Reconciliation – The wrong track to peace?

David Becker

The article discusses the shortcomings of the current theory and practice of reconciliation and explores the possibilities of addressing the complex social and psychological processes involved in dealing with the past.

Key words: ambivalence, conflict capacity, denial, imperialism, impunity, grieving process, reconciliation

Introduction

In recent years 'reconciliation' has become a relevant issue in peace building processes around the world, although perhaps it would be more correct to say that it has become an issue for peace builders and policy makers[1]. Most current theories about conflict resolution and transformation prominently addresses the issue, and NGO's in conflict- and post conflict-areas have learned to include 'reconciliation' into their project proposals, no matter what, because of their desperate need for money. Nevertheless, there is still an ongoing debate on what reconciliation really is, or should be. People attach very different meanings to the word. Some focus on confronting the past, others wish to focus on the future. Some speak about truth and justice, others about understanding and forgiving your former enemies. Some see reconciliation as the key overarching concept for peace building; some see it as a more individual and psychological process. Interestingly, neither victims nor perpetrators seem to like the concept. Worldwide, reconciliation processes have been more difficult and apparently less successful than what has been expected or intended.

Originally, reconciliation is neither a political nor a psychological concept. Although historically it has had different meanings in different cultures and contexts, it has been centrally associated to the moral basics of the Christian faith. Jesus on the cross relieving mankind of the original sin, preaching that one should love ones enemies, asking God, the Father, to 'forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing'; illustrates a moral attitude that replaces the old ideology of an eye for an eye, with a new ideology of reconciliation. Reconciliation is therefore commonly understood in terms of making peace, forgiving your enemies, and letting bygones be bygones. On a more societal level, reconciliation has been associated in recent years to truth and justice processes, and to public rituals of forgiving in different corners of the world. The expectation is that collective peace and harmony will be achieved, while at the same time facilitating individual healing processes in the victims.

However, these expectations have been frustrated again and again by reality and, in many cases seem to be a question of beliefs rather than scientific proof.

Let us think for a moment about truth commissions. We now have, and have had them in many countries, from Chile to South Africa. We probably all agree that they have helped the societies and specifically the victims, to a certain extent. However, is the process of reconciliation complete? Are the victims happy, and have the societies been pacified? Evidently, this has not happened. Quite to the contrary, conflict continues in these countries and victims criticize the process and express their discontent. Does this invalidate the truth commissions or the justice processes? I think not. However, it seems justified to evaluate the functions of truth and justice, and to discuss what all of this, if anything, has to do with reconciliation.

Are the difficulties we are seeing a consequence of insufficient reconciliation, or has the concept itself been rather less helpful than what we had hoped? Obviously, no one can be against peace, understanding, helping the victims, and working for the possibility of a society dealing productively with its past. Nevertheless, to do that do we need the term reconciliation? Does the concept itself help us, or does it work like a smoke screen that hinders our capacities to understand a complex psychological and socio-political process? In short, we have to ask ourselves provocatively if reconciliation is the right track to peace?

I would like to answer this question in four steps: First, I will examine my deeply held doubts about the concept and its usefulness. Second, I will discuss an useful definition developed by Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly within the Northern Irish context. Third, I will develop my own contradictory position about reconciliation. Last, based on Maurice Sendak's 'Where the wild things are' I will highlight the complex intra-psychic dimensions of reconciliation, the relevance of which are frequently under-rated and not sufficiently discussed.

Doubts about reconciliation

Reconciliation and the problem of values: Christian values for the world?

