicit in worship means that we are only properly free when our desires are rightly ordered, when they are bounded and directed to the end that constitutes our good.⁴⁵

As the gathered listen, however, they become aware of their profound failure to be so bounded and directed. Confession is the only response in this case. That this is structured into the liturgy – albeit at different points, depending on the church – forms the gathered as a people that do not disguise their complicity in violence and exclusion. They may bear the shame of Adam and Eve, but unlike the primal couple they do not hide themselves; they may be complicit as was Cain, but they do not defer responsibility. Moreover, the confession is not simply an admission that the gathered have disobeyed an abstract or arbitrary law. The confession is made *to* the one who has gathered and addressed them. No goods or services can remedy this:⁴⁶ only a further word of pardon from God.

At this point, two important practices, might take place: baptism and Eucharist. Both of these are called “sacraments”, because they are ways the gathered are incorporated into the *sacramentum* or “mystery” of the body of Christ. In Protestantism, sacraments are sometimes termed “an outward sign of an inward grace”, and this is true to a point. However, as in the doctrine of reconciliation, some Protestants have so individualized the sacraments that the “inward grace” is seen to be exclusively something that happens in and for the person, apart from the gathered community.⁴⁷ More recently, theologians have begun to recover baptism as a communal act, not only linking the baptized to the church, but the church to the history of salvation.⁴⁸

Baptism is the passing from death to new life through twofold identification. The first is with

43 Smith, 163. On the “cosmic sanctuary” motif in the Ancient Near East, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005) 81.

44 Smith, 175.

45 Smith, 176.

46 Smith suggests this as a contrast with cultural liturgies that shame the consumer into a sense of his or her own inadequacy, but promise repair through the purchase of a slimming programme, a newer fashion accessory, or a costly make-over. Smith, 180–81.

47 This criticism could be developed further, especially in relation to the way Protestant churches have functioned under the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. That is, the corporate nature of the church is displaced onto the body politic of the nation-state. The church becomes a club, essentially consisting of private individuals united by an interest they hold in common.

48 de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*.

the people of Israel as they pass through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1-2), though there also are echoes elsewhere in the New Testament of an older judgment and deliverance through water (1 Pet 3:20-21). In Ancient Near Eastern cosmology, the sea represented chaos and was personified in figures such as the Babylonian Tiamat. The priestly account of creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a) imagines God as sovereign over the waters: creating through dividing the waters to create “sky”, then gathering them together to create “land”. While the notion of the waters as primordial chaos is demythologized in this account,⁴⁹ nevertheless when moral chaos breaks out in the world after the Fall, God judges through releasing the waters in destructive fury. Similarly, the creation of Israel is “through the waters” – the Red Sea gathered on either side as they walk through the dry bed, while the chaos of Egyptian oppression is represented by the release of the waters to destroy Pharaoh’s army (Ex 14).

The second identification baptism signals is with Christ in his death and resurrection:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin (Rom 6:2-9).

The descent into the waters of baptism marks the end of the old life, which Paul calls “the body of sin”; the ascent from the waters marks the beginning of the new life in Christ. But again we must not miss the corporate language here. Paul is addressing a baptized *people* – a people who by virtue of their baptism bear a new, corporate identity. This is made clear in another passage:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28)

Here I pick up the thread left in section two concerning the identity of the body of Christ. It is baptism, which effects this transformation from a world of warring particularities and disordered loves to the “sociality of harmonious differences” (Milbank) that characterizes life in Christ. We might call this “an ontological transfer”. Another passage combines the idea of dying with Christ with the idea of putting on a new identity, giving baptism a special, ethical point:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ... Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Col 3:5-15)

49 Tiamat may be present in the Genesis account in the person of the “sea monsters”, which far from being the fearsome and bloody deities of Babylonian cosmology are for the Priestly writer good creatures of God. In Ps 103, another sea monster, Leviathan, is imagined as a plaything of God. On the relationship between Genesis and ANE mythology, see Middleton, *passim*.

