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Politico-philosophical perspectives on reconciliation

ABSTRACT

The article is an analysis of the philosophical meaning and political prospects of the idea of reconciliation between all South Africans. The author is sceptical about this prospect. While he regards reconciliation as an admirable theological doctrine, he doubts whether it is easily translatable into socio-political practice in South Africa. The settlement reached in the aftermath of apartheid is not primarily to be explicated in terms of a model of reconciliation where people forgive and learn to like one another, but rather in terms of the Hobbesian model of a “war of all against all”, redeemed by the restoration of basic values. The author analyses a variety of conceptions of reconciliation that were developed in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. In South Africa, the emphasis should be on the “concilium” aspect of reconciliation, i.e. the (re-) constitution of an assembly for social, political and economic deliberation. A general commitment of all South Africans to the values embedded in the South African constitution holds far more promise for a peaceful future than and narrow emphasis on the idea of reconciliation.

Let me state up front that I shall make a few remarks about the notion of reconciliation as a *social and political*, and *not a theological*, ideal, as is particularly pertinent in the context of recent South African history. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of the late 1990’s was instrumental in launching the term to a position of remarkable prominence in the political discourse of this country. Although the high fever about reconciliation that accompanied the proceedings and report of the TRC has somewhat abated over the past few years, the term continues to crop up expectedly and unexpectedly in the ongoing discourse about South Africa’s recovery from apartheid. I see today’s event as an indication that it has not lost its prominence.

At the same time I must, at the outset, apologize for the fact that I am not enthusiastic or starry-eyed about the idea that reconciliation ought to be out most prominent social and political ideal. I am particularly sceptical when the discourse about reconciliation is couched in a romanticist language that seemingly envisages a day when everybody will, again, like everybody else. If that is what is hoped for, no single society on earth is reconciled or, for that matter, has ever been. I therefore intend to be provocative and controversial, not merely for the sake of mischief, but rather for the sake of stimulating debate and the exchange of opposing, yet constructive ideas.

Too many starry eyes about reconciliation are, in my opinion, the result of the non-applicability to hard politics of the kind of discourse, which is relied upon by many reconciliation fundi’s. There is too much of a tendency to understand reconciliation with reference to the theological context that is often widely presupposed by well-meaning Christians who engage in this debate. The theological understanding of reconciliation draws heavily on St. Paul’s argument, in 2 Cor. 5, that God has, in Christ, reconciled the world with Himself, and that that provides the basis for the ministry of inter-personal reconciliation that is bestowed on all believers. The reconciliation with God is essentially the fruit of the atonement of sin through Christ; hence the ministry of reconciliation is basically aimed at the absolution of inter-personal guilt.

While I find this a wonderful religious doctrine, I am sceptical about its applicability in a socio-political context. For if Paul is to be believed, its implication is that reconciliation is to be understood as an event that occurs between individuals (as was also strongly promoted by the TRC) and that is aimed to create a situation where personal acrimony is transformed into demonstrable mutual friendship and amicability between individuals. Though one cannot but admire the moral sublimity of such a construction, I cannot see that this can ever be translated into workable political practice. In the proceedings of the TRC we saw that something resembling this transformation of mortal enemies into good friends can, in exceptional circumstances occur, but it is simply unrealistic to think that this could be the norm for a workable society.

In politics, and particularly South African politics, considerably different heuristic models are, unfortunately, more applicable. Apartheid South Africa was much rather an obscene demonstration of Thomas Hobbes's vision of people in their "original state of nature" (Hobbes 1946). That was the state where man (let's keep it male!), driven by sectional interests and racist sentiments towards the "other", is for his fellow man a wolf (*homo homini lupus*), and where we are/were in a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) (Hobbes 1946; See also Sorell 1986: 96-145). In such a state, the issue is not whether we can learn to like one another or to forgive each other's sins. The issue is whether people can learn to survive in a way that will not only stop the war, but will restore basic values (above all *safety*, but also dignity, self-esteem, prosperity) to people in a way that is successful in preventing the former "have-nots" to treat the former "haves" in exactly the same way that they (the former "have-nots") have been treated.