At the end of the 1980's, I was working with victims of political repression in Chile. The dictatorship was still in power, but Pinochet had lost the plebiscite. Free elections were in sight. The transition to democracy had begun. A transition nevertheless with severe limitations, and with practically no chance of ever bringing the perpetrators to court, as they continued to be the 'protectors' of the constitution and held on to a relevant piece of power.[2] It was in this political climate that the powerful Catholic Church of Chile, began to talk about reconciliation. The church had always been religiously conservative but with a strong social commitment and therefore had been helping thousands of victims of political repression during the dictatorship. Right wing politicians immediately picked up the issue and very quickly, everyone was talking about reconciliation. At the same time, the crimes of the perpetrators were still only discussed by a small part of society, and viciously denied by the military. In other words, at a time when the power relationships in Chile still allowed the crimes against humanity committed by the military to be qualified as 'leftist propaganda', the Catholic Church presented reconciliation as a moral and political obligation. Those of us working in human rights organisations hated the term; for us it meant nothing more than denial, the willingness to forget the past, the victims, and

their suffering. When the possibility of change finally appeared on the horizon, once again the perpetrators were protected. Reconciliation for us was synonymous with impunity. Now, many years later, I might not still view the described attitude of the Catholic Church in Chile in such harsh terms, but I would still argue that the term was introduced much too early into Chilean politics. Furthermore, that use of the term had more to do with exaggerated fears and fantasies of vengeance than with peace building and the basic needs of the Chilean society at the time.

During 2004, as a consultant with a local NGO, I had occasions to visit the Gaza strip. As a foreigner, I was privileged; I could enter Israel, cross the Erez checkpoint into Gaza, and come back again. Although the procedure always took several hours, it was possible. Palestinians did not share that privilege. Gaza was more like a huge and violent prison; no one got out, military incursions were frequent and houses were destroyed. Arbitrary measures of control, of permissions and prohibitions, were applied. One day, several Israeli soldiers were killed in their armoured car on the outskirts of Rafah. Within hours, what was left of their car was exhibited as trophies all over the Gaza strip, while the remains of their bodies were split up and hidden. This made the burial of these soldiers impossible, which in Jewish tradition requires the whole body and must take place very quickly. As the Israeli military mounted a major operation, negotiations began on the return of the body-parts. Finally, with Egyptian mediation, the remains of the Israeli soldiers were returned, earning a few hours of tranquillity. Sitting in my hotel, I thought about reconciliation. It seemed such an absurd term at that precise moment. How could anyone ever imagine the Israelis and Palestinians to

reconcile, after all the horrible things they had been doing to each other for such a long time? This led to a further question in terms of context: in Jewish and Muslim tradition, in Israeli and Palestinian history, what did the concept of reconciliation mean? I realised I did not know how to answer that question. Later, I asked Palestinian and Israeli colleagues for their opinions. Both explained to me that within their own culture this term has very different connotations than in Christian culture. They also made it very clear, that reconciliation in reference to their actual situation meant very little, and existed without either a positive or a negative implication. It is simply something completely outside of their reality. I thought that if I had ever been in a place that desperately needed perspectives of peace building, than it was this corner of the world. However, I also felt that peace building was definitely not going to happen through the adoption of concepts that, in theory, look good but are not rooted within the local context.

Since 2003, a colleague and I have been involved in training catholic pre-school teachers in Sierra Leone to deal with the issue of trauma and developing perspectives of recovery within the context of their educational work. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its history is rife with conflict. A brutal civil war ended only a few years ago. One of the particular horrors of this war has been the amputation of limbs of men, woman, and children by the warring sides.

Officially, all the educators are completely in favour of reconciliation. When asked, they explain that they have to forgive; it is the only way to make peace, and that for good Christians, reconciliation and forgiveness are an obligation anyway. In fact, they insist that they already have forgiven their

enemies and are thus nationally reconciled. However, after communication becomes a bit more intimate and trusting, the picture changes. Many hold the perception that a leader on their side who is now in imprisoned for torture is a severe injustice. They think he did this in defence of the people and feel personally they cannot forgive the people that raped and mutilated them, and killed their family members. Many still believe that the best manner of dealing with children who misbehave is to flog them. As to the women's own experiences of abuse and violence (genital mutilation is a socially accepted custom) they are angry and ashamed and cannot reconcile, even within them.

