Between Embrace and Exclusion

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Introduction

There is a certain irony about me being invited to Cambridge to address the theme of 'reconciliation and ecumenism,' because I come from a place where, in certain circumstances, to talk about them in the same breath can be counter productive. So I welcome the opportunity to reflect with your theological community on this important relationship.

I want to start with some thoughts about language and the scope of this paper. In the paper, I talk about 'churches,' 'Christian groups,' and 'Christian faith communities.' I do so to acknowledge the many different ways of living out Christian faith commitment in community, which are growing up alongside traditional church denominations, and whose members would not consider themselves as forming a 'church.'[1] We have a significant number of these faith communities in Northern Ireland. When I use the word 'church,' then, I am referring primarily to the four larger denominations in Ireland: Roman Catholic, Methodist, Church of Ireland, and Presbyterian.

With regard to the scope of this paper, the discipline of Ecumenics comprises three aspects: inter-church, inter-faith, and issues concerning justice and peace. Within the limits of this paper I am concentrating on inter-church and justice and peace aspects and I will not attempt to address issues raised by reconciliation and inter- faith dialogue. Moreover, I will speak of 'ecumenism' from a specifically practical point of view, as the relationships between churches, which clearly includes consideration of faith and order issues but is not dominated by them. This is, as it were, ecumenism at pavement level.

I am putting forward three inter-related theses. The first is that Christian churches and faith communities have largely left out of account the social dimension of a theology of reconciliation, preferring to concentrate on the personal dimension. This has had two effects. Firstly, it renders the concept of limited use in situations of inter-group conflict or division. Secondly, and more importantly, it

[1] An example would be the Lifelink organisation, which comprises approx 19 different house church groups around Northern Ireland and who as an organisation has recently joined the Irish Council of Churches.

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denies to the Christian community a vision of creation and salvation, and a description of the mission of the church, which speaks directly to the fragmented state of societies and of the world.

My second thesis is that the personal and social dimensions of a theology of reconciliation entail a holistic understanding of human being as both conscious and unconscious. Such an understanding is significantly lacking in Christian theology, which tends to be dominated by a vision of human personhood as largely conscious and rational. In consequence, Christian churches struggle and often fail to educate both clergy and church members in ways that will promote and help them to sustain the peaceful, life-giving relationships, at the heart of any process of reconciliation.

My third thesis is that processes of ecumenical engagement, at all levels, over the last ninety plus years, whilst achieving some laudable positive movements in relationships and in reflection, are seriously flawed. They have in many ways failed to equip and inspire Christian churches to live more congruently the mission of the church as reconciliation in their relationships with one another, and as a counter witness to increasing religious- ethnic conflicts around the globe. The balance of my paper will be orientated to exploring a more psychosocial vision of reconciliation and its implications for church renewal and ecumenical relationships.

I am going to begin the paper with some semi-biographical reflections that describe practical reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, which has shaped my thought. In section two, I will look at a psychosocial view of a theology of reconciliation through the lens of 'embrace,' a category, which I have borrowed from the Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf,[2] whose writings have significantly influenced my work in recent years. The final part of the paper will reflect on the relationships of the churches, issues of exclusion and some of the questions these pose.

I make no apology for the Northern Irish orientation of this paper, it is the context of my ministry, and it is one part of these islands which both desperately needs the gift of reconciliation and has, I believe, much to teach others about processes of surviving and healing deeply antagonised religious and political divisions.

1. *Theory Meets Practice*

It is a scary experience for any theologian who, fresh from the exertion of completing doctoral work on the theme of human development and reconciliation, is offered a job in which she is asked to test out her theories in practice, especially in the cauldron that was Northern Ireland in the mid 1990's. Such was my situation when the

[2] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1996.

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Irish School of Ecumenics employed me, along with my colleague, Dr Joseph Liechty, on a six-year research project called Moving Beyond Sectarianism.[3] We were tasked with what the late Dr. Eric Gallagher termed "speaking the truth in love to the churches," about their responsibility for creating, for maintaining, and their resources for moving beyond sectarianism. So within weeks of defending my thesis, I found myself living in Belfast, spending a lot of time sitting in parish halls, libraries, and community centres around Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Armagh and Omagh listening to stories; stories of unspeakable pain, of terrifying hatred, and of breathtaking courage, faith, and resilience.

