Word in the World

Enda McDonagh

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . .
and God saw that it was good. . . .
God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them. . . .
God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good.
(*Genesis* 1:1,10,27,31)

In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all thing came into being,
not one thing came into being except through him. . . .
The Word became flesh,
he lived among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory that he has from the Father as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.
(*John* 1: 1–3, 14)

For this is how God loved the world:
He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.
(*John* 3: 15,16)

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's
fault against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.
(2 *Corinthians* 5: 19)

He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, according to his good
pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ,
for him to act upon when the times had run their course;
that he would bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in
the heavens and everything on earth.
(*Ephesians* 1: 9–10)

He is the image of the unseen God,
the first-born of all creation,
for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth: . . .
He is the Beginning,

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> the first-born from the dead,
> so that he should be supreme in every way;
> because God wanted to reconcile all things to him,
> everything in heaven and everything on earth,
> by making peace through his death on the cross.
> (*Colossians* 1:15, 18b-20)

In the struggle to find a way into the rich and mysterious theme assigned to me by the conference organizers, I sought refuge in reflecting on some favourite and, I hope, relevant biblical texts. The journey thence may not have turned out as I would have anticipated and as you might have better appreciated, but at present it is all I have to offer. And a word of apology for the language, although it is pronominally accurate according to original text and the Jerusalem Bible translation, I am not happy that it is politically or theologically correct in relation to the World and Word we are discussing here. Corrections as needed I leave to individual listeners and readers.

Creation and Reconciliation

Although there are many related biblical words and concepts for what is here summarized as reconciliation, such as redemption, salvation and liberation, each with its own nimbus of meaning and reference in Christian scripture and tradition, the focus on reconciliation may be illuminating in a way particular to our task of relating the character and work of the Word to the character and need of the World. And reconciliation can do this best perhaps, as the texts cited suggest, through its close association with the work of creation for which, it seems, no alternative scriptural words or concepts exist.

In recent theology sharp disjunctions between creation and redemption or its alternatives like reconciliation, between nature and grace, even between sacred and secular have receded, if not entirely disappeared. This was also true of some much earlier patristic theology. Without dissolving the real distinction in concept and action between creation and reconciliation as process and product, I believe that they are best understood in this context of Word and World as aspects of the same originating and continuing activity of the creating and reconciling God. Reconciliation is not then an emergency measure introduced by the creator to counter human failure, although it performs that task in the course of sinful human history, but provides the necessary complement of communion to the differentiation intrinsic to divine creative activity. The connections between human 'creation', differentiation, communion and reconciliation form an analogous pattern, as we shall see.

The linguistic, theological and other difficulties associated with speaking of Creator and creature have a tangled and unfinished history. An old phrase of Nicholas Lash's returns to haunt and

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inhibit: 'Theologians are people who must watch their language about God'. That species of language watching is developed still further in his recent publication, *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God*. To add to my hesitation and, to be fair, to my illumination, I have been reading *Sacred and Secular Scripture* by Nicholas Boyle.[1] For all the richness of their publications and that of many others studied in the relevantly recent past, my preoccupations with the Word in the World and my feeble attempts to speak of God and God's relation to creation reflect a different intellectual, practical and faith history, some of whose origins are now obscure even to myself.

In the crucial relation of Creator and creation we are continually faced with the temptation to think of God as another being outside, separate from but infinitely superior to creation, if we are not to collapse creation into Creator in a form of pantheism. Conscious of these twin temptations I believe some differentiation between Creator and creation is possible and necessary although it is not to be identified with the differentiation between or within creatures, or the distinction of persons within the Godhead. The non-identity with these realities rests on the peculiar differentiation in communion which relates God and creatures and which, as I have mentioned earlier, depends on the single dynamic of divine creative activity as being both differentiating and uniting or reconciling, in its original sense of bringing others together in unity as others, that is while preserving their distinction. It may seem premature to describe this as reconciliation, particularly in the light of the Genesis stories of creation and of St Paul's usage, as cited above. Yet it helps to see how the single continuous creative activity of God moves lovingly on as it encounters not just the difference of creatures but their wilful estrangement in human sin. And how that dynamic loving led to the sending of God's Son, to the overcoming of the differentiation of creation now turned hostile and to the overcoming of that hostility in entering fully into the human condition to the point of dying at hostile human hands, only to be raised as the first-born among the dead. This is the final coming together, beyond estrangement, of Creator and creation, summarized, as noted, by Paul: God was in Christ reconciling the world with Himself.