The ontological transfer calls forth what we might call “an ethical transfer”. Baptism, for Christians, marks the end of the old life – a life of striving for autonomy; a life lived from self-interestedness, a life of estrangement. The characteristic vices of this life are listed in verse 3. Each vice is something, which inhibits, disrupts, or erodes human community.⁵⁰ The preparation for the end of life “according to the flesh” is marked by the stripping of candidates for baptism prior to their immersion. On the other side, the newly baptized are clothed with garments reflecting their new identity in Christ. Hence the accompanying virtues are listed in verses 12-14. Significantly, among the things they do *not* carry through the waters are the old, social identities (which Paul says elsewhere also belong “to the flesh” – Phil 3:4). Instead, they understand themselves to be members of one body, characterized by harmony and cohering in love.⁵¹

Baptism names the way Christians are brought into this reconciled community. Eucharist is how this community is ongoingly sustained during the world. The Eucharist begins with the offering of gifts. Originally the offering was not a matter of people dropping coins onto a plate (something that likely became widespread from the Reformation⁵²), but consisted in the bringing of the elements to share in Eucharist, as well as other items for the meal that would follow. This is “the beginning of the new Creation’s harvest”.⁵³ Just as the people have gathered in response to the call of God, so now the gifts of bread and wine are brought forth and placed on the altar.⁵⁴ The wine is mingled together and the bread presented as the living sacrificial offering of the people. The bread and the wine represent the people themselves as stewards of creation. After all, what is presented is not grain and grapes, but bread that is *made* from many grains, and wine that is *made* from many grapes.⁵⁵

But this sacrifice is taken up into the Trinitarian economy I spoke of earlier, wherein the offering of the people to God becomes at the same time God’s offering to the people.⁵⁶ Dom

50 Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 151–68.

51 The question of what happens to particularities such as language, ethnicity, and gender is a live one. If *katallassō* is the overcoming of estrangement, is it also the subsuming of alterity? This would entail another form of violence, and would fail to be faithful to the trinitarian norm of harmonic unity-in-difference. But what differences belong to this harmony? and what belong to the strife created by fallenness? See E.A.J.G. Van der Borgh, “The Most Segregated Hour: On Racial Reconciliation as Unfinished Business for Theology in South Africa and Beyond,” Inaugural Lecture. Desmond Tutu Chair in Youth, Sports and Reconciliation (Free University of Amsterdam, 2009). My intuition (which I’ve intimated already) is to understand difference in terms of a gift to be received and shared. See also note 51 below.

52 Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, New ed. (London: Continuum, 2005) 661–62.

53 William T. Cavanaugh, “Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Social Imagination in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.3 (Fall 2001): 599, quoting Rowan D. Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice—The Roots of a Metaphor* (Nottinghamshire: Grove Booklets, 1982) 10.

54 See also the play of sacrifice and spiritual gift within the context of “we being many are one body” in Romans 12:1-8, which echoes the Eucharistic language of 1 Corinthians 10:17.

55 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947) 3.74.1.

56 Cavanaugh, “Eucharistic Sacrifice,” 601–02. Cavanaugh claims that modernity lost this trinitarian logic and embraced a “zero-sum-gain” view of sacrifice, such that the offering, the one(s) making the offering, and the recipient of the offering were separated. The tortured meditations of Jacques Derrida on the (im) possibility of pure gift bear witness to this loss. Jacques Derrida, “Forgiving the Unforgivable,” public lecture (University of the Western Cape, 1998). To the contrary, a pre-modern, trinitarian logic celebrates a circulation of gifts in communion. Writes Cavanaugh, “The antinomy of gift and exchange is overcome in the Body of Christ, for no thing is transferred from one to another. In the intratrinitarian relations, the exchange of love is simply the return of God to Godself, the infinite return of the Son to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Human creatures’ return to God is only our participation in the perfect return of

Gregory Dix explains the ancient practice,

Each communicant from the bishop to the newly confirmed gave himself under the forms of bread and wine to God, as God gives himself to them under the same forms. In the united oblations of all her members the Body of Christ, the church, gave herself to *become* the Body of Christ, the sacrament, in order that receiving again the symbol of herself now transformed and hallowed, she might be truly that which by nature she is, the Body of Christ, and each of her members of Christ... In Christ, as His body, the church is 'accepted' by God 'in the beloved'. Its sacrifice of itself is taken up into His sacrifice of Himself.⁵⁷

Just like the old saying, "you are what you eat", Christians eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, in order that they might become the body of Christ *for* the world; in order that they might represent the new covenant in his blood *to* the world.

