

To What Extent is Reconciliation an Appropriate Term in Post-Conflict Societies?

Written by Matthew Richmond

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MATTHEW RICHMOND, DEC 29 2014

'Reconciliation' is a hotly-contested component of post-conflict analysis. There is ample discussion amongst scholars and practitioners concerning the value of the term—a debate characterized by pragmatism, idealism, and an inevitable undercurrent of emotion. The concept, as a constituent of transitional justice, gained international prominence following the Second World War, and more recently through the use of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC). Many theorists and practitioners have since come to consider reconciliation as the natural *objective* of a conflict-cycle—the final phase where the previously warring parties embrace *some* degree of peace. This position, however, is becoming less clear-cut.

This essay will explore to what extent the term 'reconciliation' is both appropriate following the atrocities in post-conflict societies, and further, what level of reconciliation is realistic to expect in new post-conflict societies. It will do this by first defining what is meant by reconciliation. Secondly, the essay will examine the limitations of 'thick' reconciliation. Third, it will challenge long-held assumptions about reconciliation by drawing on cases that suggest a different 'thin' level of reconciliation that can be witnessed after conflict. Fourthly, building on these respective critiques and endorsements, it seeks to find a theoretical middle-ground that reflects at least some of the idealistic intent of 'thick' reconciliation on a micro-level. Through this, the essay will argue that although 'thick' reconciliation is unlikely, the pragmatism of 'thin' reconciliation allows for compromises that result in some degree of peace and co-existence. This 'thin' interpretation can then be built upon to create a stronger mandate for the term that prevents reoccurrences of future violence.

Definition

Although the definition of 'reconciliation' is problematic, the conceptual framework of this essay is relatively straightforward. Ironically, scholars can only agree that reconciliation cannot be simply defined. Pankhurst notes that theoretical definitions tend to encompass an 'amalgam' of literal interpretations of the term, often leaving reconciliation research neglectful of either individuals or larger groups.[1] Focusing research on different levels engenders different political and emotional contexts that can be hazardous to reconciliation projects. However, despite this confusion, it can be deconstructed to clarify the concept.

This essay contends that there are two types of reconciliation: regenerative and functional.[2] One is appropriate, the other is not. Regenerative, or 'thick', reconciliation assumes a 'restoration of peaceful relationships' that resonates at an individual level.[3] This demand for an institutionalization of deep healing can be considered unrealistic due to the high expectations that it places on societies recovering from a traumatic experience. In addition, the optimistic standards required for 'thick' reconciliation require more proactive legal mechanisms. This represents a positive-peace approach, whereby action is taken to promote peace—perhaps in the form of TRCs, intervention, or constitutional reform.

On the other hand, functional, or 'thin', reconciliation merely assumes 'co-existence', and the reframing of relationships within divided societies.[4] The requisite element here is a state of non-violence, whereby, for example, groups live together despite a lack of trust. This form of reconciliation is more realistic, as the minimalist interpretation

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of the key elements of reconciliation lowers expectations of post-conflict societies. Here, negative-peace approaches, such as disarmament and demobilization that simply *stop* violence, are more appropriate initial measures. Stripped of its idealism, functional reconciliation is more apparent in the cases that this essay will study; it is certainly more constructive when tackling reconciliation normatively.

That being said, reconciliation must be approached very carefully. It is a 'grossly over-packed term' that incorporates numerous abstract concepts.[5] Context is incredibly important as often one reconciliation attempt, even if it experienced some degree of success, may not be applicable in another scenario. Next, the limitations of the maximalist approach must be revealed.

Why It Is Inappropriate: 'Thick' Reconciliation

This section will argue that a more regenerative form of reconciliation, as envisaged by idealists, is unrealistic. The dichotomous relationship between thick and thin reconciliation can be characterized as either harmony or toleration.[6] Unlike thinner forms of the concept, 'thick' reconciliation places significant emphasis on 'friendliness and forgiveness'.[7] Consequently, it is more difficult to achieve through macro level, top-down approaches to post-conflict.

