

A RESPONSE TO DENISE ACKERMANN

I would like to express my personal gratitude to Denise Ackermann for her challenging reflection on the reconciliation and change needed to fulfil the promise of the new South Africa. Though apartheid has been abolished politically, it has left deep wounds on the body of Christ and the civic body in South Africa. Her reflections can be applied with appropriate adaptations to many other parts of the continent. HIV-AIDS, economic injustice, and conflicts based on ethnicity, race, and religion, with important gender consequences, have devastated other African countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, and Sudan. So Ackermann's reflections on reconciliation have relevance well beyond the nation of South Africa in sub-Saharan Africa more generally. Indeed her reflections speak to divisions that mark the entire globe.

Ackermann is suspicious of any cheap notion of reconciliation. It can become a seductive legitimization of the status quo if "there is not sufficient agreement . . . on what is just." In order to avoid this trap she voices a lament that gives voice to the past and present suffering in her country. Ackermann's "praxis of change" will require movement toward justice, which she understands as the "restoration of 'right relationship.'" Let me build upon this understanding of justice. I would suggest, first, that building right relationships among persons is the goal of all forms of justice, not simply that form that has come to be called restorative justice. Philosophically, we know from Aristotle that a human being is essentially a social being—*zoon politikon*. To be an active, participating member of society is thus essential to the realization of human dignity and worth. To be excluded from society—for example, by apartheid or by stigmatization because one is HIV-positive—is to be treated unjustly. In the face of such exclusion, justice calls for the restoration of the bonds of community. This has come to be called restorative justice.

The call to build the bonds of community, however, is not only a matter of restoring what once was but has subsequently been lost. Justice also calls for the creation of new bonds of relationship when these are needed to assure that people can live with dignity and wholeness under the conditions they face in the contemporary world. By parallel with the notion of restorative justice, we can call this "instaurative" or "creative" justice—the duty to initiate the bonds of relationship that are required if people are to live whole lives in the future.¹

¹Paul Tillich speaks of "creative justice" in a similar but not identical way in his *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954) 64. John W. de Gruchy draws on Tillich in *Reconciliation:*

Justice is thus concerned not only with relationships that once were and have now been broken, but also with the creation of new bonds of social solidarity required for people to live in at least minimally dignified ways. Reconciliation and restorative justice, therefore, are a special case of this more general notion of justice as the minimal requirement of social solidarity. It was this that led Aristotle to see a close link between the justice of the polis and the presence in the city of the form of solidarity he called civic friendship.² It is also at the basis of the U.S. bishops' statement in their pastoral letter on economic justice that "basic justice demands the establishment of [at least] minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons."³

This link between friendship or solidarity and justice is given added religious depth when we notice how closely the biblical understanding of justice is linked with the notion of the covenant. God's justice is manifest in the covenant at Sinai, which sets Israel free from a past of bondage in Egypt and simultaneously creates the new people of Israel. Where once there was no people, now there is the people of Israel bonded to God and to each other in reciprocal relationship. Where reciprocal relationship has been denied by oppression or fractured by sinful patterns of alienation, justice calls for the restoration of reciprocity. This means tearing down walls of division, making restitution for past harms, and extending forgiveness when this is essential to reestablishing solidarity. Similarly, a justice that is like God's righteousness can call for the creation of bonds of solidarity where they do not yet exist. Seen from this perspective, therefore, justice is a manifestation of love, not an alternative to it.

These ideas are implicit in Ackermann's understanding of a praxis of reconciliation. I would like to suggest that reflection on the prospective as well as the retrospective dimensions of relational justice, both in philosophical and theological perspective, can provide more specific guidance as we turn to the policy issues facing South Africa, the larger continent of Africa, and the global community as a whole. Such an understanding of justice suggests that overcoming the divisions caused by a past marred by racism and colonialism are essential steps on the path to reconciliation. As we look to the future, it also suggests that we will need more than the alleged magic of the neoliberal market and the marvels of high tech medicine to address the suffering of Africa. We need will to create new forms of economic and political interdependence if we are to enable African men and women to live in dignity in a globalizing world.

Restoring Justice (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 203. Neither Tillich nor de Gruchy, however, stresses the future orientation of creative justice in the way I want to emphasize here.

²See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a and 1167b.

³National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986) no. 77.

Thus justice in our day needs to be both restorative and "instauration" or creative. A relational understanding of justice calls for repentance and reconciliation in response to the racial and colonial injustices of the past. It will also demand new forms of economic and political relationship between Africa and the North Atlantic region, based on an equality and reciprocity that have never existed before. The task before us, therefore, is vast. Denise Ackermann has given us an agenda that is worthy of strong engagement and deep hope. For this I want to thank her again.

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