Baptism and Eucharist are each a microcosm of the story that is told in the larger movement of the liturgy. Both of them are the means by which the gathered people are incorporated into the body of Christ – initially in baptism and ongoingly in Eucharist. But both of them also have a "be what you are" thrust. Just as in the 2 Corinthians passage in the previous section, in the Romans and Colossians passages we've just looked at, the already-baptized are called to "put to death" those things that belong to the old ways. Hence in many churches, when someone is baptized, the other members will at the same time renew their baptismal vows, and be sprinkled afresh by the celebrant. Likewise, those about to partake in the Eucharist, the "new covenant" meal, must be at peace with each other. A third century document reports that during the kiss of peace, immediately prior to the eating and drinking, the Deacon would cry out, "Is there any man that keepeth ought against his fellow?"⁵⁸ Remembering that Jesus explicitly commanded his followers *not* to offer their gift to God *until* they were reconciled with their brother or sister (Matt 5:23-24) tells us that the Eucharist is not to be participated in lightly. Paul chided the Corinthians for not discerning the presence of the Lord's body – meaning that they were treating the Lord's Supper like any other meal at which status positions would be reinforced. For this, "many of you are weak and ill, and some have fallen asleep." (1 Cor 11:30) If baptism signals a kind of death, as William Cavanaugh puts it, "the Eucharist can kill you."⁵⁹

Not only do church members need to ensure they are participating in the new world reconciled in Christ, the church as body does as well. The fact that the church's record – in and outside South Africa – is far from spotless is nothing less than a scandal. This is also part of the theology of reconciliation: the church is identified as that people only too aware of their failures to live up to their identity as reconciled and to their mission as reconcilers. This failure marks the present dispensation as suspended between promise and fulfilment, between this age and the age to come. It is something that marks what Paul calls the "groaning" of the church, longing for the fullness of redemption (Rom 8:23-25). This groaning also leads to ongoing repentance.

In some churches, the end of the service is marked by a deacon chanting the words, "*ete missa est*", "the mass is concluded".⁶⁰ The word "mass" is derived from "mitte", which means, "to

the God-man to God." Cavanaugh, "Eucharistic Sacrifice," 601.

57 Dix, 117.

58 Dix, 106–07. John de Gruchy suggests in this regard that the sacrament of Penance needs to be recovered, especially by Protestants engaged in reconciliation. Indeed, this sacrament is the model which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in large part followed. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 102–07.

59 William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 231–32.

60 This phrase, retained in the contemporary Roman rite, has also been revived by Anglo-Catholics. F.L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, "Mass," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 2005) 1058.

send”.⁶¹ Once “the mass is concluded”; the mission now begins. The church is co-missioned to go, to baptize, and to teach (Matt 28:19-20). The exaltation and sovereignty of the crucified Lord is not simply good news for the church; it is good news for the world. The gathering continues as the church opens itself out to the world, inviting it to find its identity in Christ. As Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder suggests,

It is in the Church, as the mother of believers brings forth the ‘new’ me who, also as far as cultural life is concerned, bear the burdens of the world. Only the Church joins them together into an unbreakable communion and teaches the norms for all the relationships of life, even outside the Church.⁶²

4. THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

How does the church bear witness to reconciliation in the world? And does the world have anything to say to the church concerning reconciliation? Since reconciliation, understood theologically, is both reality and process, the church also enlists the world to assist its own witness, even while demonstrating to the world its own ultimate shape in Jesus Christ. I think a good example can be found in South Africa’s recent history, an example that also shows how the world poses a question back to the church.

