

Reconciliation and Civil Society

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*It is not enough to become politically free:
we must also become human.*

*There is no way to God for our time but through the enemy.
The enemy has our key to survival and transformation.*

*Walter Wink
Engaging the Powers*

We human beings are infinitely better schooled in the business of conquering enemies than we are in making them our friends. That is why we are far less confident about how to make the new dispensation work in South Africa than we were about how to rid this land of its oppression. We saw the need to develop strategies to overthrow the apartheid regime but few have given their minds to strategies which will enable us to live in a new way with former enemies.

It may also be true that the qualities that were prized in the resistance – or defence – of apartheid, are almost useless in the search for reconciliation. Political and military struggles need an 'enemy' and to the degree that the concept of 'enemy' was necessary to either maintain or resist the apartheid system, to that degree will the reconciliation process be bedevilled, because to that degree we have compromised our true humanity. Peacebuilding cannot happen in any enduring way without a new approach to the 'enemy'.

The religious component of civil society bears a great burden of responsibility for South Africa's past and needs to shoulder a significant part of the task of reconciliation for the future. But first, some important insights into the Reconciliation process which may help us.

Some Insights into the Reconciliation Process

1. The Process of Reconciliation Begins in Acknowledging the Opponent's Permanency.

I never tire of quoting the late Percy Qoboza: *"If there is a bloodbath in South Africa, what will be left with? A majority of blacks and a minority of whites who will have to work out how to live together in this land."* I used to say " The liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and our liberation differ in one very important respect: their journey led them to a new land away from Egypt and the Egyptians; we, on the other hand, have to build the new land in Egypt, with the Egyptians all still there".

President Mandela has grasped this fact more realistically than many of his followers. Any solution must be inclusive of those who have been most instrumental in the past evils. They cannot be wished away so they must be included.

2. The Process of Reconciliation Requires a Mature Understanding of Evil.

In any struggle the enemy becomes demonised and there is a tendency to find the locus of evil in personalities. Thus the songs of liberation didn't focus so much on apartheid, the Group Areas Act, the Pass Laws, Detention without Trial, etc. as they did on Vorster, Botha and de Klerk. Government propaganda demonised Joe Slovo, Chris Hani, Oliver Tambo and Mandela.

Reconciliation is very difficult until we detach the evil of the system from the names of its servants. St Paul has an important insight when he says: *"Our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens"*. (Ephesians 6:12). It is only when we see the perpetrators of apartheid as co-victims – people gripped by the primal forces of domination, prejudice, fear and hate – that we can begin to relate to them.

Some Church leaders, like Bishop Tutu, were castigated by fellow religionists when they insisted, even in the darkest days, on keeping lines of communication open with the P W Bothas. They opposed their actions with vehemence, but insisted that they could not put them beyond the pale. Their critics scorned this attitude and some theologians were prominent in denouncing them as selling out the oppressed. Yet today those critics have been proved wrong: people can and do change.

3. The Process of Reconciliation requires that I recognise the 'Wolf' within.

I cannot reconcile with the enemy unless I acknowledge that I am capable of what the enemy has done. Until 1990 this was hard, but the irony is that just as the enemy here began to show signs of transformation, the forces of resistance discovered their own capacity for evil.

One of the laws of human nature is that we become what we hate and in the pre-Election power struggles, the moral superiority of the anti-apartheid struggle was bloodied and stained by horrendous atrocities. Maybe that is one reason why we came to Inauguration Day, not in a spirit of triumph so much as humble gratitude. We were aware of how close we had come to tearing ourselves apart.

4. The Process of Reconciliation requires an Understanding of How People Change.

Quite simply, we must choose between two propositions: either people change because they seek to earn forgiveness and acceptance, or *because people discover themselves forgiven and accepted, they become free to change.*

I am satisfied that in the first case the change will go only so far as to attain the goal of getting off the hook. I believe that true transformation flows only from the second option. I believe that President Mandela knows this too and this is why the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation is so high on his agenda. He is deliberately creating the climate in which past enemies will be free to change.

These four insights into the process of Reconciliation are, I believe, crucial to the healing of our land, because they help us to find a way of dealing with past actions in such a way that enables those who perpetrated those actions to still have a future. Religious insights into reconciliation tell us that we must steer between two false ways of 'Forgetting' or 'Punishing' the past, choosing instead the much more difficult route of *Forgiving* it.

The Ingredients of Reconciliation:

One of our problems is that we are trying to find a legal framework for what is essentially a spiritual/psychological process. This reminds me of Mr de Klerk's dilemma, as he dances around the business of confessing the evil of apartheid. The lawyer in him hesitates at admitting guilt because lawyers know that confession leads to punishment; the Christian in him wants to confess because Christians know that confession sets people free to accept forgiveness.

