

Can religions help to heal the wounds of conflict?

Robin Marsh
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Healing the Wounds Panel Can religions help to heal the wounds of conflict?

By Rev Dr. Marcus Braybrooke 22nd February 2016
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Considering the role of religion in healing the post-conflict wounds, Rev Braybrooke set out the scene at the beginning of this conference in the House of Lords.

Some of the residents told me that there was a knock on the door at 6.0 a.m. They ordered to be ready to leave by 9.0 a.m. and they were transported to land some twenty miles away where there was some corrugated iron for them to build

new shacks. Many of the community have continued to make the twenty-mile trek each Sunday to come back to the church. Afterwards, I asked some of the women how they now felt towards the white community. 'We must forgive,' they said, 'as Jesus has forgiven us.' Jesus himself on the cross prayed, 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do.'

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In the same way, Muhammad when he returned victorious to Mecca showed a divine mercy. He called for the leaders of the Quraish and said to them,

This day,

Let no reproach be cast

On you: Allah will forgive you,

And He is the Most Merciful

Of those who show mercy. (12.92)

The Buddha said, 'hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease.'

I could give many more quotations, although sadly also religion itself often enflames conflict. Yet, if it is easy to talk about forgiveness, but I know how difficult it is even in ordinary life. I cannot begin to imagine how difficult it is for those whose loved ones have been killed or tortured, but the only hope for healing and lasting peace is for us to mirror the forgiveness of God. As Desmond Tutu as said, 'There is no future without forgiveness.'

One difficulty is that the word 'Forgiveness' is used widely. At our earlier UPF sessions on forgiveness, building on the work of psychologists as well as listening to testimonies, we found that recognizing the various stages of forgiveness is helpful – as forgiveness is a process, it does not happen overnight. These, very much in summary are

1. The victim feels anger and hatred
2. The victim demands justice - public recognition of the wrong can do something to reduce the anger.
3. The victim recognizes that the anger is damaging himself or herself, making him or her twice a victim, and tries to let go of the anger.
4. The victim begins to think about the wrongdoer. Negative feelings begin to be replaced by positive ones. Perhaps the wrong-doer is a relation or member of the same faith community or the victim recognizes that the wrongdoer has lots of problems or poor background or 'was obeying orders.'

5. There is some expression of willingness to forgive but, a key question, is whether this can happen before there is confession of guilt and repentance on behalf of the wrongdoer?

6. Maybe there is some form of reconciliation. For example one ex-husband, when his wife married again took the wedding photos.

Can what may apply to individuals also apply to communities. Of course, faith communities have a vital role in giving practical help to victims of violence, but can they also play a role in reconciliation?

One difficulty is that the rivalry and hatred between communities may have a long history.

The poet Edwin Muir wrote:

Revengeful dust rises up to haunt us.

*History plagues us like a relentless wheel.
Who can set a new mark or circumvent history?3*

This is what Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have tried to do - 'to set a new mark.' Their emphasis is on healing the memories of conflict and helping a country to move forward. As the recent Canadian Truth and reconciliation report says, 'Shaming and pointing out wrongdoing were not the purpose of the Commission's mandate. Ultimately, the Commission's focus on truth determination was intended to lay the foundation for the important question of reconciliation. Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed.'

Wikipedia lists some 40 Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Some have been set up by the United Nations, some by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the great majority by governments. Who sets up the commission, of course, has a bearing on its approach. Most of the governmental commissions were set up by 'transitional governments' of often very fragile democracies as they tried to move on from the civil and human rights abuses of previous regimes. They thus had a political purpose. Sometimes a general amnesty was the price to pay for a cessation of hostilities.

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which Archbishop Desmond Tutu headed, offered an amnesty the whole truth was told. Another body was responsible for recommending reparation to assist rehabilitation of the victims.

The importance of knowing what actually happened to one's loved ones is very important. The Citizen's Pact in Mexico had as its first demand 'the naming of the victims' as well as an acknowledgement of the injustice. Desmond Tutu repeatedly emphasized his faith in the healing power of truth telling, captured in the banners which said 'Revealing is Healing.' This was also the emphasis of the Guatemala Truth and Memory Project, which the Guatemala Catholic Church established and which was chaired by Bishop Juan Gerardi - who was brutally murdered two days after presenting the report.[i] He was inspired by the Biblical verse, 'the truth shall set you free.' 'To open ourselves to truth ... are indispensable requirements for societies that seek to humanize themselves.' 'Atrocities ... refuse to be buried.'[ii] The same is true of the community trials after Rwanda genocide. 'They served to promote reconciliation by providing a means for victims to learn the truth about the death of their family members and relatives.' Likewise a group of therapists who worked in Chile insisted that 'the more victims try to forget their terrible experiences in the past, the more likely they are to reproduce them in the present in forms of emotional illness... A person needs to recount the traumatic experience in detail.'