South African theologians and church leaders played a significant role in thinking about reconciliation in the South African context during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite not insignificant differences over the relation between justice and reconciliation, in the mid-1980s both the Kairos Document and the National Initiative for Reconciliation demonstrated rigorous theological thinking about the shape of a new, reconciled society.⁶³ The Rustenburg Conference of 1991 brought together a spectrum of black and white church leaders, from the mainline Anglicans to the Dutch Reformed to the newer Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. The Conference and the Statement issued were “of great significance and the confessions there anticipate those given at the TRC hearings.”⁶⁴ Following this gathering, which marked the beginning of their own reconciliation, the churches – through such instruments such as the National Peace Accord and the Church Leaders Forum – also made significant contributions in sustaining the negotiations during the vulnerable years of 1992 and 1993, and in preparing the population for the elections of 1994.

In the founding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the idea of a space within which polarized South Africans could confront the truth about their complicity in violence and embrace the other they had violated became a reality. This space was liturgically founded in a special service that opened the proceedings, sustained in prayers and moved about in pilgrimage throughout the country, visiting the places of violent exclusion and painful memory. Its Chair, decked out in purple cassock and pectoral cross, functioned as priest-confessor to the nation. Its mission was one not simply of investigation and adjudication, but of healing. In doing this,

61 Cross and Livingstone.

62 Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Wrongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1977) 106, quoted in Smith, 207.

63 For the NIR, “what needed to be reconciled were ‘groups’, defined racially or ethnically. Apartheid was analysed as a racist ideology. Other Christians, especially the authors of *The Kairos Document*, claimed that the South African problem was systemic economic inequality, rather than simple racial prejudice. Racial antagonism and racial policies were at the surface, rather than at the depths of the problem. Redressing injustice and bringing about social transformation was therefore the first step to real reconciliation.” Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 58–59.

64 Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 57. What follows in this section is indebted to RICA’s Report.

the TRC would re-narrate South Africa's violent history, mapping it onto a Christian-like fall-redemption grid. This narrative would be one "owned" by all South Africans.⁶⁵ Hence, like the reconciliation space of the church, the TRC sought to establish a new basis for relationships that would "repeat forward", issuing in a different people that conform their lives to the quest for reconciliation – what theology calls "sanctification", albeit through a "national" spirit.

This "theological reading" of the TRC is one I've developed in more detail elsewhere.⁶⁶ But the religious dynamics have been evident also to "secular" figures, such as former cabinet minister Kader Asmal. For Asmal, the Commission served as "a civic sacrament".⁶⁷ Certainly the nature of the TRC was contested, even though its mandate was clearly marked out in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. Its mandate was six fold: to establish [1] "as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the period [1 March 1960 to 6 December 1996]; [2] to adjudicate "the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective committed in the course of the conflicts of the past during the said period"; [3] to allow victims "an opportunity to relate the violations they suffered"; [4] to make recommendations concerning "the granting of reparation to, and the rehabilitation and the restoration of the human and civil dignity of, victims of violations of human rights"; [5] to report "to the Nation about such violations and victims"; and [6] to make "recommendations aimed at the prevention of the commission of gross violations of human rights" in the future.⁶⁸ These six objectives stood behind the Human Rights Violations, Amnesty, and Reparations committees, as well as the Research department (which would produce the final Report). But the discourse of reconciliation was nevertheless divided between "minimalists", who saw the role of the Commission strictly in terms of the granting or denying of amnesty, and those with a thicker understanding of the possibilities of reconciliation, who saw the role of the Commission in terms of a larger, religious narrative of redemption. When looked at in light of our discussion in section 3 above, we can see both of these as understandings of "reconciliation": the former consistent with the modern, liberal narrative which seeks to strengthen the social contract through removing the occasion for vengeance; the latter consistent with the Christian account of reconciliation as restoration of communion.⁶⁹ Of course, those who championed this more substantive account did so without the explicit ecclesiology attending a deeper, Christian account.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this understanding of reconciliation "as a common good, defined by confession, forgiveness, and redemption, and the exclusion of vengeance" stood in stark contrast to the "discursive invisibility" of the notion of reconciliation in those favouring the first account.⁷¹

65 This was certainly a sticking point for critics of the TRC: it was far *too* Christian. For a representative criticism, see Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 109–21.