My work within the project was to bring together groups of church affiliated Catholics and Protestants, of various denominations, in areas marked by violence to discuss, sometimes for the first time in an inter-tradition setting, issues of identity and sectarianism. The conversations were seldom dull, often humourous and illuminating, sometimes heart breaking and occasionally so heated that I had to step between male members as they 'squared up' to one another across a room. The people who took part in those groups, at times under physical threat as they made their way to and from meetings, and the many others I encountered in different ways, taught me slowly but surely about the harsh social realities facing any cosy religious notion of reconciliation I might have entertained. I was given the privilege of experiencing the depth of their pain, of realising the enormity of the tasks of both forgiveness and repentance, the delicacy of achieving any kind of justice, especially where lives have been taken or irrevocably destroyed, and perhaps most of all the complexity of understanding the 'truth' about any event or process. It was a truly de-centring experience for me personally.

Gradually, as I regained my balance, I found myself replaying parts of group conversations and wondering what it would take to bring people even close to a state of sustainable, positive relationship, let alone to a state of reconciliation, such was the gulf between them. A gulf that lurked not in the conversation itself, which was often conducted with candour and flashes of Northern humour, but in the silences and in the inevitable retreat into myths, fear, prejudice or well worn patterns of antagonised division almost every time an external event, such as a bombing or shooting, occurred. My questioning arose partly because the people who attended the group work were not extremists, they were not, on the whole, bigots, they were not young, or indeed not so young, hotheads, though they did express themselves passionately. They were, largely, committed,

[3] The project ran from January 1995 to June 2000. The report of the research is available in Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press), 2001.

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church going, middle aged to older members of various denominations. These were the people who cared enough and were open enough to be engaged in a process that they hoped would help to develop peaceful relationships in their neighbourhood. These are people who believe in peace and reconciliation and pray for it earnestly.

I want to let two of their voices come through this paper to give you a flavour of the conversations and the issues concerning reconciliation and ecumenism that they raised for me. The first voice is Bill, a Protestant man, middle aged, professional, who when he heard the story of sectarian abuse suffered by one of his own congregation said: "I have worshipped with you for 30 years in this church and I never knew that had happened to your family." Such ignorance is not uncommon in Northern Ireland. Its roots are many. It could be a defence mechanism which leads to studied avoidance of what is under people's noses because to admit it would be too traumatic or might impel a person to risky action. It could be the silence of victims, who until the last few years did not feel that they had the right to speak or that anyone would listen to them if they did voice their stories. Or it could be a combination of those factors. What was most sobering for me in this example was the fact that these men could live, worship, and socialise in a small Christian community, which is in a flashpoint area of Belfast, and after thirty years still not have shared some of the dominant events of their lives. Seamus Heaney's famous line "whatever you say, say nothing,"[4] echoes through this whole conversation and through the lives of people who have lived terrible suffering whilst locked into stifling silence even within the Christian community.

The second voice is that of a Roman Catholic woman, Catherine, in North Belfast. This woman is a grandmother, active in her parish, and committed to inter-church work. She was a faithful and active member of one of my groups through a terrible period in North Belfast, when young Roman Catholic men were being shot almost daily in reprisal for the murder of Loyalist Volunteer Force leader Billy Wright in the Maze prison. At a meeting in a week when three Roman Catholic men had been shot dead in the locality of the group, we were talking about the situation and she suddenly said with utter conviction; "what we need is the 'Ra' back on the streets, they are the only ones who will protect us." The 'Ra' being the provisional IRA, who were, at that time, two and half years into their ceasefire. The other Roman Catholics in the group nodded in silence, whilst the Protestant members sat looking totally stunned. The most shocking aspect of this example for me was the seemingly reflex resort to the

[4] From the unpublished address with which the late Rev Dr Eric Gallagher launched the Moving Beyond Sectarianism project in Belfast on 3rd April 1995.

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threat of violence as a means of solving the problem by a woman who considers herself, and would be regarded in the Christian community, as committed to peace.