Many scholars adopt a definition of reconciliation that implies the restoration of harmonious relationships and 'changed psychological orientation towards the other'.[8] This represents the positive peace perspective: striving for genuine cooperative and peaceful relations instead of simply non-violence.[9] The principal challenge facing regenerative reconciliation is the ability to meet the lofty demands set by its main components. According to Lederach, there are four components of reconciliation: truth, justice, peace, and mercy.[10] To cite Souto: 'in [Lederach's] view, all these values must be satisfied in order to pave the way towards true reconciliation'.[11] To comprehensively satisfy them, positive-peace instruments are essential, as functional reconciliation can avoid some of these concepts entirely and still lead to 'peaceful' societies. Without a doubt, psychological healing and acceptance of others makes victims less likely to engage in future violence.[12] So in an ideal world, regenerative reconciliation should be the sole interpretation of the term. However, the realities of economic depression and a culture of violence in conflict zones suggest that the conditions required for complete reconciliation are unobtainable. In reality, satisfying just one, never mind finding a moral balance between the four concepts, is hugely problematic.

Regenerative reconciliation is critically hamstrung by the central theoretical assumption that 'social harmony' is the ideal *outcome* of the post-conflict process.[13] Bar-tal and Benninck are amongst several scholars who interpret it as the 'outcome'.[14] Reconciliation as the 'goal' suggests the post-conflict process is designed to achieve a 'restoration of *genuinely* peaceful relationships'.[15] Despite its value in providing citizens with a common goal through a grandiose narrative called the 'rainbow nation', this can be hazardous. Firstly, by publicly promoting a goal of reconciliation, it invites spoilers. Simply, some people will not *want* reconciliation.[16] It isolates certain victims in their own country, and will leave others nervous that the promise of national reconciliation may force them to 'compromise and forgive perpetrators'.[17] At a micro-level, it might demand that a raped woman essentially forgive her rapist. At a macro-level, it might galvanize splinter groups that disagree with the reconciliatory message. In claiming that reconciliation 'requires the support of the whole society', Bar-Tal and Benninck defend this concept against potential spoilers by asserting that society can institutionalize reconciliation despite 'marginal' groups.[18] However, history has illustrated the power of marginal actors in post-conflict scenarios. Following the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement, dissenting Arab militias who felt excluded from the process successfully destabilized the resulting 'peace', leading to increased violence.[19] Conceptually then, a framework that dismisses the threat from spoilers is short-sighted and ill-equipped to design structures that lead to positive peace.

Secondly, reconciliation as a 'goal' facilitates external influence, often to the detriment of the internal victims. A clear goal compliments the narrative and helps to measure success—a particularly important factor if states or organizations commit troops.[20] External actors are, therefore, more likely to act in situations where there is this clear objective, rather than in situations that envisage a long, cultural process that has no end in sight. Importantly, regenerative reconciliation demands that the victim be placed at the centre of moral concern, but goal-oriented narratives obfuscate this by employing rushed, top-down, macro-level solutions. Normatively then, targeting

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regenerative reconciliation means having a desired outcome. This can be troublesome, especially with a normative framework that offers the international community a significant role. For example, the international response to Rwanda, despite its good intentions, was clumsy and threatening to regenerative reconciliation. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) left some 'Rwandans unaffected and unreconciled by [the politicized nature of] its measures'.^[21] Unsatisfactory efforts such as this not only make the victims resentful of external actors, but it risks leaving them disillusioned with reconciliation, making them less likely to fully engage with the long process.^[22] The dangers associated with this approach suggest this kind of reconciliation is at best inappropriate, but at worst it can inculcate new fear that generates further violence.