God's Faith in the World

God's faith in the world may seem an unusual even unorthodox expression in dealing with a world which subjectively speaking,

[1] N Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God,* Ashgate 2004; N Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature,* Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2005.

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evinces little faith in Godself, at least little Christian faith. (In parenthesis it might be argued that to say God loves the world, a scriptural and clearly orthodox expression, implies God's faith in and hope for the world.) Objectively in what we term the secular world of the West, and certainly in its human structures and practices as in its physical structures and activities, the world betrays little of the psalmist's reading of it, as showing forth the glory of God. Cosmology, evolution and other physical and social sciences have occluded such manifestation and address. Yet in the absence of such address by the world to its Creator, the Creator God has not abandoned the world or what has just been described as God's faith in the world, expressed through covenants and prophets and last of all by the New Covenant of the Word made flesh. Summarising all this as divine faith in the world reveals yet another dimension of the continuing divine creation-reconciliation activity and of the continuing dependency, fragility and contingency of human and cosmic existence. Nostalgic awareness of this condition/plight is often best revealed, explicitly or implicitly, by artists, especially poets, from Wordsworth, Arnold and Hardy in earlier English times to Irish contemporaries like Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Derek Mahon, Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney and others. I will return to some of that Irish work later in a different context and assume for the moment that the English work is well known. For now it is necessary to draw out some of the implications of Word as the divine expression of faith in cosmos and humanity through Creating and Reconciling, and reaching its culmination in the Incarnate Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

God's Faith in the World, Globalisation and Reconciliation

In general discourse, the fashionable feature of the world in which the Word of God is to be preached and discovered today is probably that termed 'globalisation'. Despite the term's recent popularization, the phenomenon is not entirely new. Indeed a case could be made for its being as old as humanity itself. Only an arrogant, Eurocentric view could have claimed to have discovered lands occupied for eons. And perhaps only a similar view could have so happily settled for annihilation, enslavement or at best expropriation and exploitation of these lands' earlier peoples and their resources. Despite the adventurous, generous and courageous spirit of many of the early 'discoverers', it was from that narrow European political, economic and religious perspective that the first phase of modern globalisation developed in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With the industrial revolution in Europe and particularly the innovations in transport of steamship and railways, a new political and economic phase began, more

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akin to the present one. However with air travel and, much more intensely, with the computer and the internet, a shift in kind has emerged, certainly in economic terms with the instantaneous transfer of capital and the easy mobility of goods and services. But it is still by and large controlled for the present by the economic, political and military powers, who are therefore its real beneficiaries. For all the rhetoric about making poverty history, or at least halving it by 2015, about fair trade and substantial increases in aid, injustice between and within countries has continued to grow. Such injustice seriously impairs the effects of the Word in the World. Globalising, for all its pretensions to unifying the world, is far from providing the differentiation of equals in communion, in justice and peace for all, which reconciling, even at the human level, implies. And God's faith in the world remains frustrated by the powers which control and exploit the majority of the world's citizens and resources.

One significant difference is noticeable in how the Word today relates to the present globalising World, as compared with earlier globalising periods. (I prefer the qualifier 'globalising' with its sense of process, past present and future to the substantive 'globalisation' with its sense of fixed origin and current completion, akin to that other recent misreading of our world, 'the end of history': a digression too far in this context.) The significant difference to which I refer is that, unlike earlier phases of globalising, the missionary Cross-bearers no longer follow the sword-bearers and the traders, at once blessing them in their conquests, and seeking to proclaim the Word while enjoying their destructive protection and exploitation. Of course many missionaries rose above those entanglements from Bartolomeo de las Casas in sixteenth-century Hispanic America to Bishop Donal Lamont in twentieth-century British Africa.