As I pondered these and other incidents I was well aware that the Christian churches through their steady preaching of forgiveness, and their pastoral work in communities had prevented the violence becoming worse than it did. But I found myself asking: what has Christian theology to say to these situations? One of the striking characteristics among the people who attended my groups was that they did not seem to have Christian categories for reflecting about their situation that did not revolve around concepts of individual salvation. It is a line of thinking that suggests that as long as I don't do anyone any harm and I live, as afar as possible, an individually blameless life I will get to heaven. But of course, it was obvious as we progressed in the conversations that the collectivity of their individually blameless lives was not significantly influencing events in their society or their local area. Had the Christian churches developed no coherent, co-operative strategy of response to this long and bloody conflict? It seemed not.

In our work and especially in our book: *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* Joe Liechty and I sought to expose the ways in which the systemic nature of sectarianism uses the ignorant complicity and inaction of good, religious people to fuel itself. For Christians in Northern Ireland, therefore, doing nothing is not an option. The questions are: what to do? How to do it? With whom to do it? Informed by what theological understanding? It is to that theological understanding that I turn now in section two.

2. *Embrace: Created for Reconciliation and Wholeness*

In his article: *The Social Meaning of Reconciliation*, Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale University, argues persuasively that the "social agenda of the church has been isolated from the message of reconciliation," with the result that Christians have difficulty in fostering reconciliation and avoiding being drawn into conflict.[5] Volf points to the fact that the church has focussed on the reconciliation of an individual with God without taking into account the wider social scene which is riven by conflict.[6] Similarly, in the face of radical injustice, the church has adopted a justice first agenda, regarding reconciliation as possible only after justice or liberation has been attained. In a detailed exegesis of Paul's use of the notion of

[5] "And whatever you say, say nothing," Seamus Heaney, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*, 1975.

[6] Miroslav Volf, "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation," *Interpretation*, No54 vol 2 (April 2000), p162–3.

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reconciliation, Volf contends that Paul's vision was one of social reconciliation and that central to it is the fact that God reconciles human beings to Godself, not vice versa. Therefore, he argues, there is a pre-eminence of grace over justice.[7] He relocates the struggle for justice as "a dimension of the pursuit of reconciliation whose ultimate goal is a community of love."[8] His overarching framework, then, is reconciliation.

Volf eloquently makes the case for there being inherent social dimensions to a theology of reconciliation and not simply social implications that can be drawn from it. He uses the powerful metaphor of 'embrace,' opening arms, waiting, closing arms and opening them again, to elucidate the reconciling encounter between two parties in their otherness. Embrace, whilst it suffers the limitations of being drawn primarily from the world of individual relationships, (unless you are systematically into group hugs!) nevertheless encapsulates an encounter which allows for fluidity of identities, a non symmetrical relationship between participants, and through its gentle, non invasive nature an openness about outcomes and change following an encounter.[9] Embrace, as I will argue below, is a powerful symbol of God's relationship to the world in both creation and salvation.

The vision of reconciliation that informs Volf's position is: "the creation of dynamic harmony in a world ravaged by life-impairing strife."[10] This vision seems to me to be too limited and too focussed on the establishment of harmony in the place of strife. Human relationships entail a measure of conflict and struggle, if only in the differentiation of identities. Such conflict and struggle can be both necessary and positive. In our book, Joe Liechty and I, define Christian reconciliation as: "the processes and structures necessary to bring all the elements of the cosmos into positive and life-giving relationship with God and with one another."[11] I understand reconciliation as both an ongoing process, which because it is human requires structures, and which because it is a movement of God's grace, is also an eschatological event. In this vision, the inherent social meaning of reconciliation, for which Volf argues, is expanded beyond the interpersonal, and beyond the ecological into the cosmic dimension. I am positing reconciliation as both the *telos* of creation, including, therefore rational and non-rational aspects of being, and as the process of salvation.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid. p164–9.
[9] Ibid. p163.
[10] Ibid. p145–7.
[11] Ibid. p167–8.

