

Reconciliation and the Church*

Christiaan Mostert

Abstract: This article explores the Christian doctrine of reconciliation with a particular focus upon reconciliation between the indigenous people of Australia and those whose ancestry lies in other continents. The Christian rhetoric of reconciliation, derived from its biblical roots, has to confront a tension between the theological truth and the historical reality of reconciliation. This leads to the question concerning the extent to which the church may claim to be a reconciled and reconciling community. While all claims about reconciliation are subject to the eschatological proviso, and hence to nuance, the church is nonetheless obliged and entitled to claim *something* for the power of the gospel of reconciliation, including the power to create a new, redeemed sociality. The biblical claim that Christ has brought Jews and Gentiles together in one body raises questions about the relationship between Christians and Jews today, as well as the relationship between Christians of different ethnicity. Though first a gift received, reconciliation confronts the church with many challenges.

*The reality of the Church comes to it from the eschaton, so the identity of the Church is not limited to its created history.*¹

I

IN THE BROADEST SENSE, RECONCILIATION is a relational term; it is about bringing into harmony two or more parties (individuals or societies), especially where there has existed disharmony or animosity, even violence, or different sets of ideas or programmes or facts and figures. Without being exhaustive, the term has a wide field of reference, pre-eminently the field of human relations but also the fields

* In writing this article to mark the Centenary of the Melbourne College of Divinity, I gratefully acknowledge help with research from Matthew Champion and collegial advice from Katharine Massam.

1. John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2008) 129.

of ideas and finance, as well as cognate areas. This article concerns reconciliation within human relations, itself a topic of immense scope. The overcoming of estrangement or hostility is desired, less often sought and even less often achieved between individual persons, families, communities, organisations, companies, tribes, churches and nations; and as often *within* these. Reconciliation presupposes difference, often seemingly irreconcilable difference, as between marriage or business partners who have come to be at odds, ethnic or language groups that have a long history of antipathy or outright hostility, churches that remain divided despite great progress in the modern ecumenical movement, or nations that have been at war and are faced with the challenge of bringing about a new way of relating to each other. Ultimately, the challenge for all is to embrace each other.²

In any society there are differences to be negotiated. It is fashionable to celebrate difference and to make a virtue of diversity, but in practice people right across the spectrum of philosophical and religious (or non-religious) convictions find this extraordinarily difficult. Tolerance only goes so far and inclusiveness quickly comes up against limits. The current discussion of the treatment of people arriving in Australian waters in fragile boats to seek asylum is only one example. Fears of being overrun by those who are different are easily aroused, certainly exploited. In many Western countries the wearing of a veil, especially the full *hijab*, by Muslim women is highly contentious, as it is even in modern Turkey, where Islam is the religion of most people. The buttons of intolerance are easily pressed wherever minority groups make their political, cultural or religious claims. Ethnic or tribal conflict still brings to the surface the most barbaric instincts of people, and not only in distant parts of the world. Ancient hatreds and fears are easily fanned. This is the undeniable context of any discussion of reconciliation.

In Australia the term *reconciliation* has come to have a very particular reference: the situation of discrimination by the majority, largely with European ancestry, against a small minority, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the indigenous people of this continent. It is indisputable that great injustices have been committed against them, including a near-successful genocide, and that injustices of one kind or another still mark the situation of many aboriginal communities.³ The history of the relationship between

2. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

3. See Frank Brennan, *One Land, One Nation: Mabo – Towards 2001* (St Lucia QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1995); Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance, 1788-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); Doreen Mellor & Anna Haebich (eds.), *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002); Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); A

indigenous people and later settlers is shameful in many respects, including the failure to count aboriginal people as part of the national population till May 1967. The limited recognition of land rights, part of the fiction that *Terra Australis*, the "Great South Land", was a *terra nullius*, a land over which no sovereignty had been held, is another injustice of long standing.⁴ This doctrine was not invalidated by the High Court of Australia until the Mabo Case in 1992. A further salient example of such injustice was the practice of separating aboriginal children from their families, which was official policy in many places in Australia from the middle of the nineteenth century till after the middle of the twentieth century. Although the practice largely came to an end in the 1960s – in some places a little later – it was not till February 2008 that the Federal Government and both houses of the Federal Parliament expressed a memorable apology to the "stolen generations", as they came to be called. It was offered "in the true spirit of reconciliation". Certainly, by this time it was widely agreed that reconciliation between aboriginal and other Australians was a lost cause without such an apology. In the event, the occasion was a profoundly moving one, not only for indigenous people. Even though the task of reconciliation still confronts us with enormous challenges, it was felt by many that a great stain had been removed from our soul.