In short, in Sierra Leone it seems that reconciliation is understood as a synonym for forgiveness and is a superficial process. People are calm now on the surface. Nevertheless, not very deep under that surface the same conflicts rage, and hate and anger are ever present. The Christian values of pardon and reconciliation seem to be something similarly surface to putting on nice clothes for Sunday mass. All the while, this outer layer of forgiveness says very little about the ongoing conflict and inner levels of hate and anger, and of violence and destruction.

These examples from Chile, Israel/Palestine and Sierra Leone illustrate that within the context of peace building in conflict and post conflict societies, reconciliation plays a very contradictory role. It is a value, linked to a Christian religious and cultural tradition, which itself is based in western society.

In Chile, a society based in this tradition, the term has a lot of power, since it resonates with the basic beliefs of: rightists, leftists, the military and civilians. Political differences may force some to criticize the

term or the concept; nevertheless, this criticism in this case, is one of means and not of the goal. If people, like me, believe that the past has to be worked through and the perpetrators have to be punished, then it is because we think that this will facilitate reconciliation and support peace building. The discussions in Chile thus were discussions between participants of the same basic moral convictions.

In Israel/Palestine the situation is quite different. Not only are we looking at an ongoing conflict, we also have to recognise that the cultural and religious background is different. Although Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions have a shared basis, they are also very different. Reconciliation as a value system and as a political perspective can only acquire relevance here, if it is defined in a very local way, very close to the reality of daily life.

In Sierra Leone, Christian culture appears like an imperial by-product, linked and entangled with local customs and histories. As such, it is both real and unreal; it is both superficial and deeply elementary. Overall, it is not simply a value system or an orientation; it is a system intertwined with the system of imperialism and one of its key structures: authoritarianism. If you are weak, you succumb to the one who is stronger. If the power says that you are reconciled, you repeat it. Nevertheless, you do not have to mean it. Lying has always been the power of the repressed.

Reconciliation, firmly rooted in Christian tradition, thus becomes a questionable imperial value and goal. In addition, in case you never perceived it in quite this way, there always are politicians that ensure it is perceived as such, for example whenever a crusade against terrorism is declared. As politicians like Bush and Blair bring their peace to the 'heart of darkness' (Conrad, J.)

locals unavoidably feel repressed, disrespected, devalued and victimized, by war but also by cultural ignorance and projection; by 'orientalism' (Said, 1993)[3] in its most devastating form. Reconciliation becomes unavoidably entangled with imperial politics, and for most, indiscernible from it.[4] In this context, it should never be forgotten that Christian ideology was always a key element of all colonizing enterprises, from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Furthermore, it is important to remember modern humanitarian ideology, as expressed by institutions like the Red Cross, is also firmly embedded in imperial history. The intention of the people promoting these ideologies may not be imperial, in fact some of this ideology might make a lot of sense, but they are still unavoidably part of the imperial culture and thus may provoke rejection and resistance (Said, 2003).

Reconciliation and politics: Dealing with the past or covering it up?

In his famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl relates the following incident with a fellow concentration camp prisoner: 'I can still see the prisoner who rolled up his sleeves, thrust his right hand under my nose and shouted, "May this hand be cut off if I don't stain it with blood on the day when I get home." I want to emphasize that the man who said these words was not a bad fellow. He had been the best of comrades in camp and afterwards'.[5]

Expressions like this are seldom heard from victims or other traumatized persons, and for Frankl this incident was an exception as well. Victims, if they relate their experiences - experiences which usually exceed even the most perverted and aggressive fantasies - rarely speak of hate, and only seldom of anger. In addition, if they do, they usually do so more indirectly and very carefully. Although this may seem surprising, it has to do with the fact that victims try to avoid identification with hate, because this is what destroyed them. In a sense, one can say that victims usually suffer not only from the fact that their capacity to work and love has been affected, but a healthy capacity for expression of aggression and hate has also potentially been destroyed.

