

Mission as a Ministry of Reconciliation?

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I am honored by the invitation to deliver the O.G. Myklebust Memorial Lecture for this biennium¹. Olav Myklebust was a giant among the missiologists of the twentieth century. He founded so many institutions that continue to support and sustain the study of mission, both here in Norway and around the world. Certainly the jewel in the crown is the *International Association of Mission Studies*, which observed its fortieth anniversary this past year at its meeting in Toronto. Added to this is the *Nordic Institute for Missiology and Ecumenics* (which I have had opportunity to participate in) as well as a host of institutions here in Norway, and the premier Norwegian missiology, the *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjonsvitenskap*. His dissertation on mission education remains a landmark in missiological literature.

In this lecture, I wish to honor Professor Myklebust by looking at one emerging area of mission of the past twenty years, namely, reconciliation as a model of Christian mission. I want to trace its emergence and contemporary forms. And secondly, I wish to honor Norway's special place in the development of reconciliation as mission by looking at two of its manifestations: (1) Norway's mission of peacebuilding as a ministry of reconciliation, and (2) its response to the attacks of July 22, 2011.

The Emergence of Reconciliation as a Model of Mission

The second half of the twentieth century ushered in both crisis and opportunity for the understanding of Christian mission. The struggle for independence from colonialism in many parts of the Global South led to a profound questioning of the very nature of mission itself. Was it simply part of the imperial schemes of domination and exploitation of Europe? Should the presence of foreign missionaries in newly independent lands be tolerated at all? Such searching questions seared the very heart of mission as it had been understood among the churches of the Global North, both churches in the newly founded World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as the missionary religious orders of the Roman Catholic Church. For the latter, the breakthrough that refocused the crisis of the “why” of mission into a renewed sense of the “how” of mission came in the 1981 SEDOS Seminar on the Future of Mission (Lang and Motte 1982). There a hundred missionaries, mission scholars, and leaders of missionary orders pondered together these questions of “why” and “how.” What resulted was a fourfold way of seeing the “how” of mission: mission as (1) proclamation, (2) dialogue, (3) inculturation, and (4) liberation of the poor. The significance of this outcome was twofold. First of all, it focused more directly on the interaction of missionaries and those to whom they had been sent, rather than giving attention only to the task or charge to the missionary; this created a greater sense of mutuality in mission. Second, it made the concrete contexts of mission the starting point for reflection rather than *a priori* concepts of mission. Or put another way, an effort to discern the *missio Dei* as it was unfolding in specific places provided the prompting toward renewed missionary praxis.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were the first of a series of events that reshaped the context for mission. This demise of a bipolar world order had two immediate impacts that were to reverberate through mission. The freeing up of the nations once part of the Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe opened the opportunity for a revitalization of the Christian churches there. But in the rush to rebuild and evangelize it became apparent that deep divisions ran through churches and society. Churches and

church leaders had been severely compromised by being part of the surveillance network of government informers. This would have to be confronted and healed. The second impact of this demise of a world order was to be seen in the upsurge in the number of armed conflicts taking place in countries of the Global South and parts of the Global North (especially the Balkan Peninsula), as well as the Rwandan genocide. The conflicts happened within countries rather than between countries. What this meant is that the rebuilding after the conflict was even more difficult since combatants were often neighbors to one another. The genocide in Rwanda brought that point home even more. Missionaries often found themselves in the midst of violence and churches were often being called upon—as one of the few remaining credible actors in civil society—to lead peace processes and efforts at rebuilding society. These were tasks for which the churches were unprepared. The end of apartheid in South Africa put a spotlight on this role of the churches there in a special way.²

Other events in the decade pushed missionaries and churches into roles as agents of reconciliation. The commemoration of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas prompted the United Nations to declare 1992 the Year of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous peoples in the Americas, in Australia and New Zealand, and elsewhere used this opportunity to testify to their suffering (and in some places, near extinction) by European colonial powers. This prompted nations and churches to consider how to heal these grievous wounds. 1994 saw the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, an event that underscored the worldwide pattern of violence against women.

The end of the bipolar political order and the consolidation of neo-liberal capitalism as the sole worldwide economic system became more evident with the advance of globalization. The effects of globalization included an increase in migration (the majority of migrants are women and are Christian), more multicultural societies, greater polarization in societies (due to growing economic inequality around the world and social hyperdifferentiation in wealthy cultures³), and a compression of time and space through information technology and the media. These effects produce new fissures, divisions, and wounds in

society, often at a quicker pace than such effects did in the past. Within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and in countries in Europe, the revelation of the sexual abuse of minors by the clergy has added an additional layer of challenge for reconciliation and healing.

