

Shouldering the Burdens of the Past

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I first would like to say that it is an enormous joy and delight to be back at Christ Church with so many of you who were such a great support to me during the years I was here doing my doctoral studies.

In one sense I feel very free of the temptation to be intimidated by what I know is an audience of high intelligence and passion for peace, because many of you are my friends. On the other hand, the subject that is on the table, is an intimidating one, not least because our country is on the brink of going to war. Even in so-called better times, talking about peace is a little like talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. It has an eschatological ring to it. Many of us Christians feel part of our faith involves a commitment to be peacemakers, and yet we know that peace is something we will never fully see until we reach the promised land.

Instead of recognizing peacemaking as a challenge that demands our time, talents, resources and will, it is easy to take the overwhelming nature of the undertaking as an invitation to be cynical and abandon the task to others.

When people ask me what I do for a living and I reply that I teach international peacemaking and conflict resolution, I very often get a response along the lines of

“Well, you certainly won’t be out of a job any time soon.” I smile when they say that, but it IS a sad commentary on the world we live in. Actually I feel privileged to be doing what I do not because of the job security it offers; and certainly not because I have particular successes to report. But because there is something exhilarating about putting your hand to the toughest task the world has to offer. I bumble along, at times, trying to keep faithful in what I am doing, and praying that in my links with others on a variety of projects, or in the way I reach my students, or in my everyday interactions with people, I can be used to make a difference.

I am not going spend much time addressing our present crisis with Iraq and North Korea in this talk. That is not because I don’t consider those the most pressing issues in international security right now, but because I don’t feel I have much to add to the debate.

The subject for my talk today, “Shouldering the burdens of history” grows out of the research I began while I was here, combing the databases and the shelves of Widener Library. While my own doctoral wok was quite specialized, it sprang from a more general interest in the ways that the past feeds the flames of conflict, and the question of how we can overcome this problem in order to prevent the outbreak, or resurgence of conflict. I actually do think that question has relevance to our current impasse in the Middle East, and I will make some comments on that at the end.

I am going to talk about four ways that post-conflict societies have to reckon with the past, and I am going to tell you something about the progress that has been made in each area. This will segue nicely into my own work, which I think you'd like to know something about. And at the end I will try to link these endeavors up with the broader aspects of peacemaking.

Justice

The first way that a post-conflict society has to address its past is to introduce a new level of justice, which involves the conviction of offenders and the recognition and compensation of victims. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials at the end of World War II may have had their deficiencies, but they were a watershed in introducing a process at the end of a war where the victors did not summarily punish all those on the losing side, but instead held certain individuals accountable in a court of law for war crimes committed.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), set up in 1993?, was based on this model, and two years later (?) the Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda came into being.

The decision to create a permanent International Criminal Court was given added validity because of the needs of the 1990s. Remember, the International Court in

The Hague can only handle cases brought by one country against another, whereas what is needed is a means for individual victims to bring cases against perpetrators in an environment that assures the greatest possible objectivity and fairness. In the wake of civil war, domestic courts may not be able to offer the level of objectivity needed. Hence the creation of the ICC, which, as you know, the US has declined to join.

The most notable trial in progress at the moment is that of Slobodan Milosevic. No one present is likely to say a good word for him, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the ICTY has gone uncriticized for its handling of the Milosevic case...

Truth

Secondly, there is the question of getting the facts about what happened. "The truth shall make you free" it is said, and certainly, as a victim struggles to regain control over her or his life after the trauma of violence and war, finding out what actually happened can make a big difference.

One of the great experiments in truth of recent years has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which operated for two years from 1994-6.? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the result of two calculated tradeoffs. First, Nelson Mandela had to find a means of agreeing to the request from the Apartheid authorities that they would not be the objects of

revenge either by legal or extralegal means. He agreed that perpetrators could apply for amnesty if they came forward and honestly recounted their crimes, and if the crimes were committed for political reasons. Agreeing to go this route cut off the prospect of Nuremberg-type trials in South Africa. It was powerful because it could be used by either black or white.

The second tradeoff was the recognition that the pursuit of justice involves some curtailment of the truth, while the pursuit of truth involves a limitation of justice.