If reconciliation can have any meaning of real consequence in the new South Africa, I can only with difficulty see it meaning anything more than this: a society where people feel safe, where human dignity is guaranteed by law to everyone, where discrimination is illegal, where fair and equal opportunity is restored and where rectification of rectifiable past injuries is accomplished, without relying on projects that will significantly hamper universal economic prosperity. In a society where this is achieved, there is no need for reconciliation in the personal sense of everybody liking everyone else. This is a society where the ideals of justice and prosperity for all are taken much more seriously than the unachievable and unenforceable concern with what happens in people's hearts and minds when they pass each other in the streets or serve each other as clerks or clients. It is a society where we are not waiting for reconciliation as an abstract ideal, but where concrete problems that call for immediate action are identified and dealt with in a piecemeal manner. It is a society where we are less concerned about the greater good for everyone – an ideal that is similarly unattainable – and where we are much more attuned to the range of concrete needs that people experience here and now, and that constitute attainable goals through concrete and immediate action.

I would therefore argue that, rather than drawing on the New Testament and St. Paul for our understanding of reconciliation in this country, it is wiser to draw on the original etymology of the Latin word "reconcilium". This word originally meant the reconstitution of an assembly for deliberation. Note the differences with St Paul: here is no mention of an event that primarily occurs in the interaction between God and humans, and that is then applied to interpersonal relations in a way that creates the impression that what God did to me, I, in turn, graciously ought to bestow on my fellow human beings. Rather, reconciliation is seen as the reconstitution of an assembly where I, in conversation with others, and in an ongoing process, deliberate about a humane life and a humane society. (Of course, one of the problems in SA is exactly the difficulty of identifying anything that we might return to. Maybe it's therefore better to think of the "concilium" that need to be "reconstituted" as a construct of our collective imagination, fed and kindled by what we know and read about communities that have successfully negotiated viable societies and polities.)

To refer back to Theo de Witt's earlier remarks (De Wit 2010) about narrative: I am inclined to place more emphasis on the narratives that deal with the vision of a workable society, rather than the narratives that reveal the diversity of identities of the narrators. Narrative does not only encapsulate the past and the tragedies of our common and separate histories; it also envisions the possibilities of the future, thereby contributing markedly to our capacity to transform the past and the present into something better.

There is another danger of too much emphasis on the idea of reconciliation in SA. Antjie Krog rightfully refers to this when she remarks that the notion of reconciliation "...is used most often by Afrikaner politicians" (Krog 1998:109). The all too frequent emphasis on the need for reconciliation easily creates the impression that the past is all too easily forgotten. Underlying this tendency is a sinister utilitarian ethic that refuses to take full responsibility for the past, particularly for the action guiding influence that the past has on the future. A premature emphasis on reconciliation creates the impression that everything can easily become hunky dory, as long as we forget what happened earlier. But Krog argues that there is an even more sinister aspect of Afrikaners' infatuation with reconciliation. Afrikaner political leaders namely "...use it as a threat: give us what we want, or we *won't* reconcile with a black government. They use reconciliation to dictate their demands" (1998: 109, Krog's italics).

If we move from white political leaders in this country to black ones, the confusion over the meaning of the term "reconciliation" does not seem to become less. Krog notes the significantly different notions of reconciliation adopted by, respectively, the chair of the TRC, bishop Desmond Tutu, and the then president of SA, Mr. Thabo Mbeki. Tutu is predictably inspired by the theological-Paulinian notion that was referred to earlier: "You must forgive because God has forgiven you for killing His Son...You can only be human in a humane society. If you live with hatred and revenge in your heart, you dehumanize not only yourself, but your community". (quoted by Krog 1998: 110). For this idea, he also draws on the philosophy of Ubuntu as the special achievement of black Africans: one forgives and seeks reconciliation for the sake of healing the community, because one cannot live humanely in a fractured community. "Reconciliation for Tutu is therefore the *beginning* of a transformative process...one must be able to transcend one's selfish inclinations before one can transform oneself and one's society" (Krog 1998:110, my italics).