The Christian church is an institution in which there is a strong rhetoric of reconciliation and an awareness that Christians are messengers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20). Every Christian community knows that where the unity of the church is broken by disharmony every effort must be made to bring those who are in conflict into reconciliation with each other. Some churches have a sacramental practice of reconciliation. If Christians are in any sense a reconciled people, reconciled with God and with others, they must *become* what they already *are*: a reconciled and reconciling community. Reconciliation is both a gift received and a task to be taken up. The harsh reality, however, is that the church remains divided and fragmented. Christians of different traditions or communions are not united at their central liturgical rite, the sacrament of Holy Communion. The ministries of their clergy are not mutually recognised across juridical and theological barriers. Even the recognition that other Christian

Rape of the Soul so Profound (St Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Henry Reynolds, *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Reflections on Race, State and Nation* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996); *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987); *The Law of the Land* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1992); *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History* (Ringwood: Viking, 2001); Tim Rowse, *White Flour, White Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. Or as Broome defines it, "waste lands for the taking". Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance 1788-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 26.

communities are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is made only with strong qualifications. Many churches have little or no sense that their very “ecclesiality” is conditional upon their being bound to other churches and open to them.⁵

The purpose of this essay is to explore the tension between the theological truth of the church and its empirical reality in the world of human communities. What does the church claim in its doctrine of reconciliation? Correspondingly, what does the empirical evidence suggest about the church as a reconciled and reconciling community? The church does not stand above the brokenness and the evil of a morally ambiguous world. It is not now, and never has been, in a position to claim the moral high ground. As with every other community, the best and the worst of human conduct co-exist in the church.⁶ We may be disappointed at this but we should not be surprised. Only carefully differentiated statements can be made about the church in terms of its being a reconciled and reconciling community. It is a “sign and instrument” of God’s intention for the world, a rough and broken sign, but something of this intention is actualised.⁷ As an eschatological community, the church already embodies something of what it is called to be, already experiences something of the reconciled life that is God’s gift in Christ and through the Spirit, but is painfully aware that this embodiment and this experience are not yet what they will come to be.⁸ The church is a people “on the way”, not yet arrived at its destination. Subject to this eschatological proviso and avoiding triumphalism, the church may yet claim something for the power of the gospel of reconciliation. The only alternative would be to dismiss such theological claims, especially as they bear on the church, as mere wishful thinking.

II

One of the foundational texts for a theology of reconciliation speaks of God as having “reconciled us to himself through Christ”, having given “the ministry of reconciliation” to Paul and his associates. Despite the term *reconciliation* and its cognates not being prominent in the New Testament – *katallage* and *katallassein* are found only in Paul –

5. See Christiaan Mostert, “The Church as an Echo of the Triune God”, in Eduardus Van Der Borgh (ed.), *The Unity of the Church*, Vol. 18, *Studies in Reformed Theology* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010) 293-305. See also Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998) esp. ch. 3.

6. It remains perplexing to many that some churches are unable to say that “the church sins”. See *The Nature and Mission of the Church, Faith and Order Paper 198* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), the box after §56.

7. *Nature and Mission of the Church*, §43.

8. “... there is a continual tension in the historical life of the Church between that which is already given and that which is not yet fully realised.” *Nature and Mission of the Church*, §52.

this metaphor of reconciliation has been adopted, notably by Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century and Karl Barth in the twentieth, to characterise the doctrine of salvation.⁹ It has always featured more prominently in Western theology than its Eastern counterpart, and has been more central in the theology of the Reformation, where it has been allied closely with the concept of justification.¹⁰ For Barth it embraced the whole range of Christian doctrine, notably christology and soteriology, and including anthropology, pneumatology and the church. But essentially it is about God: who God is and what God does in order to be God *for* us and *with* us. It is clear that God is not the object of reconciliation but its subject; we do not reconcile ourselves to God. Even where the message or ministry of reconciliation is mentioned, the act of reconciliation is no less God's. Reconciliation is a relational term; when Paul uses it he means that the enmity that exists between God and humankind is done away with and no longer characterises the relationship. In a typical sentence, Barth writes, "Our starting-point is that [the] 'God with us' at the heart of the Christian message is the description of an act of God, or better, of God Himself in this act of His."¹¹

Barth has elaborated in the greatest detail and in the most doxological terms what this reconciling act of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, means. In this act the history of God with the world becomes a redemptive history. God's eternal grace is active and revealed in it, and the antithesis between the Creator and his created other is overcome. It means more than simply that God is with us or on our side; it means – and this is the heart of the Christian message – that "God has made Himself the One who fulfils His redemptive will." This will is nothing less than giving us our life.

At the very point where we refuse and fail, offending and provoking God, making ourselves impossible before Him and in that way missing our destiny, treading under foot our dignity, forfeiting our right, losing our salvation and hopelessly compromising our creaturely being – at that very point God Himself intervenes as man.¹²

This is not simply an act of restoring the *status quo ante*; this is about bringing humankind to the Creator-creation relationship that was God's intention for us from eternity: that we should both "glorify" and

9. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, 3 volumes, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A.B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1900); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol IV/1 – IV/4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-69).

10. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1983) 2.177-82.

11. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, Vol. IV/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 6.

12. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/1, 12.

“enjoy” God forever.¹³ This is the fullness of salvation, “the presence of the *eschaton* in its fullness”;¹⁴ no small claim to make.