It seems to be a characteristic of perpetrators to verbalize and act out their hate. When the relations of power change and when victims have to be recognized as fellow human beings, the issue of reconciliation quickly arises. Perpetrators are afraid of vengeance because of the level of aggression on which they have acted. Therefore, quite logically, what they fear most is what might happen to them in the aftermath of the violence. So, they ask for reconciliation, although what they mean is something quite different.

The perpetrators are joined in their wishes by the so-called 'innocent bystanders,' and by the political groups that wish to rapidly construct a new future. Behind their 'wish' for reconciliation, we find the fear of new conflict, the fear of having to take sides, and the fear of finding out that those who watch a crime happening without attempting to stop it are also complicit in that the crime. Although everyone knows that a new future cannot be constructed by silencing the past, most people still articulate the hope that the issue of the past might be overcome as soon as possible.

In Chile, for example, until the moment of transition, the victims of human rights violations were a central force in the fight against the dictatorship. Once the transition had begun, however for some, the victims began to represent people who were

eternally looking backwards, always having to speak about horrors everyone else wanted to forget. Consequently, they were no longer perceived as a central element of the political struggle, but actually as a threat to the process of democratization.

There is no doubt that victims harbour horrible memories. If they could forget their memories, it would be so much better. However, the problem is that they cannot, and the issue becomes one of whether a society is willing to include them or whether, once more, they will become marginalized. In addition, for society as a whole it would be wonderful if it could just forget its own past. Nevertheless, here as well it is impossible for new structures to develop, to overcome a past of crime and destruction, if that destruction is ignored. How can basic human values become part of the society again, if nothing happens to those that have violated and destroyed these values for many years?

Although from Chile to South Africa, truth commissions, justice processes and other forms of public memory all seem to focus on the inclusion of the victims, on not forgetting the past and sometimes even on punishing the perpetrators, their objective nevertheless is always also to bring closure and an end to the past. They are thus part of a contradictory political process in which the past is being dealt with in order not to have to deal with it any longer. This leaves room for multiple interpretations. In addition, it is here that the concept of reconciliation becomes so dangerous.

Reconciliation, in the way it is understood by most people, focuses on the final goal of forgiveness, peace, and harmony more than on the means through which these are achieved. Feelings and attitudes may seem to matter more than truth and justice. Therefore, it can be used in both senses, as a way to cover up the past and as a way to deal with it.

A look at different truth commissions' show that they all worked quite well, even though reconciliation was an important factor of conflict in and around them (Kritz, 1995). In Chile, the commission was undoubtedly a large support to the victims and an important first step for Chilean society. Nevertheless, it neither led to reconciliation, as its official name suggested, nor did it bring peace and harmony to Chilean society. Fifteen years later, Chile is still dealing with the problem. So the promise of reconciliation has produced frustration and anger in many people.

In South Africa, there cannot be any doubt that the commission was a landmark of the political process, and that Archbishop Tutu did a lot to pacify his country. Based on his faith, he was able to create an atmosphere of understanding and compassion in the commission, which was remarkable and helped people considerably. In addition, he did not cover up any crimes, and did everything so that the truth might be seen as a part of the new South African society. On the other hand, he used his personal abilities to coerce victims into a position of officially forgiving and pardoning their perpetrators. Surely, he meant well. However, it is this forced reconciliation that produces new anger and frustration in the victims. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that up to the present day there is a continuing discussion on these issues in South Africa that show that the truth commission has done more to enhance such a discussion than to stop it.

Sixty years after World War II, Germany continues to debate the legacies of Nazism. Germany is a relatively stable democracy, not in spite of this ongoing discussion, but because of it. It seems the fact that

Germany and the Germans are not reconciled with their own past has been helpful rather than harmful.