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Reconciliation as the telos of creation

Much theological reflection about human personhood gives primacy, explicitly or tacitly, to conscious rational thought and regards the process of hominisation as the pinnacle of creation.[12] Even Wolfhart Pannenberg who develops his anthropology in dialogue with the depth psychology of Sigmund Freud, and who regards the self as an unconscious psychological structure, tends to concentrate on the rational dimension of personhood in which the ego, as the centre of consciousness, plays a dominant role.[13] These approaches suggest an evolution of consciousness in creation from the primordial towards the development of the capacity for human rational thought. The creation which always sang the glory of God now becoming conscious of itself in the act. They, however, leave out of account the intra-psychic, unconscious, non-rational level of human being. Yet it is precisely in the psychological processes of integration of the rational and non-rational in human consciousness that human beings experience reconciliation at its most immediate, reconciliation with the ever-present, unconscious 'otherness' of self. The development of human beings towards wholeness is an ongoing process of integrating aspects of the self, in such a way that the person's being and presence in the world becomes more and more positive, and open to her or himself, to others, to the created order, and to God. At the core of human development, then, is a fundamental drive to integration, which, according to both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, is carried on in dreams even when people's consciousness is suspended in sleep.[14]

We do not yet know whether this process, which is still ongoing, will result in another stage of evolution into what might be a type of 'super-consciousness' in creation. Nor do we know what the contours of such 'super-consciousness' might look like, since it will entail both rational and non-rational elements.[15] What is clear is that at the heart of God's

[12] Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, p292.

[13] See for example Jürgen Moltmann's Trinitarian theology, which is posited on socially co-constituted, and therefore conscious, rational personhood in Jurgen Moltmann, "the Social Doctrine of the Trinity," in James. M. Byrne ed. *The Christian Understanding of God Today: Theological Colloquium on the Occasion of the 400th Anniversary of the Foundation of Trinity College*, Dublin (Dublin: Columba Press), 1993; Alistair McFadyen's notion of personhood as socially co-constituted through communication in Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: University Press), 1990 and Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan) 1988.

[14] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in a Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 1990.

[15] See Carl Jung's notion of the 'transcendent function,' Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, exec. ed. W. Maguire, trans R.F.C Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957 – 1979) Vol 8; and Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," *in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), vol IV (I) (1900).

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creative activity in human beings is a structure of development that is driven by a movement of reconciliation between rational and non-rational aspects of being. This reconciliation, as both process and event, when lived fully in relationship with self, others, the earth, and God, can be considered wholeness.

If we now examine God's act of creation through the metaphor of 'embrace' it is possible to say that in this continuous dance of creation God reaches out to reconcile the cosmos to Godself, waits, enfolds those who and that which responds, and releasing them reaches out once again. Within this framework, the event of the incarnation arrives as simultaneously God's reaching out to reconcile the cosmos and the cosmos, through humanities' conscious and unconscious being, reaching back to be reconciled, to be both enfolded by and then released by God. In the faithful life and innocent death of the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, one complete cycle of embrace comes into being. It is in this limited sense that I would describe Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of creation. He is the first of many and opens the way for the grace of God, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, to inspire further response to the offer of embrace. Reconciliation, then, understood as the structures and processes necessary to bring all elements of the cosmos into positive life-giving relationship with God and one another, is indeed the *telos* of creation. It is at this point that the orders of creation and redemption overlap. In the life, death and especially in the resurrection of the God-man, the fulfilment of creation is revealed as, at the same time, the offer of salvation.

Reconciliation as the process of salvation

Paul asserts, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,"[16] and behind Paul's simple statement lies the complex interplay of processes of creation and salvation. For me, the salvific role of Jesus Christ is best viewed in two distinct but inseparable stages: Jesus of Nazareth as provisional salvation, that is reconciliation or embrace present, but not yet achieved and Jesus, the risen Christ, as salvation, that is reconciliation or embrace achieved but not yet fulfilled. In Jesus of Nazareth, the reconciling embrace of God has been offered and is in process of response. The embrace, however, is not yet achieved because the response depends upon the total 'yes' of Jesus throughout the duration of his earthly life, and this yes is by no means certain. It is reasonable to assume that if Jesus was truly human he must have had the same structure of conscious and unconscious being as every one else. He must have experienced, therefore, natural positive and negative movements at both the conscious,

[16] Peter Russell in *The Brain Book* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979)

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rational and unconscious, non-rational level and the drive towards integration and development. He must have faced also the choice of self-contradiction, of choosing against love, against God, through sin.

