

Reconciling Theology

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Preface

As I ‘laid down my pen’, so to speak, on completing the manuscript of this book, my mind went back to one afternoon 50 years ago, which with hindsight I see as a key moment of my induction into the challenging world of ‘reconciling theology’. Retrieving this memory may be the first step in answering the question that I put to myself: ‘How did I actually get into all this?’ Sometime in 1972 I walked into a Christian charity emporium (the ‘Missionary Mart’) in south London and immediately a pair of secondhand books in striking yellow and black dust covers caught my eye. On closer examination, they turned out to be by an author of whom, at that stage, I knew virtually nothing. The author was a certain T. F. Torrance and the books were the twin volumes of his *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, published in 1958 and 1960 respectively. The unifying theme of volume 1 was ‘Order and Disorder’ and of volume 2 ‘The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel’. These topics were almost unknown to me then. Reading *Conflict and Agreement* helped to launch me on an intellectual, spiritual and ecumenical journey, in which the extensive writings and the personal encouragement of Thomas F. Torrance would play a significant part.

Since then, I have spent a good deal of time and energy in grappling with the classic Faith and Order agenda to which Torrance’s two volumes first introduced me. The specific topics of the ministry and the sacraments – and perhaps even more the first intimations of the dynamics of ‘Conflict and Agreement’ in the Christian church – seized my imagination.¹ At the time,

1 Torrance, Thomas F., 1958, 1960, *Conflict and Agreement in the*

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I was beginning work on my doctoral thesis on Bishop Charles Gore (1853–1932), the most powerful theological voice in the Church of England in his day, and the conflicts and struggles into which his theological convictions led him.² So several avenues of theological investigation were converging in my thinking at that time and the ideas of conflict and convergence were never far away. The idea of ‘reconciling theology’ entered through an open door into my thinking at a tender age.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s I was drawn into doctrinal and Faith and Order work for the Church of England (the Doctrine Commission and the Faith and Order Advisory Group, later redesigned as the Faith and Order Commission), including theological dialogue with partner churches, both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. In 1998 I was invited to become the General Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity and so to have overall responsibility, from a staff point of view, for much of the ecumenical relations, conversations and ecumenical theology of the Church of England, working with the two archbishops, the many other bishops with ecumenical portfolios, the Archbishops’ Council and the General Synod. In this capacity I succeeded Dr (now also Dame) Mary Tanner whose life has been devoted wholeheartedly to the task of reconciliation between the Christian churches and remains an inspiration and an example. Working with Mary, and also with Bishops John Hind and Christopher Hill, among several other notable bishops dedicated to a reconciling ecumenism, hugely strengthened both my motivation and my grasp of the Faith and Order enterprise.

So since those early days in the 1970s, I have longed to see the reconciliation of Christians, churches and theologians. The life and thought of Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72) and

Church, 2 vols, London: Lutterworth Press: vol. 1, ‘Order and Disorder’, vol. 2, ‘The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel’.

² Avis, Paul, 1988, *Gore: Construction and Conflict*, Worthing: Churchman Publishing. The title resonates with another Torrance work that made a marked impression on me: Torrance, Thomas F., 1965, *Theology in Reconstruction*, London: SCM Press.

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of William Temple (1881–1944) have particularly guided this sense of direction. I aspire to be a mediating theologian, not so much in the sense of the German Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century (pre-eminently perhaps Ernst Troeltsch), for whom ‘mediating theology’ meant finding a meeting point between the Christian theological tradition and modern culture and science (though I am committed to that also), but rather in the sense of mediation between disputing parties who have become alienated from one another and are both experiencing the destructive consequences. As reconciling theologians, we look for deepening mutual understanding – a hermeneutic of unity – and a meeting point in belief and practice; we engage in theological bridge-building. In this we are following in the wake of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of reconciliation, who is at work wherever God’s children, whether confessedly Christian or not, engage in building community on any scale, for that cannot be achieved without interpersonal and inter-group reconciliation.