As most Christians and their leaders in non-western countries are themselves of the indigenous (pre-European) peoples, their preaching of the Word and their building of the Christian community must draw on their own native resources and no longer appear an exotic hangover from colonial conquest. For many African and Asian local churches this is made all the more difficult by the economic and cultural colonialism, even empire, from the west which has continued in new forms long after the era of political and military empire. The growth of such local churches and the reconciling creativity of the Word in their unstable, poor and sometimes warring worlds has been partly supported by the Church's central authority and sometimes undermined by its refusal to take these Churches as genuine local churches and not just Roman franchise holders. The Word cannot be truly creative and reconciling in a globalising world if, in spite of the rich diversity of its expressions in Bible and Tradition, it is narrowly and efficiently controlled through the major technical instruments of the globalising project, and the instant communications of Roman

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dictates with their frequent and suspicious monitoring of local initiatives.

There are further and deeper differences arising for the proclamation, presence and power of the Word in this globalising world. The most challenging theological one may be the fuller realization by Christians that the Word is present already, everywhere and among all peoples though the creating and reconciling activity of the one God. As much might be inferred from the biblical texts cited, as well as from the occasional theological insights of theologians ancient and modern. Preaching the Gospel to the whole world and baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit remains the primary commission of the community of Jesus' disciples, the Church. Even in the New Testament there are important nuances from Jesus rebuking the disciples for forbidding non-disciples to cast out demons in his name to Paul addressing the Athenians on their worship of the unknown God. The disputes over the admission of Gentiles without their having to assume the rituals and obligations of Israel is another indication of the broader reach of the Word. Such disputes and developments recur through Christian history so that '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' never excluded other views of the saving presence of God without benefit of explicit Christian confession and baptism. Baptism itself had its own theological equivalents where the administration of the sacrament was not possible, such as in the pre-Christian era or for later peoples to whom the Word had not been proclaimed. These trends were strengthened at Vatican II in ecumenical and interfaith terms as well as in the Church's developing openness to the modern world. Although the broad reach of de Chardin's vision of a developing Christosphere never received much ecclesiastic or even theological approval, and Karl Rahner's account of 'anonymous Christianity' seemed to many theologians at once too clever and too parochial, the Christian and theological world engaged in a new dialogue about both the universality and uniqueness of the Word made flesh, and so made universal, even cosmic, in Jesus Christ. The possibility and the urgency of these debates has been intensified by the intimate encounters between religious faiths and also between these faiths and non-religious or secular faiths which the globalising process has accelerated. It is, I am sure, clear to this audience that the various alternatives to religious faiths are themselves ultimately faith-based rather than simply rational positions.

In the multiple dialogues envisaged here, with their intellectual, imaginative and practical dimensions, the creative, reconciling and incarnate Word will encounter severe new challenges, while developing in response rich new insights. It will not suffice to assume fullness of truth in Christian teaching or scripture which could in time supplement and complete the partial truths of the rest. Unless Christians

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are prepared to learn from and be changed by expressions of the Word in the wider human world, they will not engage in any real dialogue. More significantly they will have betrayed the Word in the World, which they believe they have been explicitly commissioned to serve. Service, humble service to Word and World is the key practice here, the humble earth-bound practice of the One who emptied himself even unto death on the Cross. The Word, Incarnate and Crucified, is Lord not in any triumphalist, conquering and Constantinian spirit but in loving self-surrender, in the continuous letting-be and letting-go of creation/differentiation and in the simultaneous/continuous bringing together of reconciliation.

Creation and reconciliation are the global activities of God moving through cosmic and human history to eschatological fulfilment. So cosmos and the human race are, as indicated earlier, the objects of God's faith and hope as well as of God's love. In that sense all human communities, recipients of God's faith and trust which, to extend the vision of John, are part of the world of God's own, to whom he came even when they could not comprehend Him. The diverse human faith-responses, sacred and secular, referred to earlier, have their contribution to make to the recognition and understanding of the Word in the World. Even somebody as clearly hostile to all religion and particularly Christianity as Richard Dawkins expresses something, however closed and skewed, of the contemporary faith community of scientists which may provide a necessary challenge and corrective to our sometimes lazy understanding of creation and creator. With our own chastening history of theological imperialism and its distortions of the Word made flesh, we might be sympathetic to scientists' temptations to imperialism, while seeking to continue the dialogue with them and so continue attempts at joint conversion to the fuller truth which may further liberate both of us.