Jesus is, nevertheless, attested in scripture as a person capable of living love and positivity to the extent that it literally radiated from his body and healed those around him.[17] Such an image suggests a man who was achieving a high degree of reconciliation between the conscious and unconscious levels in his being. In this state of integration, he would have been increasingly conscious of the strong positive and negative movements which were active in him, and he was clearly able to choose consistently to live in a way consonant with love and reconciliation, whatever it cost him in terms of suffering.[18]

In this way of understanding Jesus, I am arguing that he differed from other human beings in that at the unconscious level, the archetype of self, that is the God-image of human being, corresponded completely to God because Jesus was divine.[19] In the depth of himself and unconsciously he must, therefore, have experienced himself as one with God in a way that other people do not; they experience themselves as other than God. This position appears to entail the logical contradiction that Jesus was whole by virtue of his identity with God, but not whole as a human being. The contradiction is more apparent than real because the wholeness of Jesus through the archetype of self was precisely only archetypal, that is an inherent possibility, and had yet to come to actual realisation in and through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth.[20]

In the picture that I am sketching, the pivotal event of salvation is the final triumph of Jesus' total 'yes' in his death on the cross and in his resurrection. This fulcrum point of salvation has two aspects. From the perspective of his death, the faithful human life of reconciliation expressed in loving self, others, and God becomes reconciliation achieved. In other words, salvation as a punctiliar event happens in Jesus Christ. It is a complete response to the embrace of God, a movement into the enfolding arms of God. It is not, however, fulfilled because the participation of the rest of the cosmos in this salvation has yet to occur.

From the perspective of his resurrection, the faithful, reconciling life of Jesus of Nazareth is validated. Through this validation, the definitive wholeness of human being, possible only in reconciled relationship with God, becomes present in the cosmos. In the final

[17] 2 Cor 5:19.

[18] Cf Jairus' daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage in Mk 5:21–43 and Matt 9: 18–26.

[19] For example his consistently loving choices in the temptations Matt 4: 1–11; and in the agony in Gethsemane Mk 14: 32–42.

[20] For the concept of archetypes, see Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, Vol 5: 264.

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sequence of the embrace, the reciprocal movement of opening arms between Jesus and the Father releases the power of the Holy Spirit into the cosmos. The grace that initially was offered by God, who might be perceived as distant and other, comes to the cosmos in Christ Jesus as the power of the reconciling wholeness of human being, which while still other, is no longer distant but near. With theologians such as Karl Rahner, I would affirm that whilst in principle God might have created the cosmos without the gift of grace, it was given, in fact, always, from the beginning, in view of Christ.[21]

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God reaches out anew to embrace the cosmos and to offer the possibility of fulfilling salvation. Such a process of coming to fulfilment depends upon the free historical choices of human beings for or against reconciliation and wholeness. The event of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, however, has introduced a new level of being, a new level of consciousness, into creation. This consciousness since it is a new perception of reconciliation and wholeness must be present both consciously and unconsciously in humankind. It is present consciously in the oral and scriptural witness to Jesus. It is present unconsciously though an alteration in the archetype of Self. In other words, the reconciliation and wholeness of human being made present in the resurrected Christ alters the archetype of self to reflect the possibility of reconciliation and wholeness as a reality that has come about for at least one human being.[22] It still remains a fact that human beings can choose self-contradiction and my argument is in no way intended to limit human freedom. I am, however, implying that through the salvific action of Jesus Christ, humankind has been offered the possibility of radical transformation and given the enabling power to choose this transformation.

Reconciliation as the mission of the church

This view of reconciliation as both the culmination of creation and the process and event of salvation, resonates with the understanding in the World Council of Churches study of the nature of the church, that the church is God's instrument to "bring humanity and all of creation into communion,"[23] – and it goes beyond it. If reconciliation

[21] Jung believed archetypes to be inherited possibilities, "In the pre-natal phase archetypal images appear no longer connected with the individual's memories but belonging to the stock of inherited possibilities of representation that are born anew in every individual." Ibid.