In the discussion of reconciliation through the centuries, the accent has been placed now on the objective, now on the subjective, aspect. Barth has accentuated the former, though not without a detailed statement about *our* being with God as the implied corollary of *God’s* being with us. In his emphatic accentuation of reconciliation as God’s act for us and among us, he insists no less vigorously that, far from being reduced to mere objects or spectators, human beings are “lifted up...awakened to our own truest being as life and act... set in motion by the fact that in that one man God has made Himself our peace-maker...” so that “we are made free for [God]”.¹⁵ This is to speak of what takes place “in the subjectivity of believers”,¹⁶ *i.e.* in their actual day-to-day existence. Pannenberg argues that it is necessary to distinguish – not, of course, to separate – the act of God for the reconciliation of the world and people’s “entering into the reconciliation that is thus opened up for us”,¹⁷ and to which God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ is oriented. Paul’s urging of the Corinthian Christians in Christ’s name to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20) makes little sense apart from this distinction. Intending a strong, ontic sense of the word “anticipation”, Pannenberg writes,

Only in the form of anticipation can we say that the reconciliation of the world has already taken place in the cross of Jesus. The issue in the history of proclaiming this event is the movement from anticipation to actualisation. To this extent the apostolic ministry of reconciliation is itself reconciliation, though it is the reconciliation once and for all effected by Jesus on the cross that is at work through the ministry of the apostles and the proclamation of the church.¹⁸

Barth is unwilling to make these two aspects of reconciliation appear to be of equal weight; the initiative and act of God are not to be compromised. The objective pole of the reality of reconciliation is so strongly emphasised – it is no longer possible for humankind to be the enemy of God – that he cannot give due consideration to the subjective pole. The “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) is a call to acknowledge what has been objectively achieved in Christ, no more. For Barth, “reconciliation in itself and as such is not a process which has to

13. The verbs are those used in the (1647) Westminster Shorter Catechism’s answer to the first question, “What is the chief end of man?”

14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/1, 13.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/1, 14.

16. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 412.

17. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 412.

18. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 412f.

be kept in motion towards some goal which is far distant. It does not need to be repeated or extended or perfected. It is...present in all its fulness in every age."¹⁹ However, it appears that, in Barth's view, if humankind does not acknowledge what God has done in reconciling us, our reconciliation with God is not thereby compromised or negated.

The force of Paul's appeal to "*be reconciled*", which he describes as God's appeal, seems to require a greater unity between the act of reconciliation in Christ and its actualisation in the lives of people at any given time. Simply expressed, if the world is not reconciled to God, reconciliation is not complete, no matter what God has done from God's side to effect it. Clearly, the role of the other party, the recipient of what God has done, needs greater recognition. Unless a gift offered is also received, the relationship between the giver and the one for whom the gift is intended remains unchanged. Pannenberg argues that the idea of reconciliation has its background in the practice of diplomacy, not the religious cult. Paul considers himself and others as "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20) through whom God is making his appeal for acceptance of the offered reconciliation. "Reconciliation is thus effected, but the other side has to agree."²⁰ Without reciprocity there is no real reconciliation. We may be overwhelmed by the grace of God, but our reality as subjects is not destroyed by it. The church's theology of reconciliation must be based on, but also extend beyond, the once-for-all event of the cross. The reconciling work of God, in Christ, includes the Father's sending of the Son into the world and the Son's giving up of himself even to the point of death on a cross, but also the church's ongoing ministry of reconciliation, through which reconciliation is still being effected.

It is clear from other parts of the New Testament, especially the letter to the Ephesians, that reconciliation cannot be restricted to the relationship between God and humankind, but must also include reconciliation between different groups of people. In a particularly strong passage the Pauline writer declares to his Gentile readers that Christ, through his death on the cross, has made Jews and Gentiles one people, reconciling both groups to God in one body (Eph 2:14-16). Gentiles were "aliens from the Commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise", but having formerly been "far off", in Christ Jesus they have now been "brought near" (2:12-13). The purpose of this act of Christ was to "create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (2:15). Together with Jews, Gentiles are now "members of the household of God" (2:19). Instead of a dividing wall, there is now peace between them, and Christ is that peace (2:14). In a commentary on this letter, Markus Barth argues that

19. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/1, 76.

20. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 428.

the church is constituted not by some unchangeable constitution or some perfection of its own, but by a threefold relationship: to Christ, to Israel and to the wider human society.²¹ First, in this letter Christ is the head of the body, the church, which in turn manifests the risen Christ in the world. He is “the indispensable ruler who dominates, as the life that quickens, as the Lord who protects, as the will that directs, or as the leader that nourishes the body”.²² Secondly, the church lives in a special relationship with Israel, in every sense of that name, a relationship marked by peace and solidarity. The church has always to remember that in the time before its own existence God already had a people, a household. The Gentile converts “*have* nothing – whether redemption, forgiveness, peace, access to God, or hope...which they do not have together with Israel”.²³ There is no getting around this truth, even if it be one that the church has constantly resisted. Thirdly, the church lives in relationship with, and has obligations vis-à-vis, all sorts and conditions of people. Christians are to live exemplary and neighbourly lives, clothed with their new self (4:24), imitators of God (5:1) and above all living in love as Christ has loved them (5:2) and walking as children of the light (5:8).

So far I have considered some major elements in the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. Here lies the basis for the church’s assessment of its life and work. Against the background of this theology of reconciliation we must ask about the church’s place in the world as a reconciled and reconciling community, its openness to the lordship of Christ in and over every aspect of its life and mission, its relationship with the Jewish people and with every community of people that inhabits this planet with it: people of all religions and none, people of other races and cultures, especially the indigenous people of this land, and all who for any reason are antagonistic to the church. This task will occupy us in the remaining parts of this essay.