66 Stephen W. Martin, "Civic Sacrament and Social Imaginaries in Transition: The Case of the Churches and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Political Theology* forthcoming (2010).

67 Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal, and Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth*, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996) 47.

68 Government of South Africa, *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation (TRC) Act No. 34 [Amended]* (1997).

69 For the debate within the Commission from an insider's perspective, see Piet Meiring, "The *Baruti* Versus the Lawyers: The Role of Religion in the TRC Process," *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, Ed. Charles Villa Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (Cape Town; London: University of Cape Town Press; Zed Books, 2000) 113–31.

70 A nation-state was the new social reality—a nation-state reflecting the Westphalian model of early modernity. See Martin.

71 Wilson, 109, 106. Wilson also identifies a "mandarin-intellectual" narrative, which saw the significance of the TRC as providing "a transcendental basis" for nation-building "through the emergence of a shared

Ultimately the TRC would be widely judged to have failed in effecting its mission of reconciliation, however defined. At a conference commemorating the tenth anniversary of the first hearing, those involved in the TRC on the side of the Commission and those who stood before it agreed that, while significant, the TRC could not have accomplished reconciliation with finality. Limitations were evident in the question of whether South Africa is “a reconciled nation” after the TRC. Reflecting on some of the research of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Don Foster observed that the socio-economic conditions that obtain ten years later show that social equality is far away. Moreover, South Africans continue to live in separate worlds. “In South Africa,” he concluded, “continued *de facto* racial segregation remains the norm.”⁷²

And yet, while it would be “more regularly lauded in the rest of the world than at home”,⁷³ the TRC had opened up a fresh possibility, demonstrating something of what reconciliation could be. Following Paul Lederach, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela suggested this possibility as the creation of a moral imagination, “the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relations that includes our enemies”. In this web “rehumanization... a space where the incompatible yet inextricable stories of victim, victimizer, and bystander meet”, becomes a possibility.⁷⁴ But this possibility remains something in need of actualization by ordinary South Africans, not simply leaders or representatives. Reconciliation, admitted Desmond Tutu, “is not an event, it is a process and it is one in which all of us, not just a commission, have a stake.”⁷⁵ And Nohle Mohapi, who lost her husband in 1976, observed “it’s up to us now to make truth and reconciliation our business”.⁷⁶

Tutu’s claim that, despite its flaws, “the world thinks the South African TRC has set a benchmark against which every other TRC can be measured”,⁷⁷ is significant. For the TRC stands as a parable of the Kingdom of God. It provided a glimpse into what South Africa *could* be, and beyond South Africa demonstrated a new way of being human in which past sufferings do not hold sway over future possibilities. It constituted a place where victim and victimizer could meet, where the former could confront the latter with truth, and where both could find a new basis for relationship. The fact that my own country of Canada has initiated its own “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, investigating abuses in aboriginal residential schools, is part of South Africa’s living legacy.⁷⁸

As a social body that lives not from itself but from an act of generosity that remakes the world, the church is “custodian” of this vision of reconciliation.⁷⁹ But it doesn’t control reconciliation, nor does it stand over against the parties needing to be reconciled. For the TRC was also a challenge to *the church*. In November 1997, the Commission called on churches and other faith communities to give a public account of their activities during the period 1960-1994. And they came: Catholic and Protestant, evangelical and ecumenical, Pentecostal and independent.⁸⁰ This gathering, in full public view, before a panel empowered to call them to account, was unparalleled in the

vision of a single nation.” Wilson, 108.

72 *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, Ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and Fanie du Toit (Cape Town: David Philip, 2006) 83.

73 Charles Villa-Vicencio, in *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, 164.

74 In *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, 73–74.

75 In *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, 190.

76 In *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, 11.

77 In *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On*, 10.

78 Part of the mandate of the Canadian TRC is establish a new basis for the relation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. Sheila Whyte, “Some Big Questions for the Slow-Starting Commission” (2009), [Http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/07/10/f-trc-slow-start.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/07/10/f-trc-slow-start.html).