In the midst of all of these challenges arising from human interaction, yet another challenge began to loom ever more largely: climate change and the consequences this would have within the coming decades.

It is out of this miasma of violence and division that the theme of reconciliation began to surface as a compelling response to all that was happening in terms of mission (Schreiter 1992, 2001, 2005; De Gruchy 2002). By the turn of the twenty-first century, it had been a theme for the British and Irish Association of Mission Studies (2002), the Lutheran World Federation (2004), the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (2005) and the International Association of Mission Studies (2008), as well as a perspective explored in the Lausanne Movement's Capetown meeting (2010).

It had become evident that the world was in need of reconciliation in some many places and in so many different ways. Reconciliation—with its implications for healing and for service—was something people expected to find in the churches. The churches and missionaries found themselves drawn into work for reconciliation at many different levels. Why did the events of the 1990s spawn such an interest? Some suggest that the utopian visions that had played such a role beginning in the optimistic 1960s (in the theology of hope and the theologies of liberation) had crumbled in the face of the challenges that the end of the Cold War era now portended. Reconciliation was a more modest way of building the future by attending especially to healing past wounds that could compromise future well being—be it the wounds of war, of social injustice, of exploitation of the earth. We are probably still too close to all these events to have a clearer picture. What is clear, however, is that reconciliation is providing a model of twenty-first century mission.

Foundations for Reconciliation as a Model for Mission

What are the biblical and theological foundations of mission? The theme of reconciliation is prominent in the Scriptures although it is spoken of directly very little. The word “reconciliation” does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, although there are powerful stories of reconciliation, such as that of Esau and Jacob, and of Joseph and his brothers. Even in the New Testament, the language of reconciliation is largely to be found in the Pauline writings. Indeed, Paul’s message has been called a “Gospel of reconciliation” inasmuch as he had experienced being reconciled to God and the followers of Jesus by a gracious act on the part of God, not due to anything he himself had done.

Most of the earlier theological literature on reconciliation focused on what has been called the “vertical” dimension of reconciliation; that is, God’s reconciling humanity to God’s own self. Indeed, this vertical dimension constitutes the central Christian narrative of what God has done for humanity. It is presented concisely in Romans 5:1-11: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us so that we might be reconciled to God.

Romans 5 has long held a privileged place in Reformation theology, inasmuch as it is a key passage for understanding justification (among Lutheran theologians) and reconciliation as expiation (among Reformed theologians).⁴ Recent interest in reconciliation, however, has raised to greater awareness that it is also about reconciliation as a bringing together what had been alienated. What this does for a theology of mission as reconciliation is put reconciliation at the very heart of the *missio Dei*, the great narrative of the work of the Trinity in the world. Thus, reconciliation does not have to justify itself as a possible form of mission activity; it is participation in the very *missio Dei* itself.

The interest in reconciliation as a model for mission that began in the 1990s continues to draw its life from this vertical dimension. What is new is the deeper exploration of the “horizontal” dimension of reconciliation; that is, reconciliation between humans, as individuals and as groups. This too is rooted in Pauline teaching, especially 2 Cor 5:17-20, Eph 2:12-20, and its cosmic consummation in Christ in Eph 1:10 and Col 1:20.

Christians believe that such horizontal reconciliation is possible precisely because it is rooted in God's action of reconciliation of all creation to God's own self.

What might be seen as the characteristics of this horizontal reconciliation as understood by Christians? I would note five basic points.

First of all, reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God, who makes it a gift to us in which we in turn are called to cooperate. From a theological point of view, only God can bring about reconciliation. It is based in the very *missio Dei* of God in the world. And the ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us, as ambassadors for Christ's sake. Our work for reconciliation, then, is in cooperation with God's grace.

Second, God begins the reconciling process with the healing of the victim. Christians believe that God looks out in a special way for the victims and the marginalized generally; this is evidenced in the classical prophets' concern for the orphan and the widow, the prisoner and the stranger; it is mirrored in Jesus' own ministry (cf. Luke 4:18-19). This does not ignore or exonerate the wrongdoer. Rather, it recognizes that the wrongdoer sometimes does not repent. The healing of the victim is thus not totally dependent upon the wrongdoers' remorse and apology. The healing of the victim can even create the social space in which the wrongdoer can come to repent.

Third, reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). That is to say, the healing that takes place is not a return to the *status quo ante*, but takes all the parties involved to a new place, often a place that they could not have imagined.