III

If, in the church, the “near” and the “far” have been made a single community, a new humanity, it is not too much to claim that in the church Christ has formed a new sociality, understanding this term, as Daniel Hardy does, in the sense of a “social transcendental”.²⁴ This flows from the social character of human being as such; from the beginning, as it were, we formed societies rather than living

21. Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Collins, 1960) 106.

22. Barth, *The Broken Wall*, 108.

23. Barth, *The Broken Wall*, 120.

24. Daniel W. Hardy, “Created and Redeemed Sociality”, in Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (eds.), *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989) 21-47, esp. 35-42.

solipsistically. It belongs to our creation; we were “hard-wired” for it. The actual societies our ancestors formed were variable and were shaped by ecological, social, economic and relational factors. However, new circumstances can create new patterns, new forms of sociality. If the book of Acts is to be believed, the acceptance of the gospel of Christ crucified and risen gave rise to a new sociality, a *redeemed* sociality.²⁵ Christ himself was the peace between Jew and Gentile in the new social ecology; and by implication he must be the peace between all Christians who find themselves in conflict, irrespective of religious or other formation. In other words, Christ reconstitutes our sociality, and we form communities that are – or should be – different in some significant respects. The *Basis of Union*, on which the Uniting Church in Australia was formed in 1977 by the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, says that Jesus Christ, who “reaches out to command attention and awaken faith”, “in his own strange way...constitutes, rules and renews [people] as his Church”.²⁶ Part of this rule is his reconstituting them as a people again and again as they gather around Word and sacrament and open themselves to his renewing, reconciling work through the Spirit.²⁷ From there he sends them, reconstituted as his body, into the wider world with a ministry of reconciliation, to be exercised in word and action.

Particular aspects of sociality are reconstituted or redeemed. Like others, we form attachments to particular places, but these are relativised by the gospel. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14). Whatever we have, place, wealth and other things, we have “as though” we did not have them (1 Cor 7:29-31). Other aspects of social organisation are also changed; there are new customs, new laws, new institutions, a new narrative to frame our own personal stories. Existing power structures and relations are subverted. Outwardly the old lines of division stay in place, but they are also relativised. The head of the family would know that his slave is also a “brother”, for in Christ everyone is a brother or sister, or a father or mother. The symbolic world changes too: Christians communicate in a new language, live out of distinctive narratives and engage in new symbolic rites. The church is the place (literally and figuratively) in which new forms of sociality find expression. This is indeed a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a reconstituted sociality.

25. Hardy, “Created and Redeemed Sociality”, 45-47.

26. The Uniting Church in Australia, *The Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., §4.

27. “If Jesus Christ dwells in believers by the Spirit...then he is precisely thereby the one Lord who in the unity of his body binds together his own into the church’s fellowship.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 16.

In Bonhoeffer's terms, being Christian "means neither a destruction nor a sanctioning of the penultimate", but living in such a way that the ultimate passes judgement upon it.²⁸ To express this eschatological tension more positively, every aspect of life in the penultimate is received or undertaken in its relation to the ultimate.²⁹ In the strong sense of "anticipation" noted earlier, in everything penultimate the ultimate is anticipated. Here it is necessary to speak in pneumatological terms, not only christological, provided that the eschatological nature of the Spirit's work is recognised. It is by the agency of the Spirit that the life of the age to come is made real in the present. In Gunton's words, "the action of the Spirit is to anticipate, in the present and by means of the finite and contingent, the things of the age to come".³⁰ The penultimate is not destroyed but redeemed and reconstituted. What is known in alienation can be experienced as renewed. This is a matter of both gift and task; a new sociality is God's gift, but it is also our calling. When Margaret Mead addressed the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975 and saw before her people from virtually every part of the world she remarked, "You people are a sociological impossibility. You have absolutely nothing in common except your extraordinary conviction that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world."³¹ A Christian reading of this sees it as sociality renewed, indeed redeemed.

Yet the world is clearly not yet redeemed in its sociality, just as the church itself does not yet exhibit a truly redeemed sociality. By the grace of God and the anonymous activity of the Spirit, there are indeed instances of redeemed sociality in the church, but only in fragmentary, anticipatory form. This is a reminder of the eschatological nature of the church. If the church in its *koinonia* brings to expression a new form of sociality, however ambiguously and provisionally, it looks ahead to its full expression in the kingdom of God, *i.e.* when the reign of God comes in its fulness. For the church lives between the old and the new world. The kingdom of God has come in human history, yet the church prays daily for its coming, as Christ taught it to do. The new has indeed come, yet the old remains. The earliest Christian communities cried, "*Marana tha*" – Come, Lord!" (1 Cor 16:22), but it did not take the church too much time to see itself as a more or less permanent part of the landscape.

The church has never entirely lost its sense of the eschatological tension, but it needs constant reminding of its essentially

28. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville H. Smith, Fontana ed. (London: Collins, 1955) 133.

29. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 125.

