

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

DOING THEOLOGY DIFFERENTLY:

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Seeking a Transformational Theology
in Belfast and Beyond

THINK PEACE 8

Theology is very often seen as, at best ,irrelevant to seeking solutions to the divisions in Ireland and Northern Ireland or, at worst, the main obstacle. In either case, little use is seen in pursuing theological reflection as a beneficial way of fostering positive transformation of the on-going divisions here. I disagree.

Theology, in and of itself, is neither the problem nor the solution. How theology has been done in the past might be *part* of the problem, and how we might do theology now and in the future might be part of the solution.

Why does it even matter?

The years since the Good Friday Agreement have seen peace- of a sort- begin to take hold in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is considerably less violent, its political structures are reasonably stable and- as anyone who endured the 30 years plus of civil conflict that preceded it will tell you- it is a more pleasant place to live. It is, however, still a deeply divided place, and many of the issues that led to the outbreak of the conflict- contested identity, contested space, contested symbolism, contested nationality, deeply sectarian social structures- are ongoing and unresolved.

Indeed, in many cases, the very processes needed to begin to resolve the divisions have not yet been formulated. Communities live together, but do not live together well, in many areas barely tolerating each other, with only the slightest provocation needed for sustained violence to flare. Dozens of police officers being put in the hospital has become numbingly normative, as have pipe bombs, security alerts, disorder around the issues of parades and flags and- in Belfast- more and more security barriers, the most recent one built in July 2013.

In such a situation, how can we do theology with integrity? How can the churches and people of faith here creatively and publicly contribute to the on-going process of reconciliation and a shared future?

I believe that the role of the churches in society is to theologically reflect on their society in light of the biblical text and then engage with the public life out of that reflection. This is the process of doing theology. I also believe that there is a deep need for the Christians of Ireland and Northern Ireland to do theology in a transformational way, a way that seeks liberation and reconciliation- overcoming the structures of oppression and marginalisation as well as the structures of estrangement and division.

To that end, I envision theology that builds its reflection around a cyclical pattern: reality, reflection and re-imagining.

Reality

Theological reflection has its beginning within the social reality of the people of faith. What this implies is a definitive understanding that the great themes of our faith- salvation, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation- should not be relegated to the abstract. We cannot know what they 'mean' without reflecting on what they mean 'here'. Theological reflection, then, begins with grappling with how our faith is affected by our reality. Only then can we begin to understand how our theology can be part of transforming that reality.

How should we face our social reality? In the biblical text we are told how Jesus ‘turned his face’ toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Jesus confronted a social reality of corruption and oppressive power that would, he knew, eventually do away with him. This corruption and imperial cruelty was his social reality and that of those to whom he came to reveal the Kingdom of God. All that Christ said regarding salvation, loving ones’ enemies, forgiveness, and reconciliation was said in the shadow of that corrupt and oppressive social reality.

My theological work has involved reflecting on the themes of liberation and reconciliation in the midst of Belfast’s social reality of the separation barriers. Belfast is a city with an on-going social policy of securing and segregating large parts of the city with a network of walls, gates and fences- often running through the city’s most deprived areas- paid for with public funding. Have our churches reflected on what it means to teach and preach that Christ has ‘set us free’ and has ‘broken down the barriers’ between us in the light of this reality?

My research, as well as recent work by Gladys Ganiel at the Irish School of Ecumenics, as well as recently-published works by John Brewer, Francis Teaney and Gareth Higgins suggests not. Yet without that reflection, our understanding of God, ourselves and our theology will always be undernourished.

Reflection

Once we consciously acknowledge that our theology emerges from our social reality, we can then approach the biblical text in light of that reality. It is here that we can begin the process of finding ourselves in the biblical text and finding the biblical text in our lived experience, building an historical bridge between our own context and that in the text.

In my own theological work, this has involved investigating the separation barriers and why they are built. What I found was that the desire to have the barriers erected often come from communities’ fear and lack of trust, legitimate desires to feel safe and secure, and desires to reinforce their own identities by marking out what territory is ‘ours’ and what is ‘theirs’. Although there have been strong City Council explorations about promoting good relations and shared city space policies, in my opinion there has been little or no public reflection on what the consequences of continuing to implement publicly-funded physical segregation measures might be to communities, or the city as a whole.

This is markedly similar to the biblical practice of idolatry. By reflecting on idolatry in the biblical text, we are presented with similar dynamics- in Exodus 32, people feeling lost and abandoned by God and their leaders, demand new ‘gods’ be built, to go ahead of them, to announce who they are to their enemies. But the new gods do not provide what the people want. Worse, the new ‘gods’, as seen throughout the biblical text, demand sacrifices- most often children.

Re-Imagining

Out of this biblical reflection now emerges the moment of praxis. How does our reflection on the biblical text in the light of social reality help us transform our reality? I refer to this process using the language of ‘re-imagining’.

Re-imagining hopefully represents a new and deeper exploration of our social reality, as the reflection illuminates not only what ‘is’, but what ‘might be’. Re-imagining is the place

of hope and potential. 'Who are we? Where are we? Where do we want to go, and how do we get there?'

In my work, re-imagining became a way of helping people of faith locate themselves in the discussion and conversation about the barriers, an issue on which the churches in Belfast have been virtually silent. The barriers have been largely invisible and unnoticed by the churches.

By developing a new way of 'seeing' something, the reality of people is transformed and possibilities for new ways of engaging with their reality open up.

The consciousness of the people of faith in Belfast is raised; an issue on which they felt they could make no contribution enters their perception.

The people of faith have the opportunity to realise,

'We CAN engage with this issue. We have something to contribute to the discussion regarding a shared future. We CAN theologically reflect on our social reality and re-imagine our role in light of that reflection.'

Why transformational theology?

Because it is what we can do, and if the churches and the people of faith do not do it, no one will.

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Corrymeela Community

VISION:

Embracing difference, healing division
and enabling reconciliation.

MISSION:

To provide open, safe and inclusive
spaces for dialogue, which moves
society towards social justice, positive
relationships and respect for diversity.

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