

Trinity College Cambridge
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Address given by The Lord Eames OM

Christianity and some issues of the day: Peace and Reconciliation

In my address on this occasion I have chosen what can only be a cursory and surface glance at what is for many of us the great challenge for this generation. Each generation is remembered by historians for some key challenges and issues. I suggest that for us – and particularly for those of you about to leave these cloisters to follow professions and callings in a changing world – the key word across the global village is ‘reconciliation’. There are many interpretations of that word just as there are different examples of the crying need for humanity to recognise what reconciliation involves.

Despite the hope and promise that we wishfully invested in the future when celebrating the turn of the millennium, the first decade of the twenty-first century has brought into focus the profound alienation which remains at the heart of the human experience. It has been a time of instability and violence: of misunderstanding and exploitation: of traumatic change in our understanding of ourselves as human beings - and change in how we understand each other and the world we share. Never before has our perception of what it means to be human, our understanding of being a person, been so comprehensive, so complex – and yet so contested.

Our awareness of the diversity of human experience and existence has never been greater. Never before has humanity been more aware of the factual knowledge of this world. Yet our capacity to learn about each other, to live with our differences and to build relationships has rarely seemed so problematic. Allow me to draw on two aspects of my own life to illustrate such a conclusion.

My own years of service in the Anglican Church have confronted me with issues and situations to which there have been no easy answers. I have been greatly privileged to be involved at the centre of the Anglican Communion over the years. Relationships between various parts of the Communion have undergone and experienced many complexities. I have seen situations in which fellow members of that world family have been divided by individual interpretations of what is important for being an Anglican in today’s world. Many of those issues have as much to do with the need to listen to each other, understand each other and even to find ways of co-existing as a diverse family – in a word emphasising what unites rather than what divides. Within that experience of serving the Anglican Communion time after time I have seen that too few recognise that reconciliation does not mean weakness of individual principle or even surrender of individual priorities, but rather the strength which can come from acceptance of difference, lengthy but sincere efforts to understand the effect of individual positions on others and sadly, at times the failure to appreciate what it means to be a complex and multi-cultured world family. Those of you who have

studied Church history will I hope recognise that what we sought to do in the Windsor Report was to face up to what failure to understand each other in human as much as in ecclesiastical terms would mean. Today the tensions in the world-wide Anglican Communion bear testimony to our failure to learn these lessons.

Second, in my years of Ministry in Northern Ireland with its divisions, suffering and violence I have again been reminded constantly of the failure of human beings to see reconciliation as a sign of strength rather than weakness. Decades of what we call 'The Troubles' brought death and suffering to a close knit community. Ancient political and religious differences have been the tapestry before which violence, terrorism and consequential human suffering have brought years of darkness to all our communities. Today a new but very fragile peace prevails in my country. Political co-operation has brought together former bitter foes in political power-sharing but that co-operation is under intense pressure at present. A fragile peace process has brought new awareness of the opportunities which can be possible for a new generation. But of one fact of reconciliation I have no doubt. Political understanding or willingness to share responsibilities is but one aspect of reconciliation. You cannot legislate for reconciliation. You cannot compel people or communities to be reconciled. You can provide frameworks which can help a process of reconciliation. But reconciliation has to do with the hearts and minds of people – it has to do with understanding ourselves as much as understanding each other. The process of what we call reconciliation ultimately depends on human emotions rather than laws. So I say again: our awareness of human experience and existence has never been greater, but our capacity to learn to live with our deepest differences has rarely been so problematic.

Again, in this global village our understanding of the natural world and the functioning of the human body has been matched by a haunting sense of the dysfunction which continues to threaten, whether through climate change or the spread of devastating viruses. The devastation caused by the mighty powers of nature in Haiti has exposed again our impotence to deal with the natural world let alone understand it. The near collapse of the global financial system and the lifestyle chasm between those of us in the so-called developed world and the millions who live on less than a dollar a day, exposes today the deep moral malaise at the heart of our human interactions. How little humanity understands the nature of such division let alone embraces realistic means of removing such injustice. Indeed in many aspects of life across the globe we could be forgiven for caricaturing the decade as a time where our wayward past came back to haunt us. It is now largely agreed by economists that much of the world's financial crisis was rooted in the misdemeanours of the past.