[22] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol 18, trans E. Quinn, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), 189–210.

[23] This proposition depends upon Carl Jung's concept of the 'Collective Unconscious.' Jung's elucidation of this complex concept is scattered through his writings. For an overview: Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, vol 5 and 8.

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has inherent personal *and* social dimensions, then churches are called to live, worship, socialise and evangelise in ways that promote positive human relationships, individually and corporately, and to promote ecologically sound living, not just outside the boundaries of their congregation but also within them. If reconciliation is the mission of the church, then Christians are called to work to ensure that all church structures and actions, corporately as well as individually, internally as well as externally, reflect the loving, boundary-crossing, truth-seeking, right-relating, work of Jesus Christ. If this social vision of reconciliation had informed the communities in which Bill and Catherine, about whom I spoke at the start of this lecture, live, their situations would have been unlikely to occur.

Reconciliation as salvation has some important implications for Christian life and mission, individually and corporately. Individually and within a church or community it firstly implies that part of the discipline for Christians, of all ages, and especially for those in teaching and leadership roles, should be to work actively at developing their personal consciousness and human integration. In other words, they are to be actively engaged in learning to embrace the otherness within. This in turn requires that Christian communities create the conditions, in terms of structures, worship and teaching which are conducive to fostering such personal growth. The often dry, verbal, rational form of so much Christian worship simply will not do. Its lack of symbolism, colour, and movement fails to address and engage the whole human person, conscious and unconscious.

Secondly, it means that actively fostering a social culture of peace and reconciliation within Christian communities is a priority for mission. In other words, learning to live in reconciliation within a church community and between Christian communities is a means of being congruent with the gospel preached and a living witness to the reconciling embrace of God in Christ. Thirdly, it requires that theology and Christian education take seriously the insights of psychology with regard to the structure of consciousness of human being, and adapt content and methodologies to reflect these insights.

The vision of reconciliation that I am sketching here demands the recognition that the gift of grace engages Christians in a collaborative project with one another and with Christ not only to overcome conflict and division but also to establish relationships of embrace towards otherness in themselves, other people, the natural world, and God. An individually blameless life is less than half the story and the fact that we, as churches, in Northern Ireland have often taught little more than that, is a cause of deep regret and repentance. It is particularly so because it has given space for exclusion, the opposite of embrace, in the form of separation, destructive denial, and contradiction, to flourish.

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3. *Exclusion: Separation, Destructive Denial and Contradiction*

Building on an understanding of creation as both 'separating and binding,' Miroslav Volf describes exclusion as transgressing against both elements in the form of disconnection which destroys binding, and assimilation, which nullifies separation. Assimilation is the absorption of the other who is regarded as inferior.[24] Disconnection, on the other hand, pushes the other away either as an enemy or as a non-entity.[25] Since 1910, through the ecumenical movement, positive relationships between Christian churches have developed and the types and prevalence of exclusion has diminished – but not disappeared.

Separation is still very much evident and takes a number of forms, with varying degrees of actual separation. Within Roman Catholicism, since the second Vatican Council, there is an apparent openness to Protestant churches, though the closed communion table enforces a separation at the heart of its sacramental celebration of unity that is stark, and attitudes evident, for example, in the circulation of the document *Dominus Iesus* seem to belie a real intent to embrace.[26]

Within Protestantism an anti-Catholic form of separation entails adherents refusing joint worship and sometimes even contact with Roman Catholics on the grounds that they are not Christian. But Protestant churches also have internal anti-liberal, anti-evangelical, and anti-charismatic forms of exclusion. As a Roman Catholic living in North Belfast I still find it mesmerising that in Christian Unity week a pulpit exchange between Protestant churches is sometimes the height of the relationships we can risk or achieve. But this is the reality of a situation of antagonised religious and political difference that has endured for decades and cost thousands of lives. What is most striking is that these forms of exclusion are not reserved to small fringe groups or churches but are alive and well in the very heart of the larger denominations which are, formally at least, committed to ecumenical relations.