It seems clear that the practical mediating or reconciling task requires the support of a reconciling theology. To sketch the outline of such an approach is this book’s aim and scope. The double meaning of my title *Reconciling Theology* is of course intentional. If a theology that has the potential to reconcile Christians and churches is to be put to work, we first need to go some way towards reconciling theologies themselves, softening and healing – as far as possible – the entrenched theological clashes and conflicts in the areas of presuppositions, arguments and conclusions. In attempting to reconcile theologies, we are already making use of a reconciled theology to mediate between the two. Only a reconciled theology – one that intentionally reaches out to polarized positions and tries to draw them closer together – can help to draw the sting of the serious disagreements that exist between Christians and churches and create a basis for future steps to full visible communion. That this is emphatically not a pipe dream, nor merely a naive fantasy, is testified to by the highly impressive collective achievements of ecumenical theological dialogue and *rapprochement* over

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the past half-century and more, as the volumes of *Growth in Agreement*, published at intervals by the World Council of Churches and Eerdmans, attest.

To be realistic, the process of reconciliation is never complete, but is by its nature an unending quest and an ongoing challenge. The task of reconciliation, especially in theology and philosophy, seeks the elusive satisfaction of a final resolution, leading to a sense of metaphysical equilibrium, composure and rest. But in this world much will always remain unresolved, untidily open-ended and centrifugal in tendency. The crooked timber of humanity will see to that, as well as ever-present cultural and ideological forces. The pressures of plurality are intensifying today as the voices of, for example, black, feminist and post-colonialist theologians and their communities properly become more audible and insistent, alongside the widening gap between European and North American theological traditions on the one hand, and majority world perspectives on the other. Unresolved conflicts belong to the essence of the human condition and point to its tragic dimension.³ But that is not a reason for giving up in despair, any more than the partial success, the fragility, of reconciling efforts between individuals in families or other relationships is a reason for not bothering with mediation.

But why do we need a reconciled and reconciling theology? I believe that we need such a theology because we have a Christian church that is not only highly diverse but fundamentally unreconciled. The church is unreconciled in three main ways. It is unreconciled to itself because it is in fragments and is morally compromised and has a bad conscience. It is unreconciled to the world because it is typically viewed askance with suspicion and distrust. And it is unreconciled to God because it lies under judgement for its reckless loss of unity and its culpable loss of moral integrity. What we have – and what many of us belong to – is a church that is fragmented

³ Williams, Rowan, 2016, *The Tragic Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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into mutually exclusive pieces, and where some Christians blithely imagine that it is their duty to God to vilify and condemn other Christians, excluding them from the Eucharist and even questioning their eternal salvation.⁴ Our Christian church is one that has recently lost what it could scarce afford to lose – its integrity, credibility and public standing – through sexual abuse scandals and the useless, incompetent or actually corrupt methods that have been employed to respond to them (often to cover them up). So the premises of all the chapters of this book are i) that the church itself is unreconciled to itself, to the world and to God, and is therefore barely even the church; ii) that we should do all we can, by the grace of God, in prayer, study, dialogue and reaching out in love, to heal the wounds of the church; and iii) that we must start by doing some reconciling work within theology itself, scrutinizing its antitheses or polarities, its stereotyping and caricaturing, and the ideological justifications that are regularly put forward to defend divisive actions.

But how would we recognize a reconciled and reconciling theology if we met one? What makes a reconciled and reconciling theology different to any other theology? What are its motives and its marks? The most fundamental governing motive impelling a reconciled and reconciling theology, as indeed all Christian endeavour, must be the greatest of the traditional ‘theological virtues’: love (*agapē*, *caritas*; 1 Cor. 13.13). If we love God in Jesus Christ, it is because God first loved us (1 John 4.19). And if we love God in Christ, we must love Christ’s church, his body, just as he does (Eph. 5.25–33) and extend that love equally to all our sisters and brothers within it. And if we love his church we must seek to heal its wounds of sin. Among those wounds are the deep scars of historic disunity; so our love will express itself in working for the restoration of unity or communion (*koinonia*, *communio*, *sobornost*). The definition of love is that it actively seeks the

⁴ Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order, 2021, *God So Loved the World: Papers on Theological Anthropology and Salvation*, London: Anglican Consultative Council.

