

Philipa Rothfield, Cleo Fleming, Paul Komesaroff (Eds).
Pathways to Reconciliation: Between Theory and Practice
(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 194 pp.)

The United Nations General Assembly had proclaimed in Resolution A/61/L.22, the year 2009 as the International Year of Reconciliation “recognizing that reconciliation processes are particularly necessary and urgent in countries and regions of the world which have suffered or are suffering situations of conflict that have affected and divided societies in their various internal, national, and international facets.” The resolution was introduced by Nicaragua’s representative who stated that “reconciliation between those estranged by conflicts was the only way to confront today’s challenges and heal wherever fraternity and justice were absent from human relations.”

Reconciliation is a process which requires spiritual understanding as it goes beyond the type of pragmatism that rests in the careful calculation of causes and consequences. Reconciliation needs to be seen not only as reconciliation between two persons or groups, but as reconciliation for something. It is not merely the repair of the past, but reconciliation is a bridge to the future. Reconciliation has to do with how antagonists construct a new future together. How are they going to understand and start developing this common future.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes in the introduction of this collection of essays “It is possible today to discern a movement at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal forces of alienation, brokenness, division and hostility and to begin to move forward to peace and harmony. To give this process added force, it is important to take stock of the various approaches to reconciliation and to understand their relative strengths and weaknesses.”

Reconciliation is a process, not a state to be achieved. It is an element in consolidating peace, breaking a cycle of violence, restoring justice at personal and social levels, bringing about personal healing and building non-violent relations between individuals. As Adam Curle has said “We work for harmony wherever we are, to strive to bring together those who are sundered by fear, ignorance, hatred, resentment, injustice — any conditions which divide us.”

There is no way of overcoming the ambiguities and ambivalences of the concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a never-concluding, often uncomfortable process of bringing together of persons, practices and meaning. Because reconciliation is difficult and ambiguous, the UN has done little with the Year of Reconciliation beyond its original resolution. The resolution did stress that “dialogue among opponents from positions of respect and tolerance is an essential element of peace and reconciliation.”

For there to be a respectful dialogue among opponents, certain barriers that prevent dialogue must be dismantled as a sign of a willingness to enter into a process of negotiations. Some barriers are physical, some psychological, others ideological. These barriers must be overcome if we are to progress on the long road of reconciliation. As Paul Komesaroff writes “A key feature of reconciliation is that it refers to a process involving communication across the obstacles presented by — among other things — culture, race, religion and politics. Such communication is often difficult unpredictable, ambiguous and fragile. Untrammelled communication may not be possible, but some kind of dialogical contact always is, at least where there is a readiness to pass beyond the tyranny of violence and fear...A key question is always how to establish and maintain the process of communication, which may be fraught and requires sensitivity to local possibilities and limitations.”

Another key issue of dialogue for reconciliation is that of scale, of involving enough people to make a politically-significant force. As Paul James writes “ Reconciliation needs to be built from the ground up while being supported from the top down. Reconciliation conducted as face-to-face testimony and acknowledgement is fundamental, but unless it is at once re-embedded in the continuing moments and projects of the everyday and lifted to a level of more abstract engagement (usually as a series of institutionalized practices) with a larger community or civil sphere then it is likely to fail. In other words, reclaiming the face-to-face as one level of engagement is crucial, but it needs to be held in a clear and negotiated relation to more abstract levels of integration, including the institutionally-extended and disembodied or mediated level of mass communications.”

Reconciliation is both about healing past relationships and establishing new relationships with those on other sides in order to create a new platform for action. There needs to be a willingness to engage across lines of distrust and hatred in order to set a new agenda. There is still creative work for all of us.

Rene Wadlow