The maximalist conditions imposed by positive-peace approaches lead to unrealistic expectations of reconciliation. Each of Lederach's integral components are subjective concepts, sensitive to political context and personal interpretation. For example, a Western interpretation of justice created an inefficient, *ad hoc* ICTR, whereas a cultural understanding led to the *Gacaca* courts' unique blend of punitive and restorative measures.^[23] This contributes to what Hinton calls 'global/local friction', and what De Vos characterizes further as 'competing narratives and disconnects between global conceptions of justice and lived realities'.^[24] These 'disconnects' within Lederach's holistic approach lead to the alienation of certain, unfulfilled victims. There is the tendency for external actors to arrive at a conflict zone armed only with a moral imperative and to deploy their 'liberal normative goods'.^[25] This is harmful as regenerative reconciliation *cannot* be forced or pushed through, particularly by an actor other than the post-conflict state. Ideally, the conceptual demands could only be satisfied with a tailor-made process for *each* victim, perpetrator and bystander—leaving total regenerative reconciliation an unlikely eventuality.

This section has outlined the limitations of regenerative reconciliation. Wide conceptual interpretation signifies certain top-down structures are destined to alienate some victims. It has examined these weaknesses primarily from a theoretical perspective, as there is not sufficient empirical support to suggest it is anything other than an idealistic vision. Even South Africa, noted for its 'successful' reconciliation, does not exhibit effective positive-peace approaches: relying on amnesties instead of judicial power.^[26] Reconciliation as regenerative, therefore, is not an appropriate term. However, stripped of its unrealistic humanistic expectations, reconciliation regains its relevance, and can be properly applied to future situations. This will be examined in the following section.

Why It Is Appropriate: 'Thin' Reconciliation

In the case of 'thin' reconciliation, post-conflict scenarios that exhibit minimal levels of trust, peace, or justice demonstrate how a more minimalist interpretation of reconciliation is realistic and, therefore, appropriate.

Firstly, this essay must defend the legitimacy of functional reconciliation, as there are those who contest whether this minimalist approach to peace-building merits the label of reconciliation.^[27] Simply, it is justified by its relative effectiveness. When adapting reconciliation to a 'thin' interpretation of non-violence, there are ample examples of societies that are reconciling. Clark draws on her fieldwork in the Balkans to highlight societies that 'understood reconciliation in very minimalist terms'.^[28] Certainly, there remains tension and suspicion, but nonetheless, there is co-existence. Although it is not regenerative reconciliation as understood by Lederach, it is an important first step: a step that *can* be normatively discussed as it is stripped of much of the emotion and psychology that is central to a deeper state of healing. Functional reconciliation is, therefore, appropriate due to its reduced standards of basic security and non-violence, and its pragmatism, which Bloomfield contends, 'avoids ideals'.^[29]

Clark's work on functional trust is just one example of a minimalist approach to understanding reconciliation.^[30] The relationship between Rwandan *Gacaca* courts and justice is insightful. These courts provided an alternative to Western justice.^[31] It was a cultural legal mechanism that aimed to punish perpetrators, before reintegrating them into society. This represents functional justice as it is practical, it utilizes restorative justice, and it left many Tutsis in a position to 'move on'. Many scholars are critical of this process. Complaints over substandard judges, the quality of truth generated by the courts, and the suggestion that the entire exercise is designed to reinforce Hutu guilt are prevalent.^[32] It is an imperfect process whose flaws diminish its legitimacy. However, perhaps these critics are missing the point. Exacting justice in post-conflict scenarios is near-impossible. Prosecuting every *génocidaire* is illogical, while handing out amnesties is arguably immoral. What *Gacaca* does is give Tutsis their 'day in court.' The

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inconsistencies of the court mean a deep, regenerative healing might be unlikely, but it allowed Tutsis a position of judge and jury, in which their psyche can heal, and adjust to their new situation. This symbolic position of power counters the dehumanization they experienced as genocide victims. Consequently, the Rwandan ethnic conflict becomes less asymmetrical, allowing for greater engagement between the groups during the subsequent reconciliation efforts. Once again, this minimal level of transitional justice, as seen also in post-apartheid South Africa, is central to establishing non-violence, and *starting* the reconciliation process.