People also need to have the injustice they have suffered acknowledged. This is why I think public apologies are important and are not empty gestures.

Pope John Paul's words of apology in the scroll put into the Western wall in Jerusalem were very significant. The prayer set a seal on Churches' growing acknowledgment of the suffering caused to God's chosen people by persecution and centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teaching, which were 'the seed bed in which Nazism could grow.' It was a public and symbolic act underlining the new relationship between Jews and Christians.

Yesterday was the 100th anniversary of the start of the battle of Verdun. By the end three hundred thousand German and French soldiers had been killed. In 1984, President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl went there together. They did not just shake hands but held each other's hand. As the historian Le Naour said, 'Verdun ceased to be a symbol of nationalist pride. It became a symbol of peace and the stupidity of war' and of the new Europe.

Symbolic events and public apologies are, I think, helpful. But the most persistent question about public attempts to heal the past is 'Does the process allow justice to be done?' The distinguished Christian

thinker Naim Ateek wrote a book called *Justice, only Justice*. On the other hand, Arthur Balfour – famous or infamous for the Balfour Declaration – was for a time Chief Secretary of Ireland. When some people complained about the injustice of his policies there he replied, 'Justice? There isn't enough to go round.' The same is true in the Middle East – indeed Chaim Weitzman, a leading Zionist, spoke of the situation as 'a clash of rights.'

To what extent, does justice require the prosecution of those who perpetrated the atrocities – as for example the Nuremberg trials. More recently, in Rwanda, following the genocide, more than 120,000 people were detained and accused of bearing criminal responsibility for their participation in the killings. To deal with such an overwhelming number of perpetrators, a judicial response was pursued on three levels: First by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. After Rwanda abolished the death penalty it referred many cases to the national courts. Thirdly communities at the local level elected judges to hear the trials of genocide suspects accused of all crimes except planning of genocide. The courts gave lower sentences if the person was repentant and sought reconciliation with the community. Often, confessing prisoners returned home without further penalty or received community service orders.

The Liberian Commission recognized that prosecution was desirable to foster genuine national reconciliation and combat impunity, but allowed for amnesty in some circumstances, especially for children and for individuals admitting their wrongs, speaking truthfully and expressing remorse.

A trial expresses public horror – maybe it acts as a deterrent, but does it purge or perpetuate the memory? In South Africa, a person who made a full confession was freed from criminal or civil liability. Tutu has insisted that 'public exposure and humiliation' was a big price for the perpetrator to pay. Others more cynically have said it was a price worth paying.⁴

What too of compensation? It may help, but it cannot bring back the dead, or remove the hurt. At best probably it is a symbolic acknowledgement of the wrong that has been done.

Another question is whether the concept of a 'Truth and Reconciliation' Commission is culturally conditioned. Some critics in South Africa questioned whether it was appropriate to have hymns and prayers at a public hearing. 'The Recovery of Memory Project' in Guatemala was an unofficial initiative.

This is also significant because some Christians try to practice what has been called 'radical forgiveness,' which encourages the victim to forgive even if the person who hurt them has not expressed sorrow or contrition. The victim initiates the search for reconciliation. Desmond Tutu in his beautiful *Book of Forgiving* insists on two simple truths, 'there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness.' Yet I cannot forget the warning of a Jewish friend that 'to be kind to the cruel is to be cruel to the weak.'

This may seem an abstract theological discussion: but I think it is of real importance to think now about the long and very difficult process of healing that will be necessary in Syria and the Middle East when at last there are no targets left to bomb.

Let me end with the words of Kia Scherr after the death of her husband and daughter in a terrorist attack in Mumbai. 'If we continue to love in the face of terrorism, we disempower the terrorist and the terrorist ceases to terrorize. Imagine multiplying this a million-billion fold around the world and over time, we will truly end terrorism.' Should we pray for terrorists as well as for their victims?

Only love and forgiveness can disperse the revengeful dust of history rising up to haunt us.[iii]

[i] There was also a UN commission 'Guatemala: Memory of Silence.'

[ii] Tombs 91

[iii] Onelifealliance.org