In short, the good part of reconciliation is the truth, and the commitment of dealing with the past. Nevertheless, this could be done just as easily without calling it reconciliation. Visibly, the bad part of reconciliation is the collective fantasy of a harmony it provokes, and the fact that it promises forgiveness and putting the past to rest. For a society coming out of violent conflict, the goal should never be harmony, but conflict capacity. The problem is not the existence of conflict, but the violence with which it is carried out. The aim must therefore be a capacity to deal with conflict in a non-violent way, to achieve conflict transformation. John Paul Ledarach defines this as follows: 'Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships' (Lederach, 2003). Conflict transformation therefore means reducing violence by changing and developing the conflict in all its aspects and dimensions, from the level of society to the individual's inner life. Truth and justice are necessary in order to overcome the past and avoid primitive forms of vengeance. Reconciliation in the limited meaning that has been attributed to it publicly, in many societies, seems unnecessary and possibly harmful.

Reconciliation and the needs of the victims.
Reconciliation processes should help the victims of persecution and repression. If not, at the least they should do no added harm to them. However, how do we conceptualize the suffering of the victims?

Perhaps the most useful understanding of the 'wound' (trauma) of victims was developed by Hans Keilson. In his important follow-up study of Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands, he distinguished three traumatic sequences:

1. 'Enemy occupation of the Netherlands and the beginning of terror'[6] against the Jewish minority. This implied attacks on the social and psychic integrity of Jewish families.

2. 'The period of direct persecution' (Keilson, 1979) which included the deportation of parents and children, the separation of mothers and children, hiding the children in foster families and the experience in the concentration camps.

3. 'The post-war period during which the main issue was that of appointing guardians' (Keilson, 1979). The alternatives were to leave the children with their Dutch foster families or returning them to their original Jewish environment.

Keilson's concept implies a radical change in the understanding of trauma: instead of an event that has consequences, we are now looking at a process in which the description of the changing traumatic situation is the framework, which organizes how we understand trauma. Keilson shows, for example, that a severe second traumatic sequence and a 'good' third traumatic sequence imply better long-term recovery perspectives for the victim than a not so terrible second traumatic sequence and a 'bad' third traumatic sequence. This is very important because it illustrates that traumatization continues, even after active persecution has stopped. We are also able to understand why patients might develop symptoms immediately after the original traumatic event, as well as why they might do so twenty, thirty or forty years later. Last but not least, Keilson's concept, makes it

obvious that since there is no 'post' in trauma but only a continuing traumatic process, the helpers, those people who deal with victims, are also always *part of the traumatic situation* and do not operate outside of it (Keilson, 1979).

Keilson's trauma concept teaches us, that reconciliation processes are always part of the traumatic history of the victims. Truth commissions, justice processes etc. are not something that comes after the trauma, they are *part of the trauma itself* and thus influence directly on the well being of the victims. They can make the wound more profound, or they can help the victims be integrated back into society. The key problem of the historic experience of the victims is that they were absolutely powerless. Horrible things happened to them, and they could do nothing about it. Now the truth commissions, justice processes, and all other activities of official programs of reconciliation will either facilitate their empowerment, or repeat their disempowerment. If the community listens to them, if the state recognizes what has happened to them, they are empowered, because their voice is heard. What they say means something to the rest of society. If they are silenced, and no one listens, their wound becomes more profound. Nevertheless, the key issue in all of this is the self-determination of the victims. No one should force the victims to participate, because that is the essence of their traumatic process. Forcing them to forgive and to reconcile is comparable to torture in so far as once more an external set of mind and feelings that are not their own, would be forced onto their psychic structure. Instead of giving space to them to share the experience of death they involuntarily carry inside, we once again would be signalling that we are not interested in their voicing their experiences. Once

again, we would force silence on them; a supposedly friendly silence, but no less devastating than any other silences before that. Reconciliation is also probably a need for the victims. However, it is nothing any one from the outside can orchestrate, because reconciliation finally should be a personal decision of the victims. They could not hinder death and destruction, so should they not have the right to decide for themselves, and in their own time, when and whom to forgive?