Bloomfield's work suggests a shift in rationale when approaching reconciliation. As a practitioner, he strongly advocates a process-oriented understanding of reconciliation, the first step of which should be 'co-existence'.^[33] As a term it demands less of victims, it is not weighed down by maximalist understandings of subjective concepts, and it represents a much more achievable 'end-state' in post-conflict reconstruction.^[34] It is also more acquiescent of negative-peace approaches, leaving states less vulnerable to clumsy Western attempts to *force* peace. Understanding reconciliation as a process is critical to its success. Reducing social, historical, and ethnic cleavages is a 'long process' that might take years for victims, perpetrators, and civilians to psychologically adapt and engage with their new situation.^[35] Following the Northern Irish ceasefire in 1994 for example, the peace process continues to this day.^[36] The negatively peaceful ceasefire led eventually to disarmament, the political normalization of Sinn Féin and relations that Prime Minister Cameron recently claimed to be at an 'all time high'.^[37] Negative measures are therefore constructive to the overall process, especially as a first step. Action such as disarmament and demobilization relegate external actors to a supervisory role, which has been effective in Nicaragua, Angola, and Egypt amongst others.^[38] This essay promotes an organic, internal process for reconciliation. Simply, nobody knows how to reconnect a nation better than those that experienced the violence themselves.

Targeting reconciliation through a process has other advantages. It can consign the cathartic moment of reconciliation, as envisaged by idealists, to a secondary objective. Instead, states can focus their efforts on other projects that slowly build trust and peace. The best example of this is Franco-German relations following the Second World War. Applying Maoz' joint-projects model, one can observe how mistrust and anger was slowly eroded during the cooperative construction of the European Union.^[39] Here, economic integration was the objective, while reconciliation was simply a welcome by-product.^[40] Hence, a 'thin' level of reconciliation is attainable without even explicitly targeting it. Economic and political stability are crucial to reconciliation, and are easily ignored when scholars submerge themselves in issues of trust, peace, and forgiveness, suggesting once again that an idealistic vision of reconciliation can be destructive.

This section has illustrated how, when stripped of its idealism, reconciliation is more realistic in post-conflict scenarios. Moreover, these reduced expectations can be achieved through uncontroversial negative-peace measures, which in turn limit the influence of external actors. It is important to conceive 'thin' reconciliation, or 'co-existence', as the first step of a lengthy *process*. Only then can victims truly re-experience what has happened, before actively engaging in reconciling their communities. This model, however, is still imperfect; the next section will build upon it to posit a more appropriate understanding of reconciliation.

Finding the Middle Ground?

Although empirical analysis suggests a more minimalist approach to reconciliation yields at least functional societies, there is, nonetheless, a lack of focus on reconciliation at a micro level, leaving victims unfulfilled at a personal level, which may prevent long-term peace. From an initial stage of 'co-existence', an ultimately regenerative reconciliation would be ideal; however, there is insufficient empirical support to suggest this can be normatively targeted. Although it is unlikely, the conceptual framework can be adapted to perhaps improve the odds of a more psychological reconciliation occurring.

The previous section outlined the capacity of 'thin' reconciliation to put societies in a position to move on. These measures, despite some degree of success, muffle the impact on a micro-level as they lack an element of contact. To cite Staub: 'real contact is important for the beginnings of positive connection'.^[41] Although this essay advocates a minimalist approach that demands compromise, it does not change the fact that the outcome of a reconciliation *process* should be citizens with a right to life, safety and happiness. This demands a normative framework that

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underlines the importance of bottom-up mechanisms that resonate on multiple levels. A complimentary approach between top-down and bottom-up approaches is valuable. Top-down focus should concentrate on the general stability of the state, whilst bottom-up 'activism' should slowly and informally tackle Lederach's components of reconciliation. By targeting regenerative benefits this way, states can avoid objectifying the goal of reconciliation and they can restrict the influence of external actors. A helpful comparison might be between Northern Ireland and the North Caucasus. Northern Ireland has (somewhat) reconciled using a mixture of the two. Pursuant to The Good Friday Agreement, a negatively-peaceful ceasefire is ensured from a national level.[42] Meanwhile, grass roots campaigns such as Ardoyne Commemoration Project engage with more emotional post-conflict issues at a local level.[43] Subsequently, controversial themes such as truth-telling can organically progress without being under the auspices of a politically motivated government. On the other hand, despite significant input from the international community, a lack of resources and will severely constricts the bottom-up activity in Chechnya.[44] No methods by which the warring factions can communicate and ultimately empathize perpetuate the distance between the groups. Hence, sporadic outbursts of violence since the First Chechen War in 1994 are unsurprising. Contact is a crucial independent variable in reconciliation theory, and a framework that values it is much more likely to lead to near-regenerative reconciliation.

