

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND REMARKS

In this last section I would like to reflect on the study that I undertook. Is it possible to study reconciliation from the perspective of religious studies? And will such a study produce practical results that will make a difference in congregations and concrete contexts, and not just be an academic exercise?

8.1 Validity of study

I found that the religious studies perspective offered a number of unique approaches to study reconciliation that would otherwise not have been possible. While studying reconciliation from the perspective of the Old or New Testament, ethics or systematic theology, offers its own advantages, these fields limit and inhibit other approaches because of their particular focuses and confessional restrictions. Religious studies offers both a different starting point and a bigger measure of freedom from traditional ideas.

8.1.1 A study from below

Any study in religious studies is necessarily a study from below. If religions are to be studied scientifically, research has to be based on what can be measured and seen. This empirical approach need not discount people's unmeasurable experiences; but its concern is with the influence and impact of religious persons' revelational claims regarding themselves and society. It thus takes human beings and their societies seriously.

Reconciliation is often studied from above. Numerous theologians endeavour to explain God's view and requirements for true reconciliation. While it is true that (for me as a Christian) all reconciliation is inspired by God, reconciliation is as much a human activity as a godly one, if such a distinction is at all warranted. We need the human perspective.

8.1.2 Equality

When two different religions are studied from the perspective of religious studies, they must be treated equally. Of course no researcher is objective, and in my case I am a Christian. But when comparing Christianity with African religions, my loyalties need to be placed "in brackets". This equality allows me to consider and value the wonders of a different religion, and also forces me to admit to the shortcomings of my own. In trying to be fair, I must critically question some the basic tenets and expressions of Christianity, as I do with African religion. This critical stance may seem mischievous if used in the other theological disciplines, but reasonable in this kind of study.

8.1.3 New kind of critique

Religious studies present a new kind of critique. When I study reconciliation from this perspective, I must evaluate the integration and transcendence of the religious models, the impact of the types of reconciliation on humans and their communities, and whether they fit the context. These considerations rarely are put forward in theological studies, but offer important insights to the study of reconciliation.

One example would be that reconciliation may require upheaval and disharmony. The Marxist view in my opinion augments our understanding of reconciliation. So too does the

principles that a good reconciliation model should be relative and stimulating. These requirements are not usually addressed in purely theological and Biblical studies.

8.1.4 New options

The open and free approach of the discipline of religious studies offers new options. Our Christian Bible is a contextual document that espoused reconciliation in specific contexts. While many of the biblical contexts are quite familiar to us today, some of our contexts and questions are not dealt with (explicitly) in the Bible. Some options may be lost to us. But if we study other religions, there is always the chance of discovering new options and images that are also available to Christians and in accordance with Christian teachings.

Furthermore, every religion has its own unique emphasis. Every religion offers options and possibilities not considered by others because of this special emphasis. If all religions are human activities, the insights from one group will surely benefit other groups. African religions' view of the importance of the community illustrates this point. The idea that reconciliation between God and man can come from being part of the community, enriches all religions' concepts of human societies and our wonderment of God.

8.2 Treasure at home

This study led me to a rediscovery of Christianity, as much as it helped me to understand African religion. Religious studies teaches us about ourselves, our own religion and the treasures within.

8.2.1 Not so unique

When I studied African reconciliation models, I was amazed at the creative and original ideas and myths that I came across. Further thought and consideration helped me to discover that many of these ideas were not so unique, but often only neglected within Western Christianity. I discovered wonderful Christian possibilities and new insight into old texts.

The rituals of rebellion and acceptance caught my imagination and offered radically new ways of pursuing reconciliation. Then I realised that some of that same spirit was also recorded in the teachings of Luke and Paul. And that Isaiah 53 says nothing about a propitiatory sacrifice or an offended God, but is a song about a self-sacrificing hero.

8.2.2 The Story of the “Treasure at home”

An Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer (in Doniger O’Flaherty, 1999:337) relates the Hasidic tale about a Rabbi who lived in a ghetto in Cracow. The Rabbi dreamt that he should go to Prague, where he would discover a hidden treasure buried beneath the principle bridge leading to the castle of the Bohemian kings. He went to Prague and waited by the bridge for many days, until one night he was questioned by the Christian captain of the guard on the bridge, and the Rabbi told the captain about the dream that had sent him there. The captain laughed and said that it was foolish to trust a dream, since he himself had been commanded in a dream to go to Cracow and to search for a great treasure buried in a dirty corner behind the stove of a Jewish Rabbi named Eisik son of Yekel – clearly a ludicrous proposal, since half the men in the ghetto were called Eisik and the other half Yekel. The

Rabbi, who was Eisik son of Yekel, said nothing but hurried home and found the treasure behind the stove in his house.