30. Colin Gunton, "The Church on Earth: the Roots of Community", in *On Being the Church*, 48-80, esp. 61.

31. See Constance F. Parvey, "The Call to Assembly", *Liturgy* 7/1 (Summer 1987) 22-27, see p. 26.

eschatological nature. Because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, taken to be an eschatological act of God, the community of Jesus' followers came to understand itself as "the eschatological community called and chosen by God".³² This "elect" community (the *eklektoi*) came to be known – and is addressed in the Pauline letters as – the *ekklesia* of God. The church is not to confuse itself with the eschatological kingdom of God, but neither is it to dissociate itself from God's reign. The church is "directed towards and belongs to the coming reign of God".³³ Pannenberg makes this decisive for his doctrine of the church; "the church...is nothing apart from its function as an eschatological community and therefore as an anticipatory sign of God's coming rule and its salvation for all humanity".³⁴ The point has been made sufficiently strongly and widely in theology and the church for the WCC Faith and Order Commission to make it quite prominent in its consensus-testing statement on the church:

The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom. However, the Church on earth is not yet the full visible realisation of the Kingdom. Being also an historical reality, it is exposed to the ambiguities of all human history and therefore needs constant repentance and renewal in order to respond fully to its vocation.

On the one hand, the Church already participates in the communion of God, in faith, hope, love, and glorification of God's name, and lives as a communion of redeemed persons. Because of the presence of the Spirit and of the Word of God, the Church...is already the eschatological community God wills.

On the other hand, the Church, in its human dimension, is made up of human beings who...are still subject to the conditions of the world. Therefore the Church is affected by these conditions ...³⁵

Any claims made for the church as a reconciled and reconciling community must be made with careful qualifications, reflecting the eschatological tension in which the church's life in the world is inescapably bound. How is the church's history, including its present work of reconciliation, to be interpreted? This will be briefly considered in the final section, with reference to some particular areas mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

32. Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. R. Ockenden and R. Ockenden (London: Search Press, 1967) 81.

33. Küng, *The Church*, 95.

34. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 32. For a fuller account of the church in an eschatological perspective, see Christiaan Mostert, "The Kingdom Anticipated: The Church and Eschatology", *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, forthcoming.

35. *Nature and Mission of the Church*, §§48-50.

IV

From the outset of such an attempt, it has to be recognised that no-one, irrespective of personal beliefs and political commitments, is in a neutral position from which to understand and judge the past (or even the present). With varying degrees of awareness, historical evaluation is done under the influence, positive or negative, of the “reigning historical narrative”, which is no longer the Christian one.³⁶ Since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a pre-modern mythology has been replaced, not by a non-mythological secularist narrative but by the new *mythology* of a secular age. To call it post-Christian, which it undoubtedly is, at least in the Western world, is to say that Christianity has been “displaced from the centre of a culture and deprived of any power explicitly to shape laws and customs, and has ceased to be regarded as the source of a society’s highest values...and has ceased even to hold preeminent sway over a people’s collective imagination”.³⁷ One salient example, not unrelated to the theme of this essay, is the comprehensive rewriting of the history of the nineteenth-century missionary movement from Europe to Africa and India as entirely in the service of economic and political colonialism, with scarce recognition that the motives of some of those in missionary service were of a different order altogether.

In fact, it is impossible to know how well or how poorly the doctrine of reconciliation gave shape to the life and work of the church, both internally and in relation to those outside it. It is not uncommon to quote Tertullian’s line about how outsiders viewed Christians: “Look how they love one another (for they themselves hate one another), and how they are ready to die for each other (for they themselves are readier to kill each other)”,³⁸ but that really gives us very little to go on. Hart’s claim about the magnitude of Christianity’s effect on the history of the world seems quite defensible; he describes the radical nature of the new faith in late antiquity in these terms:

how enormous a transformation of thought, sensibility, culture, morality, and spiritual imagination Christianity constituted in the age of pagan Rome; the liberation it offered from fatalism, cosmic despair, and the terror of occult agencies; the immense dignity it conferred upon the human person; its subversion of the cruellest

36. I take this term from David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), but see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) for a much more technical discussion of Christianity as a meta-discourse and an argument that it should not surrender the claim to be such in the face of a postmodern secular social theory. His work is a challenge to the assumptions of the latter.

37. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 32.

38. Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 39, §7.

aspects of pagan society; its (alas, only partial) demystification of political power; its ability to create moral community where none had existed before; and its elevation of active charity above all other virtues.³⁹

But this does not mean that the church managed from its earliest times to escape the normal institutional flaws and failings, the inability to convert radical theological and inspiring moral ideas into concrete human relations, both within Christian communities and in their relations with non-Christians. Why indeed should one suppose that that the Christian message could “magically transform whole societies in an instant, or summon the charity it enjoins out of the depths of every soul, or entirely extirpate cruelty and violence from human nature”?⁴⁰ Extraordinary change is possible in human behaviour, probably even on a wide scale, but humankind remains in its essentially broken or “fallen” condition and the degree to which people can be transformed is both limited and highly variable. There is no need to evade the fact that Christians, like members of every other human society, fall short of spiritual and moral perfection, even when they take their faith with utter seriousness. When writers such as Richard Dawkins claim that religion is dangerous, because violent, or that faith is evil,⁴¹ the only possible reply can be that people kill for many kinds of reasons. “Some kill because their faiths explicitly command them to do so, some kill though their faiths explicitly forbid them to do so, and some kill because they have no faith and hence believe all things are permitted to them.”⁴² Some people give their religion a very bad name; others give it a good name. The same is true, of course, of any community, religious or non-religious. In the name of Christianity people have been reconciled across extraordinary barriers of enmity, while others have erected unthinkable barriers against fellow-Christians, not to mention others.

