

RECONCILIATION IN RWANDA AND NORTHERN IRELAND

- Topic: Christian Visions of Reconciliation in Rwanda and Northern Ireland
Convener: Jay Carney, The Catholic University of America
Moderator: Stephen Bevans, Catholic Theological Union
Presenter: James Wiseman, The Catholic University of America
Presenter: Jay Carney, The Catholic University of America

In a special session on the constructive roles of Christian ministers in post-conflict reconciliation efforts, James Wiseman and Jay Carney analyzed the grass-roots initiatives of a variety of Christian actors in Northern Ireland and Central Africa's Great Lakes region. Wiseman's presentation, "Peacemaking in Northern Ireland: The Work of the Rev. Roy Magee and Fr. Alec Reid" focused on the peace efforts spearheaded by a Catholic priest, Fr. Alec Reid, and a Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Roy Magee. Ministering in the midst of Northern Ireland's sectarian violence between the 1970s and the 1990s, Reid and Magee saw themselves as, first and foremost, Christian pastors who should model Jesus, the "companion to sinners" who reached out to the marginalized and the enemy. Magee and Reid focused their outreach on their own parishioners, moving beyond pulpit denunciations to direct engagement with paramilitaries in their communities. This sparked no small measure of controversy among their religious colleagues and superiors, most of whom viewed such outreach as tacitly endorsing the propagators of violence. Such efforts, however, allowed Magee and Reid to develop credibility as honest peace-brokers. Their efforts in turn were critical in shaping the political dialogues and ceasefires that helped prepare the way for the Good Friday agreement of 1998.

Magee's and Reid's recognition of the polyvalent nature of individual identity was crucial to their success. IRA Nationalists and UDA Unionists were militants whose violence should never be condoned, but they were also "parents, sons, brothers, wage earners, and members of the Church." Such empathy allowed each minister to build personal relationships with those whom a government might summarily dismiss as "terrorists." While the prophetic advocate (e.g., Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu) may be a more popular vision of the Christian minister involved in public life, Magee and Reid demonstrate that the slow, less glamorous work of community-building and mediation are just as crucial to the resolution of entrenched conflicts.

Shifting the regional focus from Northern Ireland's sectarian troubles to Central Africa's entrenched intra-ethnic violence, Carney's paper, "Reconciliation in Central Africa: New hope or old panacea?" began by analyzing the vision, strengths, and weaknesses of Rwanda's post-genocide Gacaca process. While national processes like Gacaca or South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission serve critical roles in post-conflict national reconstruction, Carney argued that Christian churches bear a special responsibility for facilitating the longer-term, day-to-day, and relational dimensions of the deeply-spiritual process of reconciliation.

Towards this end, Carney highlighted the work of three grassroots Christian peacebuilding efforts in Africa's Great Lakes region: Maggy Barankitse's Maison Shalom in Burundi, Bishop Paride Taban's Kuron Holy Spirit Peace Village in southern Sudan, and Bishop John Rucyahana's prison ministries in Rwanda. All three grew out of contexts of entrenched civil, political, and ethnic violence – the years of civil war which followed the assassination of Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndayaye, in 1993; the decades-long war between the Khartoum government and the Sudan People's Liberation Front in southern Sudan; and the 1994 Rwanda genocide which took the lives of an estimated 500,000-800,000 people. Beyond their own charisma, Barankitse, Taban, and Rucyahana established holistic ministries that addressed the spiritual and material needs of their respective communities. In this sense, their ministries themselves are perhaps best seen as "communities," from the network of Maison Shalom children's homes to Taban's non-violent village to Rucyahana's prison-based fellowships. Their ministries also embody an eschatological sense of resurrection hope, revealing alternative visions of what Christian community can and should look like.

Carney concluded by discussing four challenges to the emerging Christian reconciliation movement in Africa: resurrection without narrative, resurrection without the Passion, resurrection without the Exodus, and resurrection without Antioch. Reconciliation theology must undertake the painful but necessary process of constructing a shared communal history, taking the time to lament, and avoiding the temptation to rush from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Christian reconciliation must retain a fundamentally liberative dimension; it also must hold on to the distinctiveness of the Cross without withdrawing into a sectarian ghetto.

A vigorous discussion moderated by Stephen Bevans followed the two presentations. Contested issues included the extent to which the celebration of Christian reconciliation efforts masks political and gendered complexities on the ground, the intersection of top-down and bottom-up reconciliation efforts within the church, and the reasons for hierarchical silence in the aftermath of great violence in places like Rwanda.

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