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good, the well-being, of the Beloved above itself and does so with unwavering intentionality. To love Christ is to desire what he desires and to pray the same prayer that he prayed and still prays: ‘that they may all be one’ (John 17.11, 21–23).

If love is the motive that impels reconciling theology, what are its marks? The marks or signs of a reconciling theology are naturally infused with the spirit of reconciliation. Above all, a reconciling theology is one that is not adversarial and instinctively hostile to any different theology, as some sadly are, but is irenic and conciliatory in its posture. It does not set out to be combative by default and, with sinful glee, seek to put others in the wrong. It does not indulge, with wicked delight, in stereotyping, travesty and caricature or in the undermining by snide innuendo of a rival position. So a reconciling theology is not defensive, but open to receive from what is new or strange or expressed in a different theological language and register. It is not reactive, but stretches out the hand of understanding and friendship to what seems ‘other’. Reconciling theology is infused with a spirit of receptivity, eagerly absorbing from elsewhere whatever can correct, redirect and enrich its tasks. So we may say that reconciling theology – far from being arrogant, smug or triumphalist – knows that it has need of the other; it seeks completion from engagement – an engagement that is not uncritical but nevertheless is profoundly empathetic and receptive – with what is different.

To that extent, reconciling theology teaches us to think differently about difference. It is characterized by at least three main dispositions. First, a fundamental sense of *belonging*: an overwhelming consciousness that we belong to one another in the body of Christ and that it is not for any one of us to say that anyone else does not belong to Christ and to his body. We exist as Christians *in solidum*. Second, *recognizing*: reconciling theology is strong on recognition in that it looks with a friendly eye for potential dialogue partners and for whatever can be recognized as a facet of Christian truth, wherever it is to be found; it scans the world for the pearl of great price. Finally, *receiving*: reconciling theology is intentionally receptive, espe-

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cially ‘ecumenically receptive’. It is oriented to both giving and receiving, knowing (as the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi puts it) that it is in giving that we receive. Luke (Acts 20.35) attributes to St Paul a saying of Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive; but Paul would have been the first to point out that we can give only what we have first received (1 Cor. 4.7).

It is my aspiration in this book to delineate the rudiments of a reconciling theology that is inspired and motivated by these three qualities – a theological framework that promotes the spiritual disposition and practical intention that is the fruit of the continual actions of belonging, recognizing and receiving. The exercise will take more than one book, so *Reconciling Theology* is intended as the first of probably two volumes. In this current work I have set out the daunting challenge presented by an unreconciled church, which is barely the church at all, and I have also tried to portray what a reconciled church would look like in accordance with Scripture and theological principles. The planned sequel will address more specifically and concretely the pathway – the methodology to be followed – that is designed to bring about a relationship of deeper communion between the churches. I have been working on this agenda for many years now and have tried out various approaches to this set of issues. Some chapters of this book include material – not usually verbatim but fully rethought and rewritten – that has previously appeared in public lectures and journal articles. But about half of the word count consists of fresh material that has not previously seen the light of day in print.

Thomas F. Torrance’s Foreword to one of his later books, *Theology in Reconciliation* (1975), describes well the orientation of this current work and I am glad to be able to acknowledge with admiration and gratitude a pioneer and paragon of reconciling theology in the age of ecumenism. Torrance wrote:

Any theology which is faithful to the Church of Jesus Christ within which it takes place cannot but be a theology of reconciliation, for reconciliation belongs to the essential nature

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and mission of the Church in the world. By taking its rise from God's mighty acts in reconciling the world to himself in Christ, the Church is constituted 'a community of the reconciled', and in being sent by Christ into the world to proclaim what God has done in him, the Church is constituted a reconciling as well as a reconciled community.⁵

In tune with these principles, my final (and longest) chapter is entitled 'Envisioning a Reconciled and Reconciling Community'.

I am most grateful to David Shervington and his close colleagues at SCM Press for their enthusiastic support of this project and for bringing this first volume to publication.

Paul Avis
The Birth of St John the Baptist
24 June 2021

⁵ Torrance, Thomas F., 1975, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, p. 7.