The promise of amnesty is the inducement to people to come forward with the truth. The threat of a legal process is a guarantee that people will curtail or twist the truth. In South Africa the decision was made to pursue the truth, placing some limitation on the pursuit of justice. Certain South Africans did not accept that trade-off, most notably the family of Steve Biko, but by and large this decision was accepted.

This is not the setting to discuss at great length the extraordinary tale of the TRC. Bishop Tutu's chairing of this body, his profound faith and spirit of forgiveness, and the tradition of ubuntu, or ? in the part of South Africans made the process one of profound giving on the part of all concerned. It has been criticized for favoring the perpetrators over the victims. And yet in balance its success seems to soar above its deficiencies.

Healing and forgiveness

This leads naturally into my third category or area where a post conflict society must deal with its past, and that is in psychological healing.

Can people be healed from the trauma of war? Does such healing mean leaving that traumatic past behind? How do we allow people to talk about it? Does healing require confrontation of the one who committed the traumatizing act, or seeing that person brought to justice? How can we possibly make available the numbers of therapists and clinicians to help an entire society that is grieving?

What is forgiveness, really? Does the granting of forgiveness on the part of the victim require an expression of repentance on the part of the oppressor? Christian teaching seems to say NO, forgiveness is something we grant even if the perpetrator doesn't know what she did, or refuses to express sorrow or regret. Marc Gopin tells us that Jewish teaching does require this utterance of repentance.

Clearly forgiveness is not something we can demand of people. The truth and Reconciliation commission did NOT require apologies or expressions of repentance, recognizing that that would only open the way to phony apologies. Most of those writing about forgiveness seem to agree that forgiveness is offered for the sake of the one forgiving, in order to draw a line under the event and be free of recurrent resentment. Others say that the conferring of forgiveness opens the way for God to forgive the wrongdoer, and this is why it is our vocation to forgive.

In case you are not aware of it, the past decade has seen a burgeoning number of books on forgiveness and reconciliation. Among the best is an edited volume by your good friends and neighbors across the river Ray Helmick and Rodney Petersen, which came out of a conference at the Kennedy School on this subject in 1999. Marth Minow of Harvard, Donald Shriver of Union Theological Seminary, Philip Yancey, Michael Henderson, Scott Appleby, and Marc Gopin all have produced extraordinarily fine and readable books. Some of these writers explore the issue of public apology – Tony Blair’s acknowledgement of British culpability in relation to the Irish famine; the people of Australia’s apology to Aborigine people for the stolen generation of Aborigine children taken from their homes to be raised in white families; Bill Clinton’s expression of sorrow to the Rwandan people for our slow response in 1994.

One of the most powerful and most recent books to come out on this subject is by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was herself a member of the TRC. A clinical psychologist, Pumla was here at Harvard for four years, some of that time as a Bunting fellow, writing and reflecting about her experience on the TRC. The book is about Eugene de Koch, one of those with the most blood on his hands for killings and violent treatment of Blacks under Apartheid. It is called *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*.

Developing a new narrative

In the end all of the above approaches feed into the process of creating a new narrative that functions as the foundation story of a new social order that comes into being in the wake of conflict.

History, Howard Zinn tells us, is the record of events as told by the victors. And indeed this has pretty much been true through the ages. Perhaps recognizing this we treat history to a good deal of disparagement: History, Henry Ford told his interviewer Charles Wheeler of the Chicago Tribune, “is more or less bunk.” More elegantly, Matthew Arnold called history “that huge Mississippi of falsehood.” Yet Santayana cautioned us that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

History is not merely an account of past events that stands separately from our daily life. Our written history legitimizes our social order. It offers us a narrative that tells us how we came together, how we define our heroes and heroines, what are our values. Psychologists and anthropologists tell us that our history provides us with material for our “myths.” Myths are not necessarily untrue. The point about myths is that they solidify social relationships, and people live their lives recollecting and reliving the core myths of their society.