Zimmer comments on the myth that "... the real treasure ... [is] never far away; it is not to be sought in any distant region; it lies buried in the innermost recess of our own home, that is to say, our own being. ... [But] there is an odd and persistent fact ... [that] the one who reveals to us the meaning of our cryptic inner message must be a stranger, of another creed and of a foreign race" (Doniger O'Flaherty, 1999:337).

Within Christianity, I found, were all the possibilities and options needed to make sense of reconciliation in South Africa. The treasure is indeed buried at home. But I would not have found it without the guidance of a different, African religion. The study of religion can facilitate this kind of encounter that will help Christians to rediscover their own treasures (Bellah, 1989:91).

David Bosch (1973:73) once wrote:

I would therefore dare to say that today I understand God better than I used to. This is due above all, of course, to the boundless grace of God, but my increasing understanding of African concepts of God was instrumental in the process. God used the richness of African religious experience to teach me more about his richness.

8.2.3 Deconstruction

Finding the "treasure at home" links up with my deconstructionist aim in this study. I used African insights to deconstruct the traditional (dominant) reconciliation models and ideas, in order to rediscover new and different possible ways of understanding reconciliation. As

I have noted in the first chapter, a reflexive and postmodern approach to research always leads back to the researcher, *casu quo* my values and questions.

A postmodern approach also allows me not to take the research or myself too seriously. It is after all an artful and playful exercise. I did not set out to create new dogmas, nor change the church in South Africa or change society. What I intended was a personal exploration of religion, of Christianity and African religion, and of the needs of South Africans. I had fun doing it, and sometimes got a bit side-tracked. This study is at most a provisional experiment.

I did not intend to be thorough. It would have been theoretically possible to catalogue every African idea, and to exhaust all the possible African reconciliation models, but that was never the idea. Instead I opted for an eclectic approach hoping to find stimulation and inspiration from African religion, rather than create a new anthropological analysis.

Eclecticism, is a legitimate departure point if I want to change myself and my personal worldview, and thus import my personal religion, likes and dislikes into the study as much as my academic background (Doniger O'Flaherty, 199:344-345).

8.3 Practical value

The question that remains to be answered is whether this study achieved anything. Even though the study was personal, it would have been of little value if it did not produce a number of insights that have practical value for my own ministry in the congregation, as well as for the wider community I am serving. I believe it did.

8.3.1 Principles of good religion

The study gave me new criteria to evaluate religious models and ideas. Kobus Kruger's (1995) insistence on integration and transcendence helped me to understand what a good religion constitutes, and to evaluate my own religious ideas and practices. Likewise, his insistence on the relativity and perspectivity of religious models put in words my discomfort with the models that dominated within traditional Western Christianity, and showed the way to better these models.

The study shed light on different sociological and anthropological options that exist in the quest for reconciliation. It also helped me to understand the prerequisites for this quest in South Africa. The method was thus enlightening.

8.3.2 Community use

I came to understand what kind of reconciliation should be sought in South Africa and which models could be best used in pursuit of this reconciliation. I realised that quite a number of existing reconciliation liturgies can be directly employed and that others can be used after slight modifications. I tried to explore new and acceptable liturgies where it was needed.

8.3.3 Personal understanding

The African ideas and myths on reconciliation helped me to understand typical Christian reconciliation models – like those associated with bloody sacrifices – and add to these models. I found new ways to interpret the reconciling work of Christ for myself (and by

extension for my congregation). To integrate this into my pastoral work and preaching – as well as into the creation of new liturgies for Lent – constitutes a very real challenge.

8.4 Suggestions for further investigation

This study is, as I have stated, certainly not meant to be the last word on African religion and reconciliation. A much more thorough appraisal of African reconciliation models should be conducted, with more input from African theologians. I tried to prove that it can be done, but it should be done on a much larger scale by more people.

It should be very interesting, for example, to conduct a close examination of AIC spirituality, theology and practice with a view to discovering the way in which they have combined, integrated, synthesised or syncretised traditional African and Christian myths, concepts, models and facilitating liturgies of reconciliation.

From the perspective of religious studies, it could be interesting to examine the critical parameters of “Christianity” as an historical religion, or to reflect on the concept of reconciliation as a religious category, perhaps to reflect on the person and work of Jesus Christ in this context.

In addition, this study’s focus on reconciliation myths, models and rituals, did not permit me to explore other valuable and related concepts in African religion such as the African concept of time. Western conceptions of rigidly linear time are useful for organising life in an industrialised society, but in Africa societies, time is not conceived in this way. Time is more cyclical and relative. According to the pygmies time is spherical – and we should always be in the middle of our sphere. If we move too fast (in body or mind), we move

away from the centre of our sphere, and become disorientated and unpredictable. But given enough time, our spheres catch up with us again (Thorpe, 1991:124).

Within Christianity the linear idea of time dominates, especially in our eschatology. But how healthy is this? And does it allow us to live life to the fullest in the present? It would be fascinating to compare African and Christian views on eschatology, which also touches on all other aspects of these religions.