If we could forget about reconciliation, we might discover that the real issue for victims in the third traumatic sequence is *working through losses*. They can never get back what they have lost. They can get recognition for their trauma, they can win back their positions as honourable citizens and they can receive money and treatment for their injuries. However, they cannot get back their lost loved ones, they cannot eliminate the scars from their skin and they cannot forget their horrible memories. Truth-telling mechanisms can only help obtain a very clear knowledge of what they have lost and offer them, in some cases, a certain level of compensation. These mechanisms can help to reintegrate them back into society, facilitate respect, and offer a basis for a new beginning. This beginning, nonetheless, has to centrally acknowledge the losses that have occurred.

If the key task of a society would be to facilitate and accompany the mourning process of the victims, then the central focus of reparation would finally be where it should. In reconciliation it seems like the key task is one for the victims. They have to forgive. Accompanying mourning would turn this around. It would finally become clear that the society has the task of reconciling its victims.

Taking a look at a potentially useful definition

After having discussed the profound disadvantages and risks of the concept of reconciliation it nonetheless makes sense to look at some of the better definitions that have been produced by specialists of conflict transformation around the world. Perhaps these concepts are not well known and therefore the term continues to be defined in a simpler, more primitive way. Nevertheless, these new and complex definitions shape international politics on the issue and, in the long term, possibly also our understanding.

The handbook *'Reconciliation after violent conflict'* (IDEA, 2003) defines reconciliation as a process that is long, complex and contradictory. In reacting to possible misconceptions of the term, it defines what reconciliation is and what it is not (see Table 1).

The authors thus clearly dissociate themselves from any religious connotation and focus on a long process of change, that implies acknowledging, remembering and learning from the past. They also highlight the fact that reconciliation has to be voluntary. This definition is a good answer to most of the criticism expressed above. The only question is why the whole thing has to be called reconciliation? Is the term needed to do what is described?

More recently Hamber & Kelly (2005) carried out research in which they first investigated the perceptions about reconciliation in professional and political groups in Northern Ireland, and then checked their own definition of reconciliation (see Box 1) with their interview partners.

Their research (to which this article cannot do justice due to space constraints) showed that most people originally did not like the concept of reconciliation and they did not know how it could be used productively in their work. In reference to their work most preferred the word 'peace building.' They used the word reconciliation only for application to EU funded projects. Once presented with Hamber's and Kelley's definition, the reactions were generally very positive. Somehow they felt that this definition very much coincided with their own goals

Table 1	
The process of reconciliation is not: • an excuse for impunity; • only an individual process; • in opposition to/an alternative to truth or justice; • a quick answer; • a religious concept; • perfect peace; • an excuse to forget; nor a matter of merely forgiving	**The process of reconciliation is:** • finding a way to live that permits a vision of the future; • the (re) building of relationships; • coming to terms with past acts and enemies; • a society-wide long-term process of deep change; • a process of acknowledging, remembering and learning from the past; • voluntary and cannot be imposed.

Box 1. Definition of reconciliation

Reconciliation is a necessary process following conflict. However, we believe it is a voluntary act and cannot be imposed. It involves five interwoven and related strands:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society: The development of a vision of a shared future requiring the involvement of the whole society, at all levels. Although individuals may have different opinions or political beliefs, the articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society is a critical part of any reconciliation process.

2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past: Acknowledging the hurt, losses, truths and suffering of the past. Providing the mechanisms for justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration (including apologies if necessary and steps aimed at redress). To build reconciliation, individuals and institutions need to acknowledge their own role in the conflicts of the past, accepting and learning from it in a constructive way so as to guarantee non-repetition.

3. Building positive relationships: Relationship building or renewal following violent conflict addressing issues of trust, prejudice, intolerance in this process, resulting in accepting commonalities and differences, and embracing and engaging with those who are different to us.