During the past decade we have seen a number of conflicts in the world that are internal in nature. In these conflicts – Bosnia, the Holy Land, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka – the ruling order is being challenged by an entity which either wants to

change the nature of the existing state, or secede from the state altogether. One of the things that happens in these contested societies is that the two contending social orders offer up different histories, villainizing each other in the process. The histories are a form of legitimation for each side's vision of the political future. But they are also very personal. They describe the sacrifices of each side's forefathers, the shared traumas and victories of each group.

In the early stages of the Balkans crisis of the 1990s it was often said that those people had been fighting each other for centuries, they were caught in an ongoing snarl of ancient animosities. And this seemed to be borne out by the fact that war correspondents who went to the region would find people speaking about 1389 or 1942 with the same level of resentment as they showed when speaking of events in 1992. And yet as the situation came under greater scrutiny, it became clear that these battles over history were really the result of chauvinist leaders – and Milosevic was not the only one – who whipped up these latent sentiments to gather support during a period when the collapse of communism had left them without a political program.

I am not telling you anything startling or new here. I expect you have heard most of this before. When this type of discussion comes up, people often mention the fact that the history textbooks of the contending groups are spreading specious ideas about the other to the next generation. Hence the mythologies of the “evil opponent” are perpetuated.

The particular issue of the teaching of history has been the main object of my own research. Since doing my doctoral work on the way this plays out in Northern Ireland, I have been learning more about current projects in this regard relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Greece and Turkey, India and Pakistan, Bosnia, etc. I have recently been invited to join an extremely impressive project which has just gotten underway in the former Yugoslavia, to mobilize historians of the region to work together in teams to study ten of the most contentious historical issues arising from the recent war.

Some final remarks

At the start of each semester I invite to speak to my class in peacemaking a suffi teacher born in the Syrian desert, who describes how he found his vocation as a peacemaker one day when he was seven years old. At the time, in the 1930s, there were frequent skirmishes between the French and the local people and occasionally the children would see bombing from French planes. One such day this seven year old was told by one of his friends to run and find his little brother. When he found his brother, the three year old had been hit and killed by a stray bullet. The seven year old picked up his three year old brother and ran home to his mother. As he ran, he could taste his brother's blood in his mouth. It was the taste of the blood, he says, that stayed with him and required of him a life of dedication to peace.

The suffi teacher always goes on to tell my students about the man who goes and visits a quarry. He asks the first person he meets what he is doing, and the reply is “I am earning my living.” To the second person he asks the same question, and she replies, “I am dressing stones.” The third person to whom he poses the question says, “I am building a cathedral.”

Peacemakers are cathedral builders, is what the suffi teacher tells my students.

At the end of the semester I ask the students what they have learned about the meaning of that parable in the course of the semester. The students interpret it in many ways. Some refer to the size and beauty of the task of peacebuilding. Some speak about how we never see the result of our work, because it takes generations to complete. Some talk about the teamwork needed to build the cathedral. There is the interesting interfaith perspective of hearing this parable which focuses on the Christian house of worship, the cathedral, from the mouth of a person of Islam.

The suffi teacher is actually the head of the peace and conflict resolution division of the School of International Service at American University.

Taking students to Isreal-Palestine, which I did before it got too dangerous, and shepherding students through the experience of September 11, however, it has

been particularly powerful to work closely with colleagues of Muslim faith. We live in confusing times, when legitimate concerns for our security might cause us to forget our primary calling to reach out to the very “other” whom we might be tempted to fear.

The past does place a burden upon us because we of the West have imposed our universalist ideas on the global community, yet we avoid being a team player, have made a priority of our own enrichment and comfort, and have failed to promote a universalist vision that offers respect for those who do not think like us.

In a recent symposium on the issue of religion and American foreign policy at the Brookings institution in Washington, Louise Richardson, the head of the Radcliffe ... and an authority on terrorism, said that in her view a military approach will never succeed in reducing the threat of fundamentalist terrorism. The only solution she could put forward to this challenge was to aim for the recruits – in other words to create conditions that make terrorist recruitment more difficult. What are those conditions? Surely when we in the West live consistently, applying the same high principles to our own lives that we ask of others. When we offer respect for the values of others, and place that above our own financial gain. When we recognize and explore other ways of thinking about our past that offer respect to those who were not the apparent victors.