In addition to contact, there is another element that must be incorporated into reconciliation theory: a stable state. There is a lack of literature concerning the significance of stability during reconciliation. History suggests that the stronger the state, the more likely the reconciliation. Northern Ireland and South Africa have reached some level of peace, and both exhibit stable democracies and possess relative wealth. Hope, too, is crucial: contentedness is important to reconciliation, and is likely to grow if civilians feel secure in terms of human, political, and economic security. A comparison between Zimbabwe and Angola is insightful. Both experienced civil wars, resulting in a 'peace process'.[45] Following a ceasefire, both employed the (dangerous) 'forgive and forget' strategy, encouraging citizens to start anew, and offering amnesties to perpetrators.[46] Today, Zimbabwe is in dictatorial turmoil, whereas Angola is thriving. Both attempted the ill thought-out strategy, so why the enormous chasm? Oil, perhaps. Since the conflict, Angola's GDP has sky-rocketed thanks to oil deposits in and around the country.[47] Since their conflict, Mugabe's isolated regime, in addition to destructive farming policy and widespread corruption, has left Zimbabwe 194th out of 195 countries in terms of GDP per capita.[48][49] Angola's sensible economic management and domestic policies elevated the state to a position where it was better prepared to begin an emotional process. This is doubly pertinent as it relates to both domestic action, and also input from the international community. So despite its unusually ineffective approach, Angola succeeded in quelling civil violence, putting them on the path towards a more complete reconciliation. Economic prosperity creates a positive effect for a state, and this 'feel-good' factor is more likely to result in friendly inter-group relations.[50] To normatively address reconciliation, therefore, perhaps there needs to be more attention focused first on the state, rather than its reconciliation process. From there, 'democratic reciprocity' beckons.[51] This end-state of re-humanization and equality can be achieved from a negative peace, and represents a realistic objective that benefits on both macro *and* micro levels.

Stability and contact are thus two crucial aspects that can improve 'thin' reconciliation theory. If citizens can be engaged with the process through contact and contentedness, a more substantial reconciliation might occur.

Conclusion

This essay argued that despite unrealistic expectations associated with 'thick' reconciliation, the practical realities and moral intent offered by 'thin' reconciliation thus far make it an 'appropriate term' in post-conflict scenarios. It has done this by first analysing reconciliation from a 'thick' peace-building perspective—pinpointing assumptions and conceptual themes that are counterproductive for achieving reconciliation. Second, it considered more minimalist approaches that result in functional reconciliation, and functional societies, and how these reduced expectations permit a more process-oriented approach to reconciliation. Third, in recognition that 'thin' reconciliation exhibits the most success in establishing non-violence, the essay took this important first step, and modified it to make it more inclusive of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Proponents of regenerative reconciliation must lower their conceptual demands, avoiding theoretical frameworks that explicitly target reconciliation itself as the goal of reconciliation. Instead, practitioners should first focus on stabilizing the state, offering victims a newfound sense of security and economic hope—which is what victims typically desire in the first place.[52] As a result, contentedness

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will improve, easing fears about engaging in a painful process. This essay still advocates a negative-peace approach, but there must be a greater emphasis placed on contact. Although co-existence is important, the process *must* go on to at least try and achieve something greater. Without micro-level engagement, the minimal levels of trust and justice will stagnate and possibly turn poisonous, resulting in unsustainable peace and, potentially, new violence.

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