As science and its partner, technology, are, with commerce, key forces in driving current globalising, discerning and proclaiming the Word in the World will involve discerning it in the scientific and technological world as the origin, presence, power and justification of values such as truth and goodness. The development of such creative and reconciling dialogue is for another time and place and people who are more expert than I am. Let me turn instead to two areas of Word and World which have preoccupied me over much of my theological life, politics and poetry, in which latter I include the arts generally.

The Word in the World of Politics

While politics may have always been heavily influenced by and at times subservient to economics and commerce, it remains the key

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discipline in theory and practice for the successful management of the peoples of the world, nationally and internationally. By successful management of peoples I mean the just, peaceful and participatory organization of society, in solidarity with all peoples at home and abroad, observant of human rights and under the rule of law, national and international . The list could, of course, be extended but I will have to abbreviate it here and deal mainly with national/international justice, peace and solidarity in their creative/differentiating and reconciling aspects.

It is in this confusing political world that we must also look for the Word in its creative and reconciling, if secular, activity. The separations referred to loosely as those of Church and State, of religion and politics, of sacred and secular, and which have in many ways been so beneficial to both sides, should not be taken as excluding the Word from the second of each of these duos. Such separation in practice, based on differentiation in concept, could enable each side to challenge, correct and enrich the other in their sacred and secular character and in their characteristic activity. The differentiation and equality in difference among citizens of the state is ultimately founded and powered by the creative presence of the Word among us. So wherever we find this differentiation and equality in dignity, rights and responsibilities being fostered and cherished, we may discern activity of the Word, even if the promoters and protectors of such politics are unable to make the connection themselves. Indeed in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe it was the breaches between Church and State and the other duos which facilitated the emergence of these political realities, even if with these breeches they could not eventually be given any firmer foundation than positive human law.

Differentiation and equality involve community and bonding, what we have been calling reconciliation, as in origin bringing and keeping the different, the "others" together in a mutually enriching way and, in further development, as bringing together forgivingly and positively, the different who have been estranged, the hostile others. As I have sought to develop these ideas more fully elsewhere I will summarise such reconciling activity as the renewed and persistent act of bonding which every society needs to survive, including the entire human society, particularly just now in the throes of rapid and often unjust and exploitative globalising. Where the differentiation in equality and the bonding in solidarity within a single state or between states are honoured and promoted, the creative and reconciling Word is at work in approval and support. Where the differentiation and bonding are abused by the powerful at the expense of others less powerful or powerless, as is so frequent in our world, the Word is at work condemning and resisting. In the ambiguous situations in which we may often find ourselves, humble attention to and service of the Word in the suffering and excluded, and in personal

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prayer and the liturgy, may enable us to distinguish between the Word's approval and its condemnation, between its support and its resistance and turn these distinctions into action.

While reconciliation may seem more characteristic of human political activity, creativity and its associate, imagination, are also clearly necessary. What we call human procreativity confronts the procreating parents with a new and irreducibly different human other and stranger. The bonding and formative process which the parents are called to involves creativity and imagination on a sometimes exhausting scale. The self-surrender of unselfish, caring and frequently reconciling parents betokens reconciling self-surrender of God in Jesus Christ. All this forms part of the continuing sacrament of marriage for the couple and the family, the Word realized anew in the flesh of parents and children. In a related fashion the Church, the explicit community of the Word's creative and reconciling presence and power, embodies, in the words of Vatican II, the sacrament of the one human community of God. This one community is always in the process of formation or creation by the gracious, creative power of the Word, mediated through creative human activity with the Church exercising its sacramental role of effectively manifesting and recognising the Word at work in the World. Much of the Church's recent teaching and practice in the fields of justice, peace and solidarity have been sacramental in this way.