79 Rowan D. Williams, “Public Religion and the Common Good,” address (St Andrews Cathedral, Singapore, 2007).

80 A complete list may be found in Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 191–98.

history of South Africa – or of anywhere else.⁸¹ Virtually across the board the churches identified themselves as victims, perpetrators, and opponents of human rights abuses. In their testimonies the iconic figures of Beyers Naudé, Allan Boesak, and Desmond Tutu were justly celebrated.⁸² But they also spoke of pastors that, Sunday after Sunday, encouraged the perpetuation of abuses through their affirmation of “whatever” the good Christians in the security police were doing to protect the Christian nation from godless communism.⁸³ Even more scandalous were the stories of black, activist members of churches tortured by white members of the same church who were working for the regime.⁸⁴ Most scandalous were the ways churches rejected – implicitly through unequal distribution of resources between white and black parishes, or explicitly through church apartheid⁸⁵ – the meaning of baptism and Eucharist. The sacraments themselves were twisted into a means to legitimate violent exclusion.⁸⁶

Following their acts of confession, churches committed themselves to bringing their considerable resources to the project of reconciliation and reconstruction. Grand plans were announced for special services, projects, and conferences. Churches committed themselves to land audits, the equalization of clergy stipends, and denominational consolidation. They offered pastoral care to victims who had testified, facilities to aid the reconstruction of communities, and greater involvement in promoting a culture of accountability.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, no one (to my knowledge – and I *have* been asking!) has gone back to those plans to see how they were implemented.⁸⁸ Indeed, it seems as if, much as the rest of the Commission, the appearance of the churches in public, once called by John de Gruchy the closing chapter of the church struggle in South Africa,⁸⁹ has been virtually forgotten. The church – like the nation after the TRC – has gotten on with its life.

5. CONCLUSION: THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL IN A WORLD OF ATROCITIES

It's been nearly 2,000 years since the church began to proclaim the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. During that time there have been gains, but also losses. Some ask, has anything *really* changed – especially when “the people of the solution” have so often become part of the problem?⁹⁰

Things are of course more complex than they seem. The reconciliation spoken of by the church is parodied in different ways in the post-Christian secular state, and it has been argued that the thin, secular form of reconciliation discussed in section 3.1 above is but a secularization of a prior Christian narrative.⁹¹ The Christian view is also anticipated in thicker, non-Christian

81 John W. de Gruchy, “Giving Account: Churches in South Africa,” *The Christian Century* Dec. 17 1997.

82 Though one of the most moving parts of the testimonies came when Michael Nuttal, Bishop of Natal and former chaplain to Desmond Tutu, apologized on behalf of Anglicans to the former Archbishop for their ambivalence towards his message. Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 42.

83 Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 36–38.

84 Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 38.

85 Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 39–40.

86 Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, *Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, submission (Johannesburg, 1997).

87 Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 61–64.

88 The RICS Report called for a monitoring agency to track the progress of faith communities in all this. Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, 75.

89 See de Gruchy, “Giving Account: Churches in South Africa”.

90 In the words of N. T. Wright *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 53f.

91 Hence Cavanaugh's title suggesting secular modernity as parody of Christianity. “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, Ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999) 182–200.

traditional practices. This is to be expected, if as Bonhoeffer writes, “the reality of the world has been marked once and for all by the cross of Christ, but the cross of Christ is the cross of reconciliation of the world with God, and for this reason the world also bears at the same time the mark of reconciliation as the free ordinance of God.”⁹² At the very least we can say theologically that to pursue costly reconciliation is to act “with the grain of the universe”.⁹³ Or to quote South Africa’s most famous reconciler,

There is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has sent in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the centre, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice; one that removes barriers.⁹⁴

The church bears this possibility in its story, in its structures, and in its understanding of mission. As “moral imagination”, reconciliation is sustained in the church’s liturgy and enacted in its sacraments. And yet the exemplars of reconciliation (such as the TRC) also speak back to the church, calling it to repentance and challenging it to be more fully reconciled reconcilers.