Fourth, the release from suffering is patterned on the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Christians believe that suffering in and of itself is destructive. It can only become redemptive for individuals and for societies if it is patterned onto a narrative larger than itself. This narrative is that of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, the central part of the larger narrative of God's reconciliation of the world to God's own self. Only by being patterned onto the narrative of Christ's suffering and death can we hope to come to know the power of the resurrection (cf. Phil 3:10-11).

Fifth and finally, reconciliation will only be complete when God has reconciled the whole universe in Christ (Eph 1:10), when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). This accounts for why we typically experience every effort at reconciliation we undertake as ultimately incomplete. We are reminded that reconciliation is not only a goal or end; it is also a process in which we are called to cooperate.

The Practices of Mission as a Ministry of Reconciliation

If this provides the theological framework for reconciliation as a model for mission – based as it is on the *missio Dei* itself – what are its concrete manifestations, and what are the practices that move the reconciliation process along?

The concrete manifestations that reconciliation is taking place are often talked about as *healing*. For individuals, reconciliation might be seen as the restoration of their humanity; that is, their refulgence as having been created in the image and likeness of God. This healing affects their agency or capacity to act. It restores their dignity. It rebuilds broken relationships with self, with others, and with God. For societies, reconciliation means coming to terms with a destructive past that often remains toxic for the present and unduly delimits the future. It means assuring that the wrongful deeds in the past cannot be repeated in the future. Put another way, reconciliation is about healing wounds, rebuilding trust, and restoring right relationships.

What then are the practices of a ministry of reconciliation that make up reconciliation as a model for mission? I would like to note four of them here.

The first is *healing*. Healing is extended into three dimensions: the healing of memories, the healing of victims and the healing of wrongdoers. The healing of memories involves coming to terms with the traumatic memories of the past in such a way that they are no longer toxic to the present and the future. This requires reconstituting the narratives we have about the past. Memories are powerful vehicles of both individual and collective identity. How we narrate the past shapes how we relate to the past. To attempt simply to repress the memories of a traumatic past does not erase the past; rather, it sets the stage for what Freudians have called “the return of the

repressed.” It can portend a return of violence through revenge, retaliation or victims themselves turning into perpetrators.

The healing of victims, as already noted, is about restoring their humanity, theologically understood; that is, their dignity, their relationships and their violated rights. Their own narratives about the past will need to be reconstructed. This entails acknowledging loss, lamenting what has been lost, and finding new sources of meaning and hope.

The healing of perpetrators is best mapped out by the Western Christian tradition of penitential practices as set forth in the early Church, however they might today be enacted. Acknowledging wrongdoing, seeking forgiveness, promising amendment of life, and accepting punishment are all part of those practices. The ancient tradition of separation of the penitent from the community may need to be practiced, because perpetrators—by their deeds—have separated themselves from the community and have to go through a process of gestation and rebirth before they can be readmitted to the human family.

The second practice is *truth-telling*. Situations that call for reconciliation often become saturated with lies and are muffled under palls of silence. Breaking through a culture of lies and a culture of silence that sustains those lies is a key part of reconciliation. Truth-telling involves testimony to what really happened in the past, and a common effort to reconstruct a public truth. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has helped us see the four dimensions of that public truth: objective truth (the who, what, when and where of events), narrative truth (the why or possible meaning and causality of events), dialogical truth (a narrative where conflicting sides can discover their own and others’ truth), and moral truth (what lesson can be drawn from the past for the future). Such practices of truth-telling help establish a culture of truthfulness for the future, as envisioned in the Hebrew concept of ‘emet: trustworthiness, dependability, and reliability.

The third practice of reconciliation as mission is the *pursuit of justice*. Truth-telling must in some measure precede the pursuit of justice, lest efforts at justice turn into revenge or “victors’ justice.” Specifically three forms of justice come into view here. The first is punitive justice: the punishment of wrongdoers

to impress upon them their wrongdoing and to say publicly that such wrongdoing will not be tolerated in the future. This is justice for the wrongdoer and the state. The second form of justice is restorative justice, which is directed toward the healing of victims. It may involve restitution and reparation, as well as opportunities to explore how to rebuild a just and meaningful society. The third form is structural justice, which involves changing social structures through deliberative and political processes in order to reduce economic, social and political structures in society becoming sites that promote and sustain injustice.

Within the discourse of human rights that is so central to the liberal model of peacebuilding, there can be a tendency to reduce reconciliation to the pursuit of justice, or to say that there can be no reconciliation unless there is full justice. From the theological view this is an inadequate view of both justice and of reconciliation. As noted above, we do not experience full reconciliation—and therefore full justice—until all things have been brought together in Christ. Thus to demand the fulfillment of complete justice can paralyze or obviate other practices going into the process of reconciliation.