Artistic Creativity and Reconciliation

As reconciliation seems more native to politics, so creation and creativity have been regarded as native to the arts. Yet great major and even minor works of art have a reconciling role, as Heaney hints in his Oxford lectures *The Redress of Poetry* although we will not be pursuing his precise argument here.[2] The sense of presence which serious art evokes is developed by George Steiner in his book *Real Presences*, in ways at least supportive of the general argument here.[3] The argument may be briefly stated. (Some further elaboration may be found in my recent book, 'Vulnerable to the Holy'.[4]) Human creativity as expressed in artistic productions reflects and reveals a human capacity which transcends the simple calculating deployment of material resources, and resists simple reduction to the arrangements of atoms and molecules or whatever. The work in turn takes the attentive reader or viewer or listener beyond herself into new dimensions of joy or sorrow which again resist reductionist explanations. This is perhaps most powerfully experienced through great

[2] S Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, Faber, London 1995.
[3] G Steiner, *Real Presences*, London 1989.
[4] E McDonagh, *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality and Art*, Columba Press 2005.

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music. As the creative productivity of the artist encounters the creative receptivity of the audience, one may speak of both transcendence and transformation. The Word is at least signalling its presence in the world as a creative, transcendent and transforming energy.

One of my favourite modern plays, touted by many knowledgeable critics as a modern classic is John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.

The mother Maurya faced with the last of her sons, Bartley, to be lost at sea utters this final lament. Synge had by now abandoned the rather strict Christian faith of his Protestant mother and some contemporary commentators would like to interpret the lament as purely ancient, Celtic and pagan. Some such background as the Samhain reference may be there but Synge was too respectful a listener to the Aran Islanders to ignore their genuine Christian language and sentiments.

> They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. Give me the Holy Water, Nora; there's a small sup still on the dresser. . . . It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking. . . . They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn; and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. . . . Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.
> (*She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly*).

I have heard very similar lamentations in African villages particularly at the burial of AIDS victims. The Word in the world today and perhaps in all days too often takes the form of lament. The women of Jerusalem weeping on the way to Calvary are joined by millions today in face of the daily crucifixions of disease, famine and war. Must they be satisfied? Can the Word remain passive? Will the creative and reconciling powers which the divine artist inspires in the human enable the human to reveal and resist the tragic and destructive divisions of our time and so prompt the judgment and the healing so urgently required.

In the following Irish poems, none of them incorporating direct Christian reference, I try to surrender to the creative technique and rhythm of the poem while remaining alert to the internal reconciling

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of the language and deeper reconciling of persons, presences and world, sourced eventually, as I believe, in the Word of God.

Quarantine by Eavan Boland was published in the Irish Times literary page on 22 September 2001, shortly after 9/11. But it reflects her broader concerns with personal and social tragedy in history, and more particularly her frequent return to Irish examples.

Quarantine by Eavan Boland

In the worst hour of the worst season
of the worst year of a whole people
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.
He was walking – they were both walking – north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.
He lifted her and put her on his back.
He walked like that west and west and north.
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.
But her feet were held against his breastbone,
The last beat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.
There is no place here for the inexact
Praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.
There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.
Also what they suffered. How they lived.
And what there is between a man and a woman.
And in which darkness it can best be proved.

Michael Longley's *Ceasefire* was also published in the Irish Times on the Saturday after the first IRA ceasefire in 1994, but by accident he says. His moving account of the creative preparation for the reconciliation act is beautifully portrayed.

Ceasefire by Michael Longley

I
Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II
Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,

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Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III
When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV
'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'.

The artists' imaginative if obscure embodiment of the mystery of the Word in the world should not be left to 'secular' poets. G M Hopkins and R S Thomas can be equally dark and difficult in struggling with a presence in which they certainly believe but occasionally seem to lose track of.

There is so much more to be explored, analysed and recorded even in the restricted material with which I have been concerned. A major feature today is the dialogue between the major religions, although it certainly should not be separated from the political and artistic concerns which I have voiced. As a basis for all such exploration and dialogue I might combine two phrases from George Steiner and St Paul in describing us humans as Guests of Creation and Ambassadors of Reconciliation. And it is by the creative gifts we receive as guests of creation that we are enabled to follow our vocation as ambassadors of reconciliation in serving, revealing and proclaiming in our inadequate way, the Word in the World.

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