When assessing the attitude of Thabo Mbeki on reconciliation, one enters a different world. Mbeki is essentially a politician who interprets reconciliation fully within the ambit of the political program of the ANC. For him, there can be neither talk nor understanding of reconciliation before the complete transformation of society. He states in a speech: "The point we have sought...is that given the history of our country, true reconciliation can only take place if we succeed in our objective of social transformation. Reconciliation and transformation should be viewed as an interdependent part of one unique process of building a new society" (quoted in Krog 1998: 111).

Transformation, for Mbeki, means Africanization. As Krog writes when she compares the two: "Tutu believes that black people have access to an almost superior humanity, which enables them to do things that surpass cold logic...What the world lacks, black people have. In his view, the main thrust of reconciliation is between people of all colours – embodied in the idea of the 'rainbow nation'. Mbeki, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily care about what the world lacks...He wants black people to work together to transform the country and the continent. He talks about an African Renaissance. He wants to show the world that black people can run a country and a continent successfully. For him, reconciliation should take place among all black people, with white people in peaceful co-existence" (Krog 1998: 111). Reconciliation in SA might also be the goal, but it is for Mbeki a process, which can be encouraged and accelerated or

deferred and undermined. (Boraine 2000: 351). In that respect his view coincides with that of Alex Boraine, the deputy chair of the TRC who writes, "Reconciliation...is not a sure-fire escalator which takes one consistently and steadily to new heights. It is a process of fits and starts, of going forward and going back, of reaching heights and plumbing depths" (Boraine 2000: 346).

The views just discussed reinforce my impression that the debate about reconciliation in SA is not only confusing in terms of the different notions that inform it and the imprudence of mixing theological and political discourse at a level where they do not match. It in fact draws us into idealizations that are both conceptually incoherent, politically and socially unrealistic and that, as such, hamper us in our efforts to create a viable society in SA.

Is the more pertinent question in SA not rather the establishment of a true democratic culture in which people, irreconciled as they may well be to one another on the personal level, are nevertheless committed to the constitution and the framework of law that at last have been established as the mechanisms by means of which to regulate and manage conflict in society? It is much more important to look at realizable goals than to hanker after an ideal that will indefinitely remain too distant.

Because of the uniqueness of our situation, experience and history, I do not easily or lightly propose roll-models for SA to follow. But let me today make an exception for the sake of argument. I refer to the society, which, in spite of all its blunders and acknowledged shortcomings, remains widely acclaimed as the greatest democracy of our time, viz. the USA. This is an ever more diverse society, racked by a monstrosly inhuman and violent past (as was evident in slavery, the civil war, the treatment of blacks in the South and the civil rights movement that rectified it). Not nearly all of those issues have been resolved. But that society moves forward and reaches heights that are incredible – not least of which, for example, is the history of aviation that started with a flight by the Wright brothers in 1903 that was shorter than the wing span of a Boeing 747, and that culminated in one of the brothers experiencing the breaking of the sound barrier in 1946, and who served in the commission that became the NASA that landed the first man on the moon only 66 years after the brothers' epic first flight.

What make the USA work? A reconciled population? I very much doubt that. What makes that society work is a political culture committed to the Rule of Law and to their (27 times amended) Constitution with its Bill of Rights. That is the Hobbesian *Leviathan* that keeps them from flying apart as a result of the centrifugal forces of the state of nature and the *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

This is what I plead for South Africa. If we wait for reconciliation, we'll wait forever. I personally belong to the first generation of white South Africans that did not bear a grudge against the British people (and thus against white English speaking South Africans) in the aftermath of the Boer War. There is fundamentally only one reason why those animosities became obsolete in the ranks of Afrikaners: the old, grudging generation (and they had excellent reasons for their grudges!) became extinct.

Of course we must work for better relations between people of all races, creeds and classes in SA. Of course this will be a better society if whites are not simply sorry for blacks, but are really offended and appalled by racism (Nozipho January-Bardill). But how do we establish that, short of invoking some kind of bizarre, Orwellian thought police that try to monitor what happens inside people's minds. The more prudent way is the way of law and commitment to values that everyone might well not always like, but that no one in the future of this almost tragic, yet ever hopeful society, can ever transgress or deny without the risk of universal rejection.

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