In speaking of the challenge of reconciliation, I want to say two things in conclusion. Firstly, it’s important to reiterate that reconciliation is not just an idea or ideal, but the very *reality* of the world in Christ. And this reality calls for practices that bear witness to it – practices that anticipate the time when the whole *world* will see itself – and the world will see itself *whole* – in Jesus Christ. Until then, the church is called to act vicariously, on behalf of the world. It was Bonhoeffer who put matters thus.⁹⁵ But living the reality of a world reconciled in Christ can and will be costly, as Bonhoeffer’s example also reminds us. It requires martyrdom (*martyrion* being the New Testament word for “bearing witness”). That will, at minimum, mean a laying aside of self – and class, and volk, and perhaps even national – interest. Paul talks about this under the phrase, “being crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). But it may also require the laying aside of one’s bodily life as the most profound testimony to the reality of reconciliation, laying bare the *untruth* of a world that can maintain itself only through violence.⁹⁶ Secondly, as a practice, reconciliation is not simply something that takes place from the top down, but from the bottom up. Just as the Word became flesh “and moved into the neighbourhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*), reconciliation has to take on flesh in a local context. This was an opportunity I think the churches missed in the mid-1990s. Certainly national church leaders were making grand, public gestures of reconciliation. But what was happening in local parishes? That’s the question I’ve been trying to get an answer to during my time here in South Africa. In the late 1990s, my former parish initiated a process of story-telling that had great promise to open up space for healing in the present and for the future, especially for the many families who were long-standing members and were displaced because of Group Areas legislation. Regrettably, this research project remained just that.

There have been laudable initiatives, from the growing number of black clergy in historically white, Anglican parishes to the structural reconciliation of churches divided into racialized sections. The movement for restitution, initiated by some evangelical churches in the Western

92 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 206, as quoted in de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 72.

93 John Howard Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 58. Yoder’s fuller statement is, “people who bear crosses are acting with the grain of the universe”.

94 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 212.

95 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” *Between Christ and Caesar*, Ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 106–08.

96 Rowan D. Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Grand Rapids; Toronto: Eerdmans; Anglican Book Centre, 2000) 111.

Cape, recognizes the way whites as beneficiaries of apartheid have a responsibility to participate in social and economic empowerment. Rather than looking to the state to address inequality, whites voluntarily pay into a fund that is used for literacy and other programs.⁹⁷ And yet, NG and VG Kerk members continue to worship in separate churches. The mainline churches, which bear in their histories (and often in their physical buildings⁹⁸) the marks of the past, are currently being displaced by new Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which are “in tune” with the new ethos, and which can claim to have sprung into being post-apartheid. Unsurprisingly, the same new elite that has “put the TRC behind it” has embraced these newer forms of Christianity.⁹⁹

But I digress. Let me get back to the question by phrasing things differently: if local parishes were taking the example of their national leadership seriously, we should, fifteen years later, be able to see the fruit of that *now*. So the question – and the challenge – becomes: what do *local parishes* look like in 2010? This is not a call to name “values” but to spell out, concretely, whether the reality of parish life conforms to the reality of reconciliation in Christ. The 1960s activist Abbie Hoffmann once said: “Don’t tell me what you *believe*. Let me watch what you *do*. Then *I’ll* tell *you* what you believe.” To address readers who are involved in the church: when people look at *your* parish, do they say to themselves, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself”? Or do they say something else?

In a world beset by atrocities yet under the scandalous promise of grace, *that* is the theological challenge of reconciliation.

97 <http://www.restitution.org.za>

98 Part of this concerns what churches do with monuments within their walls. For instance, some years ago many members of the congregation at Grahamstown Cathedral take great offence at the use of “the ‘K’ word” in the wall plaques, and called for their removal. Others claimed that, as offensive to current sensibilities as those things are, the past cannot simply be erased. The compromise was to glue bits of marble over the contentious words. When I looked at these plaques on visiting the Cathedral in 2008, it struck me that, as inadequate as this solution was, here was a church at least struggling to come to terms with its ambiguous history.

99 Mandy Roussouw, “Zuma’s New God Squad Wants Liberal Laws to Go,” *M&G Online* Sept. 11 2009, [Http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-09-11-zumas-new-god-squad-wants-liberal-laws-to-go](http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-09-11-zumas-new-god-squad-wants-liberal-laws-to-go).