The fourth practice of reconciliation is *forgiveness*. Forgiveness is itself a process, both for individuals and for societies. The process can be a long and difficult one. After social trauma, it is not uncommon that the work on forgiveness can take more than a generation. Difficult as it is, Christians believe that, with the grace of God once again, it is possible. It is God who forgives, and we participate in that forgiveness. It is not accidental that forgiveness is placed as the last of the four practices being considered here (although processes of reconciliation are rarely linear). There is a constant danger of cheap forgiveness or forgiveness being forced upon victims. There are fears that forgiveness means foregoing justice or punishment (it does not mean that). There are fears that forgiving requires forgetting (it does not; when we forgive we do not forget—we remember in a different way that is not toxic to the present and the future). Forgiveness entails coming to see that the wrongdoer is a child of God as is the victim. It does not condone the deed but seeks the rehabilitation of the wrongdoer. Without forgiveness, the

past continues to determine the present and the future. Indeed, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, there is no future without forgiveness (1999).

The Ministry of Reconciliation: Norwegian Contributions

As was already mentioned, one of the characteristics of the development of theologies of mission in the past several decades has been a willingness to begin with the practices of mission and develop a theology of mission from there. That has certainly been the case with reconciliation as a form or model of Christian mission. In this final part, I would like to turn attention to two major contributions that Norway has made to the ministry of reconciliation. I bring my perspectives on this to you as an outsider. Many of you could write more insightfully in describing these contributions than I. What I do hope to bring is something of the impression Norway has made on the world-wide Church with its efforts. Norway has a very strong missionary tradition that can be felt in many parts of the world, and its contribution to reconciliation as mission is but the latest in a long history of your missionary endeavors.

The first is Norway's efforts at mediating conflict and building peace in different parts of the world.

What is remarkable, first of all, is the cooperation of church and state in the efforts at building peace. This is something that is not possible in many other parts of the world. It is something that one sees only in Scandinavia; I have had a similar experience in working with the Swedish Mission Council. A combination of things comes together here: While it is an economic power, Norway is on the periphery of political power in the world. It has developed an international reputation for fairness. The Church of Norway enjoys a good working relationship with the government. Consequently, Norway has created a social space where warring parties can meet each other without fear of being manipulated by the Norwegian government. Its generous support of many development projects around the world through Norway Church Aid and other entities only secures that reputation. All of this comes together to create a hospitable and secure place for peace negotiations.

I take here but one example to illustrate what is being done:

the Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights, led by Lutheran pastor and former Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik. In an interview with him, conducted by Knud Jørgensen, which will be published in a book we are co-editing now in press, Bondevik spells out the principles that underlie his efforts at peace (Schreiter and Jørgensen, 2013).

He delineates four of them: (1) creating trust and confidence, especially in the person of the mediator; (2) an acknowledgment of the truth about what has happened; (3) developing pathways toward forgiveness; and (4) securing justice for victims. These four principles are immediately recognizable as practices of the ministry of reconciliation, as outlined above: creating and expanding the social space in which erstwhile enemies can come together; truth-telling and recrafting narratives to reflect the truth; the pursuit of justice, especially restorative and structural justice; and working toward forgiveness. These are all areas that have strong roots in the Abrahamic faith traditions, but also are acknowledged in other religious and secular traditions as well. What Bondevik adds beyond this care is against humiliating any party. Humiliation has been recognized more recently as an important moment in the “geopolitics of emotion,” as French political scientist Dominique Moisi has put it (Moisi 2009).

Seeking political and social reconciliation as a model of and for mission will likely continue to gain relevance in the twenty-first century. A remarkable recent development is the way it is being introduced into international relations as an ethic, based upon the Abrahamic faith traditions, to bring about genuine peace (Philpott 2012). In a world where the presence of religion is being recognized as an important social force, both positive and negative (Shah et al. 2012), Christian mission as reconciliation may be able to contribute something significant both to the realization of the *missio Dei* and a better, more peaceful, and sustainable world.

The Massacre of July 22, 2011

The second reason the rest of the worldwide Church looks to Norway these days is its response to the massacre perpetrated

on July 22, 2011 by Anders Behring Breivik. Besides the bombing of the defense ministry, the heartless killing of 69 young people on Utøya Island shocked Norway and indeed the entire world. In the year and a half since the massacre, Norway has had the chance to respond, as well as to trying Breivik for his crimes.

