

**Course TS 800: International Conflict Transformation:
Religion and the Ministry of Reconciliation**

**Instructors: Raymond Helmick, S. J. (Boston College),
Rodney Petersen (BTI), and Tom Porter (JUSTPEACE)
Boston University School of Theology**

Components of JustPeace Declaration

to be contributed toward the Decade to Overcome Violence of the World Council of Churches.

We, the members of the class International Conflict Transformation: Religion and the Ministry of Reconciliation at Boston University, believe that our work together contributes toward overcoming violence in our world. We share our thoughts with the Decade to Overcome Violence of the World Council of Churches in order to construct a JustPeace Declaration.

We believe that a foundation for a JustPeace is a culture of reconciliation. We understand culture as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.”¹ A culture of reconciliation then, would be one in which people choose to respond to the social reality around them in an intentional way which builds reconciliation between individuals and groups. We understand reconciliation to be a process. Reconciliation refers to a way of dealing with and overcoming past alienation, enmity and hurt and of relating to the ‘other’ in the present, and is a goal that is always ahead of us in the future however much we may experience it here and now.² Reconciliation is forgiveness wedded to liberation and justice. Our goal is to create a culture of

¹ Lederach 1995, 9

² de Gruchy 2002, 27

reconciliation such that religion and reconciliation are brought into greater awareness within our circles of influence.

A. Building Cultures of Reconciliation: A Theological Question

We believe that conflict and injustice occurs when there is an imbalance of power and the powerful work to hold onto their control. The greater the imbalance of power, the greater the possibility exists for confrontation and conflict. We acknowledge that religions may also be part of conflict and power struggles. For example, the myth of redemptive violence has often been manipulated by religions to justify their own actions and positions.

We believe that an initial step to building a culture of reconciliation is to approach conflict from a perspective that views it as a natural part of life. The question for us becomes, how do we engage conflict *well*, that is in healthy and transformative ways? An appreciate approach to building a culture of reconciliation begins with an acknowledgement that we all have hopes and dreams about the future, and that a healthy way to move into the future is to do so by seeking to tap into people's hopes and dreams rather than their fears. We believe that people are best able to work together on the things about which they all share a common hope and vision. The key lies in our respect for the dignity of the other person, other community. Our enemy does not attack us for no reason. We are called to understand that reason, understand the thinking and the life experience of the other, and be prepared to meet the other on terms of readiness to seek the redress of grievances and a relation of cooperation for the common good.

Religion is a powerful resource for peace. Religion has the capacity to mobilize people to act and live holy and wholesome lives. Religion has the capacity to lead people to overcoming boundaries of exclusion and encouraging the embrace of others. However, in order to realize this positive experience of religion, we believe in an important taxonomy that has informed many religions, especially the three Abrahamic faiths. We believe that the constant and persistent message from the holy scripture of these faith teaches that the world should not fear for God is with us. We believe that fear and anxiety are at the root of all conflicts: fear of the other, fear of death, anxiety about shared resources, anxiety about the future and our security, etc.

We recognize that the role of religion in peacebuilding has been experienced ambivalently. Religion for some has been a cause for conflict. This causation is often expressed through the myth of redemptive violence, and experienced through the act of exclusion. However we reject the myth of redemptive violence. Instead, we recognize the many ways religion has been a resource for peace. This is particularly seen in the tenets of forgiveness, empathy, and compassion of which religion has much to say. These are bedrocks to a culture of reconciliation and to a just and peaceable society.

Forgiveness and reconciliation address the boundaries which humans erect to exclude others. Forgiveness acknowledges that there has been conflict and suffering, and may be approached from either human or divine perspectives. Reconciliation moves beyond the personal to the interpersonal, building bridges between people who have been on opposite sides of a conflict.

Key concepts to be addressed in reconciliation are listening to those who have been wounded, restorative justice, restitution and breaking out of cycles of aggression and violence.

B. Conflict in the Christian Community

In order to build a culture of reconciliation, it is also important to be conscious of the way we frame our world. We are called to ask about the narratives that give shape to our lives and sense of existence. We acknowledge the existence of competing narratives in our world. However we believe that we all share in one grand narrative in which we must be able to coexist together. Coexistence is essential to building a culture of reconciliation. What becomes important is how to coexist peaceably without fear of one another.