Reconciliation with God, as God’s own gracious initiative and gift toward humankind, is not capable of direct, empirical observation. Contrastingly, the reconciliation which human beings build with each other across formidable and sometimes long-standing barriers can be conspicuous, sometimes by its absence. The reconciliation of Christians across theological, ethnic, cultural and political barriers is uneven and very limited. In many respects attitudinal change over the last several generations has been remarkable, and some very significant

39. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, xi.

40. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, x.

41. For example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) ch. 1 and p. 308.

42. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 12. See also Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Books, 2007) ch. 4.

achievements have been reached at official levels. On the other hand, despite an impressive list of “united and uniting churches” around the world, the mutual recognition of ordained ministries across the barriers that separate episcopal and non-episcopal churches is disappointingly minimal and remains elusive. Yet churches around the world have been committed to the task of Christian unity ever since the first World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh in 1910, a unity much later articulated as

a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole of creation.⁴³

Speaking of the catholicity of the church, the World Council of Churches recently called the churches to a renewed commitment to the search for unity, and said, “Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfils its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches.”⁴⁴ This is the goal and many of the world’s churches, at least at the national level, see themselves as being on the way to it. The church does fall lamentably short of being a reconciled communion of churches, and yet in many ways it is a reconciling community. Indeed, it must be so if it is to be “a sign and instrument of unity among all [people]”.⁴⁵ Echoing this, Pannenberg argues that

because the kingdom of God has the concrete form of fellowship with God and others, the gospel as the message of reconciliation to God must everywhere lead to the founding of congregations that have among themselves a fellowship that provisionally and symbolically represents the world-embracing fellowship of the kingdom of God that is the goal of reconciliation. The fellowship of the church that the gospel establishes is thus a sign and a provisional form of the humanity that is reconciled in the kingdom of God ...⁴⁶

The doctrine of reconciliation is a doctrine of the church, but its scope includes the whole of humankind. It has in view the future of a humanity reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and thereby reconciled across all barriers and divisions of human history. In the New

43. “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”, the Canberra Statement of the World Council of Churches, 1991, §2.1.

44. “Called to be the One Church”, a statement from the Porto Alegre Assembly of the World Council of Churches, February 2006, §6.

45. Vatican II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”, (*Lumen Gentium*) (1964), §1.

46. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 462-63. See also Vol. 3, 31-32, 44-47.

Testament this primarily meant the division between Jew and Gentile, a matter of intense theological difficulty at the time. If it is an exaggeration to claim that there is a direct line from the anti-Jewish passages of the New Testament to the gas-chambers of Auschwitz, as Gerard Sloyan suggests, the theological anti-Judaism of some of the Church fathers, repeated in later times, played a much greater role in fuelling the persistent and indefensible hostility toward Jews by Christians over the centuries.⁴⁷ In recent decades the church has learnt that it has no right to claim the title "People of God" for itself alone; certainly it has not displaced Israel from this status. The "election" of Israel is inviolable, as Paul argued forcefully (Rom 11:29, in answer to 11:1).⁴⁸ If Christians see themselves in any sense as followers of Jesus, they "must also stand side-by-side with the Jews".⁴⁹ What this means in practice is a matter on which there is at present no consensus. As a community persecuted over centuries by Christians, the Jewish people are entitled to support from the church and did receive it between 1917 and 1947, when the independent state of Israel was established. The extent to which Israel is entitled to support for its current policies in relation to the Palestinian people is much more disputed. Theologically speaking, the terms of a new relationship with the Jewish people are also controversial: whether its status as the "People of God" can be divorced from its judgement about Jesus Christ and whether there should be a "mission" to the Jewish people.

The idea of the reconciliation of Jews and Christians requires more differentiated discussion. Unquestionably, for historical and theological reasons, they are destined to stand "side-by-side".⁵⁰ Politically, the overcoming of ancient enmity and the maintenance of friendly (but not necessarily uncritical) relations are sufficient to constitute reconciliation. Theologically, it would require agreement on the question of what it means to be a single "People of God".⁵¹ For Christians the core question would be whether their claim to be "exclusively identical with the eschatologically 'new' people of God" was premature; in other words, whether it would have been more correct to claim that this new people, comprising both Jews and Gentiles, was "a *provisional*

47. Gerard S. Sloyan, "Christian Persecution of Jews over the Centuries", www.ushmm.org/research/center/church/persecution/persecution.pdf, p. 11, accessed 19/4/2010.

48. See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 470-477, esp. 471, n. 98.

49. See Mark Lindsay, "The Identity of the People of God: Israel and the Church in the Theology of Markus Barth", unpublished paper, 9.

50. It is arguable that Islam, as the third great monotheistic religion, should be considered in this discussion as well. Its place is neither identical to that of Christianity nor altogether different.