The fact that the government decided not to introduce new legislation in response to these two events sent a strong signal to the rest of the world as to how those events were to be perceived. They would not be allowed to change Norwegian society into a social space of fear and retribution. In so doing, the government had the courage to take up what is one of the cardinal points of reconciliation when it comes to rebuilding a society after conflict or trauma: the logic that created the violence will not undo the violence. To follow the logic of violence with some form of retribution simply perpetuates the rule of violence. Rather, individuals and societies must operate from what might be called a “moral platform” of basic principles for the organizing and sustaining of their societies. At times, for some, those basic principles may seem naïve or simplistic, such as “every human being innately has dignity” or “we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.” But in the light of tragedy these principles often take on a new light, a light that in turn illuminates the situation in a very different way.

On July 30 of last year, at the Saint Olav Festival, Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, lauded Norway as a “beacon of hope,” that did not choose counterviolence as a response to violence, but instead looked to the principles of social justice, unity in diversity, and multiculturalism. It is extremely rare that a nation would respond as Norway did to such a tragedy. But in doing so, Norway embodied reconciliation both as a message and a ministry (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-20).

I would like to delve briefly somewhat further into that event and the ministry of reconciliation. One of the things that Breivik's actions raises is the presence of radical evil in our society and what should be the religious response to it. The Enlightenment narrative, out of which most secular societies in the West live, have little place for radical evil. It does not fit the optimis-

tic anthropology that pervades this narrative, nor does it rhyme with a narrative of continuing progress. How is it that so much mass atrocity continues to occur in the world even as the world sees itself being freed from the irrational? There are no logical categories to define and explain it.

This inability to deal with mass atrocity was evident in Breivik's trial, where two conflicting opinions were given from psychiatrists about his sanity: was he a paranoid schizophrenic or suffering from a narcissistic personality disorder? The deeply troublesome picture that emerges is how little control and understanding we have of what we call the "irrational." The demonologies of an earlier religious cosmos have pretty well disappeared among most of the inhabitants of secularized societies, yet we do not have an adequate substitute for them. "Insanity," a category by which we can dismiss certain behaviors, broke down as a useful category in Breivik's case.

Troubling too was the fact that his *Manifesto* was not simply the ravings of a disturbed mind, but the piecing together of written material from a host of nationalist and racist authors. Added to this was the appearance of Richard Millet's *Eloge litteraire d'Anders Brevik* (2012) that was read to say that Breivik was just simply stating what many Europeans are thinking about the current state of their society.

Mass atrocity has been relegated to the "unspeakable" by many contemporary philosophers. The problem is that this exile from social discourse does not make mass atrocity or its lingering effects disappear. We still must find ways to deal with it before it utterly corrodes our efforts at rational discourse.

This represents an important area of development for a theology of reconciliation in the immediate future. Given what we already have in this regard, Christians affirm that God is the author of all reconciliation. What this might imply that there are things that need to be healed and reconciled that only God can grasp, and we but follow along as best we can to see the *missio Dei* at work. This is not to encourage passivity; it is rather an acknowledgment that we have so much still to learn about reconciliation. Reconciliation has, I believe, a distinctively exocentric character. By that I mean the situation that calls for reconciliation cannot be understood utterly by itself and of

itself. Just as the logic of the violence that created a situation calling for reconciliation cannot be the logic that heals the effects of the violence, so too we need to stand in awe, as it were, of the devastating effects of wrongdoing that far surpass our imagination as well as the remedy that will indeed make of such a situation a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).

The circumstances in the late twentieth century that called to our attention the importance of a ministry of reconciliation have prompted us as Christians to move more deeply into this central Christian narrative. There we can discern in a new way the suffering, the division, and the conflict that divides our world in so many ways. And it is there too that we may encounter the most intense experience of God at work in our world today.

Noter

- ¹ The O.G. Myklebust Memorial Lecture, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo, 29 Jan 2013.
- ² It should be noted that writing on reconciliation had already begun in South Africa after the issues of the Kairos Document in 1985. But since this was almost exclusively in Afrikaans, it did not come to the attention of a larger audience.
- ³ “Hyperdifferentiation” refers to the increasing differentiation in postmodern cultures to the extent that individuals and groups will form enclaves of like-minded people and try less to communicate with people who think differently. The multicultural growth in urban societies because of migration adds to this process of self-isolation. Polarized politics is one of the by-products of this hyperdifferentiation.
- ⁴ Among theologians working from Germanic and Nordic languages, the closeness of the words “expiation” and “reconciliation” only heightens this more narrow identity between the two. In the Dutch language, for example, there is but one word (*verzoening*) for both concepts.

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