So, reflection on the past has much to contribute to the process of reconciliation. On the world stage that has to do with past practices where caution as to long term consequences was ignored. On the more local even the personal relationship level it has to do with memory. How much do we allow memory of the past to dictate our attitude to the present and of more importance – how much does how we regard our

memories play in fashioning our futures? Time and again I have witnessed legacies of the Northern Ireland Troubles where the dominant human and also community attitude to the present have depended on how we have dealt with our memories. I have seen how corrosive memories of past hurt or past grievance can control so much of the present. The hurt for which we cannot find the power to forgive: the past memory for which there can never be acceptance: the past memory which haunts us relentlessly with all its guilt and remorse.

Equally I have been amazed by situations where against all the odds people have talked in terms of forgiveness, even of reconciliation. There is nothing new in the field of human endeavour, we are told. But there is an equal human propensity to ignore what the past can teach and what power it possess to dictate the present and the future. As the historian Marc Block, martyred in Nazi Germany in 1944 observed: 'Once an emotional chord has been struck, the limit between past and present is no longer regulated by a mathematical measurable chronology.' This generation is as burdened by the wounds of history and as haunted by its ancestral voices as any that has gone before. The fundamental alienation of human beings from their true nature, from each other and the earth is in sharp and brutal focus. To this as a Christian I would simply add: humankind's alienation from its God poses questions for the theologian which should not nor cannot be confined to words from a sanctuary or a pulpit.

Living and working in Northern Ireland as part of a community in conflict with itself I am deeply conscious of the urgency of Christian faith in responding to the brutality and random suffering of violence. Discerning the practical outworking of our Christian identity as peacemakers is I believe core to the Church's witness. However I have to express a personal view at this point. The failure of the world churches to develop a mature peace theology and practice represents an abandonment of the fundamental human angst. What does faith say and people of faith do in the face of unspeakable terror and brutality? Surely it is not acceptable that we ignore the real challenges of our time: the affect to humanity of war, the corrupting dynamics of unchallenged political power, the complexity of conflict or the long term process of social and cultural change. For the Christian the goal of peacemaking is reconciliation. But in the church this is too easily prescribed as one dimensional. Its focus too often is what happens in church not what is happening on the street. Its too frequent stress is on the merits of instant solutions or conversion over against the long hard painful journey of making peace with our enemy.

Reconciliation is a word that to-day needs to be rescued – rescued in a world which appears too often to be seeking solutions to great human problems in force of might, in force of imposing solutions which ignore the deeply held principles of culture and society other than our own, in force of imposing other cultural values on communities we do not understand and in force of ethical standards which do not always equate with how justice and human rights are recognised in other societies. The key to this reappraisal of what reconciliation needs to become the priority for this generation can

perhaps be illustrated from an incident in my own experience. After a lecture to a senior school class I was asked by a student this question: "Can you tell me how I will recognise the day when I wake up that reconciliation has happened in Northern Ireland?" Now we all may smile at those words. We may also I hope recognise that they misunderstand the primary element of reconciliation: it is a process not a fact. It is a journey, a pilgrimage not a date on a calendar. But that process has to begin somewhere, and often we cannot know at what destination we will arrive. The journey demands pain, misunderstanding, risk and danger. It demands sacrifice and dedication, courage and vision. It demands faith in ourselves and in each other. It demands we recognise what is truth and that we dispense with false values. But it is a journey this world needs in political terms, international terms, within divided communities and within the world of Churches.

Within that rescuing of reconciliation I believe universities have a role to play of vital urgency and importance. As our universities analyse all those theories of justice, human rights, personal and material responsibilities and what it means when we seek freedom from the bondage of hunger and injustice in this world we are sharing in that same pilgrimage and journey. We are saying to humankind be unafraid of the hard questions, be unafraid of criticism from those who have yet to forsake their own comfort zones, be unafraid of dilemma and unafraid of what it means to chart new societies through the darkness of ignorance – for in the end reconciliation, the healing of wounds, the building of bridges and the opening up of new visions of faith are among the most noble of lives' journeys.

Members of the family of this great university, that is my call to you all today. It is my call too for those who are about to leave this campus to play their part in contributing to the better life of justice and peace in this world. It is my call to those who teach here and must foster the enquiring mind. It is my call to those who seek new ways of enhancing the mission of the church in a world where so many are alienated from the God of the ages. There is surely no more noble calling than to move forward the reconciliation between and among the peoples of this earth. I have been privileged to speak to you about a journey which I believe is more important to undertake than to arrive.