51. When the New Testament claims that Christ has reconciled Jews and Gentiles "in a single body" to God and made them one (Eph 2:14-16), the context is clearly that of a common life in the church.

sign of a still awaited consummation".⁵² For Jews the question Christians would press would be whether its view of the identity of the God of Israel could be expanded to include a definitive self-disclosure in Jesus of Nazareth. From a Christian standpoint, the new covenant referred to by Isaiah (59:21) is indeed an eschatological reality, but one already proleptically (though imperfectly) actualised in the reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile Christians in a single community, the church.

In theological terms, the whole question of reconciliation, including reconciliation with God and reconciliation across human barriers, is set within an eschatological framework. No political order, whether religious or secular, can fully give expression in its various dimensions to a human community reconciled across all divisions. The church's claim to be a community in which reconciliation with God and with people across their divisions has taken place in a real but anticipatory way must be made (and heard) with this eschatological qualification.⁵³ Despite the claims of some particular churches, Christians do not participate in a common institutional life. Comprising people from (virtually) every nation and every identifiable community on earth, they are formed as a single people (or body) only spiritually, and acquire visibility as such only as a liturgical, i.e. eucharistic, assembly. Particular ecclesial communities can and do share a common institutional life, and are thus in a position to establish reconciled relationships with other particular communities, including Jewish communities. Thus some churches in Australia are in active conversation with the Jewish community, as indeed with other religious communities in this country. This dialogue is significant and does permit potentially divisive matters to be discussed before they do too much damage, but whether one can really speak of "reconciliation" depends on whether the theological or political/institutional sense of the term is primarily intended.

Much the same point can be made if we enlarge the focus to include other world religions. Apart from the World Parliament of Religions, recently held in Melbourne, there is little institutional structure for the multi-lateral encounter of representatives of the world's religions. In an increasing number of countries, however, there are communities of people who belong to religions once associated with other parts of the world, with whom a friendly dialogue is both possible and necessary. The fostering of good relations and better mutual understanding, the challenge of religious stereotypes and joint approaches to social problems all contribute to a kind of reconciliation, especially in a

52. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 476 (emphasis added).

53. This qualification applies to every claim made about salvation here and now. It can be expressed as something already reached, something currently being actualised and something yet to be arrived at.

climate in which there is a fear that some religions will legitimise the use of violence in the course of pursuing political ends. There may be a certain interest in exploring common ground at a theological, spiritual or philosophical level, but not of a kind that could realistically be considered an exercise in religious reconciliation. However, understanding at greater depth (and with greater accuracy) the character of other religions and especially the resources for promoting non-violence in these religions, including the religion of one's own culture, might well make a significant contribution to peaceful relations between them.⁵⁴ Regardless of what people of other religions threaten or do in the name of their God, Christians are committed to another way, one that renounces violence and vengeance, even though their history contains more than a little of each. Living peacefully with all people, so far as it depends on us (Rom 12:18) would be a constructive form of breaking the cycle of violence and counter-violence, and thus of being a reconciled and reconciling community.

To speak of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is to speak not only of a religious but also of an ethnic reconciliation. The religious and racial divisions which reconciliation presupposes and addresses cannot be separated. In life as distinct from theory they frequently coincide, each line of division reinforcing the other. Despite the theological truth of reconciliation in Christ, there are separate "black" and "white" churches in South Africa and in the USA, though there are also churches comprising both. Despite the end of *apartheid* as official policy in South Africa, *apartheid* is far from eradicated in that country. Even in the churches that were not officially racially divided it could be said that "Sunday morning and evening constituted the most segregated hours of the week."⁵⁵ It may not be well known outside South Africa that among the churches *apartheid* began in the Dutch Reformed Church, the primary Afrikaner church, with the decision to allow separate services of Holy Communion on the basis of skin colour.⁵⁶ It should not be thought, of course, that the challenge faced by the church even today applies only to South Africa. In Australia, where the indigenous population is numerically small, there are communities of aboriginal Christians but largely as part of the denominational structures established from the first British

54. See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 282-86.

55. E. A. J. G. Van der Borgh, *Sunday Morning – the Most Segregated Hour: On Racial Reconciliation as Unfinished Business for Theology in South Africa and Beyond*, inaugural lecture in the Desmond Tutu Chair at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam (Amsterdam: VU University, 2009) 11.

56. Van der Borgh, *Sunday Morning*, 14. Whites feared *gelijkstelling*, the giving of equal status to blacks, and the "nightmare scenario" of racial mixing.

settlement.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, national and ethnic identity is a significant factor in keeping churches divided, both internally and externally; the difficulty is seldom only theological. The Uniting Church in Australia is currently in the process of testing a proposal to amend its Constitution by the addition of a Preamble, the purpose of which is to acknowledge the spiritual heritage of indigenous people as well as the injustices of the churches' treatment of them in the past.⁵⁸ There appears to be strong support for a conciliatory statement of the kind intended, despite serious questions about the theological implications of clause 3 of the proposed Preamble.⁵⁹ With some other churches, the Uniting Church has acknowledged that many people in the churches which later formed the Uniting Church in Australia "shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples".⁶⁰