Each one of these forms of separation, Roman Catholic and Protestant, whilst being destructive in themselves can lead to pressure on ecumenically-minded ministers and members to refrain from developing positive relationships with the other for fear of splitting their congregation, parish or church. This, in my view, is a particularly pernicious face of exclusion, which, because it is not overt, is sometimes underestimated.

A second form of exclusion is destructive denial. I use the adjective 'destructive' to qualify denial because I have learned that there can be a

[24] *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No 181 (Geneva: WCC, 1998) section 26.
[25] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p67.
[26] Ibid.

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blessed type of amnesia, which is a form of denial, but is sometimes, at least initially, the only way for severely traumatised people to move beyond their trauma into positive relationships. This amnesia is not the type of denial I have in mind here; rather it is the destructive denial of both difference and commonality between traditions and denominations.

The tendency to minimise difference, is in my experience in Northern Ireland, a particular temptation for Roman Catholics, though it is not exclusively Roman Catholic. There is a universalising and inclusive dynamic that characterises a typical Roman Catholic approach and which in inter-church settings can lead to a premature and therefore destructive assertion of commonality. One of the counter balances for this is an appropriate concern for the Faith and Order issues that divide the churches, without allowing them to become stumbling blocks to developing authentic relationships in a locality.

On the other hand, the tendency to maximise difference is a particular, but not exclusive, temptation for different types of Protestants. There is a profoundly individualistic and differentiating dynamic, which characterises typical Protestant approaches and which in inter-church settings can lead to a persistent focus on, and therefore destructive assertion of, difference. One constructive way of balancing this tendency is to encourage people to express their different denominational identities in strong, positive terms, to give them space to be themselves, and an affirmation that their identity is respected, before attempting to make any connections of commonality. People need to be standing in a secure place in terms of their own identity, before they can risk making space for meaningful connection with the other.

Conclusion

There is, however, one question that has hovered just below the surface all the way through this paper: if reconciliation is the *telos* of creation, the process of salvation and the mission of the church, why is it not more fully advanced between the Christian churches? This question is particularly pointed in a situation like Northern Ireland, where religious-political division has led to such carnage and distress. It is not sufficient to point to the lack of doctrinal consensus. The fifty years of conversations which led to the Lima document in 1982[27], and the subsequent significant bi-lateral conversations, such as ARCIC, Roman Catholic-Lutheran, and Church of Ireland- Methodist are concrete evidence that many, though not all, of those obstacles are, largely, behind us.

[27] cf. the controversy surrounding the text, which accompanied this document and stated that Protestant churches were not be regarded as 'sister' churches. *Declaration Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, September 2000)

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We in the Christian churches have to face the question of the place of memory, history, power and wealth in our failure to live in congruence with the gospel of reconciliation that we preach. We have the mission, we have many of the resources, but we seem to lack the will to embrace one another in any sustained way. And so we linger between embrace and exclusion. What is needed, in my view, is an option for reconciliation in much the same way as the option for the poor was adopted by some churches a number of years ago. The events of September 11th, the emergence of global religious-ethnic violence indicates that we have reached a crossing place, in Irish "Trasna," and we have a choice. So let me end with a reflection on this crossing place, by Sr Raphael Consedine, a Presentation Sister:

Trasna

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones
In the mountain gap.
Behind them stretched the roadway they had travelled,
Ahead, mist hid the track.
Unspoken the question hovered:
Why go on? Is life not short enough?
Why seek to pierce its mystery?
Why venture further on strange paths, risking all?
Surely that is a gamble for fools. . .or lovers.
Why not return quietly by the known road?
Why be a pilgrim still?
A voice they knew called to them, saying:
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Choose! Go back if you must,
You will find your way easily by yesterday's road,
You can pitch your tent by yesterday's fires,
There may be life in the embers yet.
If that is not your deep desire,
Stand still. Lay down your load.
Take your life firmly in your two hands,
(Gently. . .you are trusted with something precious),
While you search your heart's yearnings:
What am I seeking? What is my quest?
When your star rises deep within,
Trust yourself to its leading.
You will have light for your first steps.
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Choose!
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Come!
(Sr Raphael Consedine PBVM)

[28] See "Report of Faith and Order Commission WCC, Lima, Peru 1982 in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds. *Growth in Agreement: reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

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