From a Christian perspective, we believe that God intends for peace, reconciliation and justice for the entire created order. The mission of making these visible realities for all people belongs not to any one religious community; less yet to any one nation-state, ethnic group or social class. God is a God of peace, and reconciliation is not a human agenda but an expression of God's very nature. Reconciliation as a dimension of the *Missio Dei*, the loving mission God, is the calling of every Christian community as it engages others in the world.

Since we write as Christians in a Christian seminary, we believe that the Christian church is that community called to witness in its own body the reconciliation and peace we envision. While we acknowledge the church's imperfections, we still believe that it is the nature and purpose of the church to live out from the culture of reconciliation we envision. Therefore we urge that the

church remains committed to embodying in its theology and practice the life to which God calls the church.

Churches and communities of faith are not simply local and parochial bodies but are parts of wider communities of faith and practice. They function in the public square as much as within the bounds of particular traditions. They raise the question of not only how to be faithful, but also how to live faithfully in a world of difference. Churches and communities of faith have their own agendas, but they are also drawn into conflict as faith is easily hijacked for other purposes. Each of the areas of focus in this section has had an ambiguous relationship to religion, and Christianity in particular.

C. Global Conflict and Global Efforts at Peace-building Through Religious Agencies

Religious Peace-building and Ethnic Conflict and Nationalism

We have come to recognize that an important element in building a culture of reconciliation is constructing shared identities whereby people feel that they belong to one another. This idea is often expressed in the notions of ethnic solidarity and nationalism. The issue is further complicated when ethnic or national lines divide also along religious line. However, we believe that these are not the only ways the human community can shape and inform their identities. While we recognize times when these identities should be affirmed and celebrated, we believe that the world is called to acknowledge its more interdependent and interrelated nature across ethnic and national boundaries. We believe that religions have an important role to play since

many of the world's religions are now global in character. The basic character has the powerful potential of teaching others that what affects one community affects the rest of the world.

Religious peace-building, therefore, can contribute by assisting faith communities to cooperate with others as we seek a more just and peaceable global world.

Religious Peacebuilding and Race

We have come to understand that race is an important element in a culture of reconciliation. A high level of commitment is required for those who are engaged in issues of race and reconciliation. We caution against cheap forgiveness or cheap reconciliation that does not take a serious acknowledgement of past experience of racism and injustice. Moving forward toward reconciliation when the wounds of racism are old and deep may be painful and difficult, but issues of justice must be worked out together in this process. Questions to be addressed are those of identity, both individual and group identity. For Christians, it is important to examine the implications of what it means for when the oppressor and the oppressed are both Christian? We believe that issues of racism must engage whole communities, bringing them into dialogue on challenging issues such as the call for reparations.

Religious Peacebuilding and Economic Injustice

We have also come to understand that economic justice is a significant component in a culture of reconciliation. Christian Scripture often calls our attention to injustice and the plight of the poor, calling us to a faithful and compassionate response. As Walter Brueggemann has argued, the externalities of our globalized world indicate the prevalence of differentiation of economies today. Today's pharaoh and idol is the notion of business before responsibility. In fact, it is only

by the grace of God that we can imagine an economy of abundance. Whether it can be realized is unthinkable in our everyday terms; even “resources” begs the question of what is left and at what cost. Manna from a heavenly place has become a myth. The myth survives, however, and we embark again on our journey to Sinai. There is something intriguing about the notion of selfless activity, a community oriented economy, and neighborliness. It lends comfort to the oppressed and a guiding hand to effective leadership, global citizenship.

Religious Peacebuilding and Ecology

As a class, we have pondered together the fact that, in the face of the enormity of our ecological crises, it is not only helpful, but necessary to situate ourselves in an awareness of the local ecologies we each hold dear. Such an awareness, and sharing of personal connection to our earth can serve as a "guiding light" and common ground for shared action- something we demonstrated in ritual. From fiery sunsets and misty mountains in the Hudson Highlands, to a glistening North Korean river which exists only in the stories imparted to a student by his father in exile, we affirmed that we each possess something worth saving.