As early as 1988, the bicentenary year of the first European settlement on the east coast of Australia, the leaders of the major churches made a statement about a just and proper settlement of issues that keep indigenous communities disadvantaged. Four particular requirements for such a settlement were specified: a secure land base for dispossessed Aboriginal communities, a process for resolving conflicting claims to the land, a place for Aboriginal people in our political processes and a guaranteed future for Aboriginal culture and tradition.⁶¹ In ways which, for the most part, only local histories record, there have always been people whose sense of the implications of the doctrine of reconciliation was strong enough to make them stand apart from prevailing attitudes toward Aboriginal people. Writing in particular about the 1830s and 1840s, historian Henry Reynolds shows that "the missionaries, clergymen and other assorted humanitarians" took up the Aboriginal cause "when so many fellow colonists looked on with indifference or were keen to see the indigenous people and their legal rights trodden underfoot in the onrush of colonial

57. In some of the churches, the Uniting Church in Australia being probably the most prominent, there are also many "ethnic" congregations, respectively for people from a wide range of emigrant countries.

58. See "Frequently Asked Questions", *Proposed changes to the Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia*, August 2009; <<http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/preamble.html>>, accessed 26/4/2010.

59. This clause states, "The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways."

60. The proposed Preamble, § 5.

61. See Frank Brennan, *Reconciling our Differences: A Christian Approach to Recognising Aboriginal Land Rights* (Richmond VIC: Aurora Books, 1992) 105f.

progress".⁶² Reynolds writes that these humanitarians "may not have changed many minds, significantly altered colonial behaviour or moderated the violence out on the vast frontiers but they clearly troubled many consciences and raised questions which didn't easily go away."⁶³ Richard Broome sees the missionary contribution as a mixed bag, pointing out that many missionaries held "ethnocentric and racist attitudes"; they were "men of their time, equipped with the ethnocentric arrogance and racism of their fellow whites".⁶⁴

It is, of course, impossible and unnecessary to try to construct a balance-sheet, setting the challenge of Christians to the values and attitudes of their time against the acceptance by other Christians of precisely those values and attitudes. The churches in Australia are today well aware of the failures of earlier generations of Christians in regard to the treatment of our indigenous people, while at the same time gratefully acknowledging that there are outstanding examples of people whose ideas and actions went far beyond prevailing attitudes.⁶⁵ Christians have never ceased to preach reconciliation, but in practice, the challenge to express the gift of reconciliation of God with humankind in terms of reconciliation across human divisions has always met with widely varying response. The successes and failures, clear vision and blind spots do not simply cancel each other out; both require to be acknowledged.

V

One way or another, the Christian doctrine of reconciliation encompasses a huge amount, both in its core theological truth and in its implications. The church's claim to be a reconciled and reconciling community is at once necessary and risky. Theologically speaking, the church is both the recipient and the bearer of a message of reconciliation, the reconciliation offered to the world in the crucified, risen Jesus Christ. Empirically speaking, the church's continuing divisions stretch the credibility of its claims. The new redeemed sociality which the gospel creates is as much anticipatory as actual. For this reason, especially when existing models of ecumenism are felt by many to be irrelevant, it is critical that the ecumenical flame be kept

62. Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts* (St Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998) 22. The whole book is an account of people in early colonial society whose consciences were deeply troubled by prevailing attitudes to the Aboriginal population and whose words and actions were aimed at change.

63. Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts*, 13.

64. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, ch. 7, esp. 104 & 119.

65. Of many examples which could be given, see E. J. Stormon (ed.), *The Salvado Memoirs* (Nedlands WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1977) about the Benedictine mission at New Norcia; also Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007) about the Moravian mission at Ebenezer in the Wimmera.

alive. I have argued in this paper that the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles should also continue to be given high priority, and that the core theological issues that caused church and synagogue to separate in the first century CE should be part of the dialogue. Even if this were not to be fruitful in the short term, there is every reason to seek and consolidate such political and economic friendship as would constitute a meaningful kind and degree of reconciliation, as long as it is a friendship in which there is freedom to speak in critical as well as supportive terms. As suggested at the outset, an essay on reconciliation written in Australia can hardly fail to make some reference to the challenge of reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and those whose ethnic roots are in other parts of the world, and to the regrettable state of affairs which have made such reconciliation so urgent. Perhaps even more than in other areas, here the church's claim to be a reconciling community is most hazardous, just as it is in other places of ethnic conflict or division, particularly where there is long-term injustice on the part of settlers against an indigenous people. In this area of the church's experience generalisations are of very little worth. The history of the church's relationship with Aboriginal people in general, and of its efforts at reconciliation in particular, consists of innumerable stories, some of disastrous failures, others of laudable achievements. There is no excuse for the former and little consolation in the latter.

The church remains a community *in via*, living in a broken world between Pentecost and Parousia. It is called to acknowledge past and present failures to be a reconciled and reconciling community and yet to continue each day afresh with its ministry of reconciliation. It does so in the hope that the future reconciliation of humankind across all barriers will come in the fulness of time. It can never be satisfied with its achievements in the work of reconciliation, and yet it may be thankful that something of what it is called to be and do is realised in an anticipatory mode, an *already* corresponding to a *not yet*. Wherever this happens, it is a sign of God's coming rule and thus of the reconciliation of humankind with God and across all human barriers. There is both comfort and challenge in the truth that the identity of the church is established not only from its history but also from what is to come.