My religion identifies certain fundamental ingredients required for reconciliation to happen. I want to list them and then relate them to the present state of things in the new South Africa.

1. A Prime Mover

Someone has to take the first step, with the will to forgive in order to restore relationships. At the macro level, this is the role that Mr Mandela is playing. But that is not enough. The challenge to all of us in civil society is to find local initiatives which will mirror what he is doing. This challenge is primarily to religious bodies like the churches: they must explore ways in which ordinary people right across the land can hold out their hands in the same way as he has done.

2. The Parties Must Engage

Reconciliation can't happen at a distance. At the macro level, the Government of National Unity is the symbol of this willingness to engage – however uncomfortable it may be. At local level, the Peace Structures forced this engagement on unwilling antagonists with remarkable results that undoubtedly played the major part in giving us a peaceful Election. It is vital that this interparty engagement continue and rumours that the Peace Structures may now be dispensed with are terrifying to me. We will

need them as much in the foreseeable future as in the past. Their work has only just begun.

3. The Truth Must be Told

The deeds of the past are like toxic waste buried beneath the surface of our soil. Those responsible must take us to the burial sites and help us bring the evil to the surface. Otherwise it will seep out drop by drop over the years, poisoning our future and our children's future.

Again, at the macro level, the proposals for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission are crucial. As I hear the State President, this Commission, instead of following the Nuremberg process of *punishing a few to make an example and as a symbol of victory, will instead forgive a few as an example of healing and as a symbol of future unity*. There are risks in this process of exposing past evils, but I would rather we take those risks than have the certainty of unhealed wounds which comes from hiding that past.

At the local level, elements of civil society should ask themselves how best the truth of their own part in apartheid may be told, surfaced and forgiven. If we do not do this, then, like the German people, we will be tempted to simply blame the few scapegoats and say "we didn't know". Already it is difficult to find anyone who admits to having supported apartheid at all! Collective amnesia is not the same as healing.

4. Genuine Repentance

Very closely linked with the telling of the truth is the ingredient of being sorry. There is a danger that people will act as if nothing happened. Civil society needs to find symbolic ways in which the people can express repentance. In 1986 – the tenth anniversary of June 16 – some of us organised *Flowers for Soweto Campaign*. It was absolutely simple: if you wanted to express your sorrow and shame at what was done to the children of Soweto, send a posy of flowers with a note attached, to be delivered to the township on June 16. You will remember that hundreds of thousands of flowers came. The Police prevented their delivery (except for those we dropped from a plane!) but the message was clear – people wanted to say they were sorry.

Perhaps we can link the truth-telling and repentance by sending "truth trains" around the country with exhibits like the *Anne Frank in the World* exhibit. Churches and clubs and organisations of civil society need to have a simple discussion group tool that will surface the wrongs and enable people to acknowledge their implication in the past. The more this happens for ordinary people now, the more healthy will be our future.

5. Restitution

The most practical way for groups (as distinct from individuals) to permit reconciliation is through restitution and I don't believe that enough is being asked of civil society. We need to identify those aspects of apartheid which were most painful and which offer the opportunity for some form of restoration.

Education was one: I believe that any one of us who had the privilege of ten years of uninterrupted schooling has an obligation to those many more who did not. We should

all be playing some part in night schools or other instruments of informal education. That is restitution. The *land issue* is another: cannot local communities be called together to examine unused land in their area, with a view to making it available – even for a few houses? The *economic imbalance* also requires a massive effort from civil society. In fact, if the RDP is not to fail, it must engage us and not be seen to be a Government initiative alone. Paying for the RDP should be promoted by all organs of civil society as an act of restitution (and, incidentally, of enlightened self-interest). The Trades Union example of being willing to work certain holidays to help the RDP should shame corporate South Africa into action. It is shocking that big business stands on the side and waits for 'stability' before 'risking' their money back from overseas, when they made so much of that money out of the apartheid system in the past.

Another crucial area requiring restitution is that of the *Police*: Police-Community forums are a start, but much more is needed. What would happen if local communities 'took over' their local Police Station, 'adopting' it and doing it up, affirming its staff, decorating its charge office and winning it over to a completely new style of operation? Violence is a further point of pain. Here we should be offering restitution by handing in our guns (if we have guns), whether licensed or unlicensed, and seeing them destroyed. Civil society should pressure Armscor into phasing from military to civilian research and development. There can be no greater symbol of our determination for reconciliation both within and beyond South Africa than the ending of the arms industry's bloody traffic.

6. Absolution

This is the ingredient that completes reconciliation as well as making it possible at all. Absolution must be absolute. You can't be half-forgiven any more than you can be half-pregnant. It is never easy to offer pardon, but I believe that the offer is being made by millions of the people who have been wounded in the past. The bigger question for me is whether those of us who inflicted those wounds will find the courage and grace to offer the ingredients required from us.

Civil society has a duty to help this happen.