4. Significant cultural and attitudinal change: Changes in how people relate to, and their attitudes towards, one another. The culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence is broken down and opportunities and space opened up in which people can hear and be heard. A culture of respect for human rights and human difference is developed creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging.

5. Substantial social, economic and political change: The social, economic and political structures which gave rise to the conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed. (Hamber & Kelly, 2005)

---

of peace building. Nonetheless, on closer investigation it became obvious that although all assigned key relevance to the issue of dealing with the past, very few had concrete fantasies of directly confronting the past. Many saw this more in terms of overcoming the past.

Personally, I feel that Hamber's and Kelley's definition is the best in the market at present. It is very clear, very broad and very easy to put to use. It highlights all possible aspects of making peace in a society and it makes clear that on an individual

level this must be a voluntary act. It shows that dealing with the past is something related to the present, to the construction of social change. However, here again one can ask, if the term is really essential to the process. It must also be taken into account that the authors are presenting this definition in a country that is shaped by Christian ideology. Yet, even here, where it produces basic agreement, the key issues of dealing with the past is misunderstood by many. Somehow one would like to speculate with the authors on the possibility of inventing a

new term, which emphasizes the need of confronting instead of burying the past.

Ambivalences and contradictions

My own attitude towards reconciliation remains profoundly ambivalent and contradictory. On one hand I would like to get rid of the term, because I believe it has produced a lot of damage and misunderstandings. On the other, I tend to agree with reformers like Hamber, who try to push for a workable and convincing definition. I must also accept that I grew up in a Christian background, for which this kind of basic moral understanding is, like it or not, part of my culture. My basic position on this issue can be summed up as follows:

- Reconciliation is probably here to stay, even if we don't like the term, we might have to work with it.
- It seems impossible to overcome the inherent Christian bias in the near future. Reconciliation thus becomes a cause for conflict as part of a process of symbolic violence (Bourdieu[7]) in which this bias is being forced onto the rest of the world.
- Reconciliation is most dangerous as a concept when understood as the promise of harmony and leaving the past behind.
- Conflict transformation processes require approaches that integrate psychological, social, political and spiritual dimensions. Until now, reconciliation is one of the few concepts that risk the integration of these dimensions.
- Reconciliation, if it is to be a meaningful process, implies amongst other things, an intra-psychic process that is highly complex.

Intra-psychic processes

I want to finish this article briefly highlighting the complex intra-psychic processes that are involved in reconciliation. Maurice Sendak, in his famous children's story 'Where the Wild Things Are' presents these processes in a very simple and clear language, and illustrates them through wonderful pictures that unfortunately cannot be reproduced here. The story goes as follows:

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another his mother called him 'Wild Thing!' and Max said 'I'LL EAT YOU UP' So he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are. And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said 'BE STILL!' and tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things. 'And now', cried Max, 'let the wild rumpus start!' 'Now stop!' Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper. And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all. Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are. But the wild things cried, 'Oh please don't go - we'll eat you up - we love you so!' And Max said, 'No!' The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws but Max stepped into his private boat and waved good-bye and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot.[8]

In this case the fight is between a child and his mother. It is not a terrible fight, but terrible enough to require a very complex working through of the situation. Max behaves badly according to the conviction of his mother and is punished. Max is very angry about this. His mother called him 'wild thing'. So now, in his imagination he leaves home and goes to the place where the wild things are. He goes to the centre of anger, aggression and destruction. He is threatened by the place, that after all represents his own rage, but he is capable of controlling the situation. Now he becomes king of the wild things, and starts 'the wild rumpus'. Vengeance is now occurring in a very lustful and funny way. There is no text here in the story only very impressive pictures. And then Max stops the fun and does to the wild things what was done to him. Only after this feast of anger, fun and vengeance can Max finally calm down a bit. Depression about his loneliness sets in and at that point he smells all across the world good things to eat. In other words his mother is making an offer of reconciliation. And now that he has undergone his long voyage, he also is ready for going somewhere, where someone loves him best of all and thus discovers his own disposition to reconcile. So he waves goodbye to the wild things, who once more try to threaten him in their love, but he can control this now easily. So he goes back and finds his food still warm. Reconciliation has occurred.