In an increasingly interdependent world, we realize that all ecosystems are affected by every other, that human lives and needs are intricately tied up with the nonhuman, and that both far-reaching and locally situated creative solutions are urgently needed. At stake, literally is the continuance of all life on earth, and our policies and activism naturally needs the deepest resources of the world's great spiritual and wisdom traditions. We realize that these traditions have not only failed to be used effectively in the past, but have actually been used to justify both environmental and inter-human violence. We examined ways a just Christian theology and

mission is necessarily tied up with the needs of the Earth. We were challenged to reflect on the ways religion can inform holistic, vitally needed political and ethical theory and action. And we were reminded of ways environmental poverty leads to conflict in the world around especially as we continue to diminish our resources.

D. Creating an International Climate for Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding: The Religious Response – Non-Violence and the Rule of Law; Restorative Justice; & The Moral Imagination, Holy Spirit and Communion

Churches, Non-governmental Organizations: the Pursuit of Non-Violence

One of the guiding insights to a JustPeace Declaration that Geico Muller-Fahrenheit has provided us is the awareness of the intimate connectedness of life on Earth and its subsequent extrapolations. With him, we believe that there is a need for people to acknowledge this connectivity, so that we can see a community that exists beyond national boundaries. The need for this is exacerbated by the present global crises that threaten the existence of life as we know it, including but not limited to: global warming, food and resource shortages, and nuclear weapons. This should further our consciousness about humanity's joint vulnerability, and the need for universally beneficial cooperative systems that can end the unsustainable and oppressive systems that exist for the benefit of only a few nations.

Reconciliation Politics

With this idea of a global community, the leaders of all community need to re-imagine their community's role as the "new and better world" into one that places it simply as the center of the

global village. With this mindset the rest of the world is not viewed as the “old world” which can be left behind, and the relationship between the center and the periphery should take paramount importance. As such power should be used justly by guiding its use with the ideas of justice, mercy, and humility.

With this new type of leadership, politics should be based on reconciliation politics. Following Muller-Fahrenheit, we believe that this includes the concepts of: 1) finding connections instead of imposing corrections, 2) taking seriously the shame and guilt that exist in relationships, 3) restoring the honor of victims and the self respect of offenders by liberating them from their shame and guilt respectively, 4) striving for honorable compromises between parties, 5) taking seriously the needs of the age (including the environment), and 6) allowing humanitarian and religious movements to promote the goals of reconciliation politics as “They are the ones who may be able to produce good will and honest beginning in opposition to all who thrive on exploitation and corruption.”³

Restorative Justice in Context

Restorative Justice is also an important part of our JustPeace declaration. Victims of conflict need to have a sense of peace about the victimizer. The victims need to heal through hearing the sincere apologies from the victimizers as well as hear them feel shame for what they did. While probably not feasible for all individual cases, for a large-scale conflict representative victims (not leaders of victim group) should be able to hear these expressions face to face from victimizing leaders and commoners as well. The rule of law is essential in restorative justice, so that all

³ Geico Muller Fahrenheit, 179

parties in a conflict can move forward from a foundation of security and justice. We recommend that nations use Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to facilitate restorative justice in situations where the oppressed feel the existing court systems are not adequate for the process of reconciliation.

The Moral Imagination, Holy Spirit and Communion

In the final analysis, we believe that the moral imagination pushes us to move beyond the logical and rational to imagine a bigger sense of reality, to be challenged into expanding our thinking about conflict and reconciliation in new ways. It is important to examine a situation carefully, to listen and wait for solutions rather than jumping to quick conclusion. The work of the Holy Spirit is in this patient listening and waiting. Through communion and coming together as communities of faith, new ideas are engendered which may not have come about through an individual. Communities of faith pray together, searching for new and creative ways to solve violence and injustice in their own communities and in the greater world. All this is to imagine a world whereby we learn “to transcend cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them.”⁴

⁴ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding* (Oxford: 2005)