Sendak's story beautifully illustrates that in psychological terms reconciliation is a very complex and difficult process, even when the issue is basically a loving relationship like the one between a child an his mother. From Sendak we can learn the following:

- Reconciliation is about integrating conflict.
- Reconciliation is about confronting and working through what happened.
- Reconciliation is about establishing relationship, not only in the external but also in the inner world.
- Reconciliation deals with linking: good and bad; love, hate, anger and fear; omnipotence and dependency.
- Reconciliation finally deals with mourning processes.

References

Becker, D., (2001). In: *Dealing with the Consequences of Organized Violence in Trauma Work*, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict-Management Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. Berlin.

Conrad, J., Heart of darkness. http://www.online-literature.com/conrad/heart_of_darkness/

Frankl, V.E., (1984). In: *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hamber, B. & Kelly, G. (2005). *A place for reconciliation? - Conflict and locality in Northern Ireland*, *Democratic Dialogue Report 18*. Democratic Dialogue: Belfast

IDEA, (2003). *Reconciliation after violent conflict*, www.idea.int/publications/**reconciliation**/upload/**reconciliation**_full.pdf

Keilson, H. (1979). *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern,* Enke Verlag: Stuttgart

Neil J. Kritz, (1995) (Ed.), *Transitional Justice, Vol. I, II, III*. United States Institute of Peace: Washington.

Lederach, J. P. (2003). *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation,* Good Books: Intercourse.

Said, E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf

Said, E. (2003). *Always on top,* London Review of Books, Vol 25, No 6, 20 March 2003

[1] This article is an extended version of a presentation at the SRC Conference 'Beyond Violence' April 6, 2005.

[2] In fact it took till 2005 to eliminate the undemocratic special laws the Chilean dictatorship had declared in its last year of power, in order to control the future democratically elected government.

[3] See http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/-Orientalism.html

[4] The colonial and post-colonial significance of 'reconciliation' and its implications for ongoing discourses on conflict transformation in crisis regions unfortunately have not yet been researched in depth.

[5] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

[6] English edition: Hans Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization in Children* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Hebrew University, 1992).

[7] See for example http://condor.depaul.edu/-~rrotenbe/aeer/aeer11_1/bennett.html, as well as http://ibs.lgu.ac.uk/forum/BOURDIEU.htm

[8] Maurice Sendak, Where the wild things are, Publisher: HarperCollins, ISBN: 0060254920

David Becker is managing director of the International Academy for Innovative Education, Psychology and Economy at the Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, where he teaches intercultural Education. E-mail: d.becker@zedat.fu-berlin.de   web site: www.opsiconsult.com

Reconciliation on the web...

G.Kelly & B. Hamber (Eds.) Reconciliation: rhetoric or relevant. Belfast, Democratic Dialog, Report 17.
Freely downloadable at: http://www.democraticdialogue.org/reports.htm
This report is based on research into the ways in which reconciliation is conceptualised and implemented at the political level and at the community level. It also examines the way local government structures have created, or constrained, opportunities for local reconciliation initiatives.

G.Kelly & B. Hamber (Eds.) A place for reconciliation? Conflict and locality in Northern Ireland. Belfast, Democratic Dialog, Report 18.
Freely downloadable at http://www.democraticdialogue.org/reports.htm
This report describes the results of a research project on community reconciliation in Northern Ireland: how reconciliation is conceived and implemented, politically and at the grass roots, in different areas. It discusses the role voluntary groups play in facilitating community reconciliation, and the ability of locally elected politicians to forward a reconciliation agenda in a non-sectarian and effective manner.