

**Reconciliation reconceived:
Religion, secularism, and the language of transition**

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In September of 2001, a former professor of religious studies named Charles Villa-Vicencio was invited to give the keynote address at the inaugural workshop of a new multidisciplinary research project at the University of Notre Dame, just outside South Bend, Indiana. The new project, sponsored by Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, was dubbed RIREC – shorthand for the Research Initiative on the Resolution of Ethnic Conflict. Villa-Vicencio's address to the RIREC workshop, entitled "Lessons from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," was drawn from his own personal experience with South Africa's path-breaking and internationally heralded attempt to come to grips with its violent past, to pursue national healing, and to build a bridge between the old Apartheid system and the "New South Africa."

Villa-Vicencio was well placed to speak about his country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, regularly referred to simply as the TRC. A veteran of the South African struggle against Apartheid, he had taken leave from his position at the University of Cape Town in order to serve as the Research Director for the TRC, coordinating an effort that eventually led to the publication of that commission's massive seven-volume report. With the major activities of the truth commission winding down—although the final version of its report would not be presented to South African President Thabo Mbeki until 2003, the first five volumes had been completed and published by 1998—Villa-Vicencio hatched a plan for a successor organization, a small NGO that would carry forward the work of promoting reconciliation started by the TRC. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation opened its doors in March 2000, just down the road from

the University of Cape Town, joining other local NGOs and civil society organizations in the ambitious aim of “transcending a century of injustice,” as South Africans continued to struggle through their storied transition “from Apartheid to democracy.” Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, the TRC’s charismatic chairperson, was named the Institute’s Patron—an exemplary model of the spirit of reconciliation to which the organization would aspire—and Charles Villa-Vicencio became its Executive Director.

A major theme of Villa-Vicencio’s presentation to the RIREC workshop that September day at Notre Dame was, inevitably, the question of “reconciliation.” Under the leadership of Archbishop Tutu, the quest for reconciliation and forgiveness had become a master narrative of the TRC, whose rituals of public truth telling were promoted throughout South Africa as “the road to reconciliation.” “We are a people who know,” the Archbishop had said in response to a confession offered before the TRC, “that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future.” Tutu’s theology of reconciliation and forgiveness proved resonant. “The process is unthinkable without Tutu,” the poet Antjie Krog (1998) would write in her emotionally charged account of the TRC, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. “It is he who finds language for what is happening... and it is this language that drags people along with the process.”

Villa-Vicencio’s own vision of reconciliation differed in important respects from that of the Archbishop. Perhaps most importantly, he was uncomfortable with Tutu’s close association between reconciliation and forgiveness, preferring an explicitly more “modest” conception of reconciliation that would not necessarily involve or depend on the prerequisite of moral absolution. Despite his apparently more “realistic” approach, however, he did not shy away from the lofty rhetoric often associated with the TRC’s rendering of reconciliation. Archbishop Tutu

had claimed that the relatively nonviolent South African transition was a “miracle,” and Villa-Vicencio, who had lived through that transition, was not beyond seeing things that way. “We were anticipating a bloodbath,” he told me later, expressing a frequently repeated perspective among proponents of reconciliation in South Africa. “The fact that we got away with a very messy negotiated settlement—shot through with compromises and negotiations and limitations and ‘yes buts’—is nothing short of amazing.”

In the popular imagination, the TRC’s dominant discourse of reconciliation—what anthropologist Richard Wilson has called its “religious-redemptive narrative” (Wilson 2001)—has come to be closely associated with South Africa’s “miraculous” political transition, an association even more pronounced among international observers of the South African saga. In the context of that transition, the nation’s search for reconciliation has been tied not just to the individual stories of confession and forgiveness that became the basis of some of the TRC’s most memorable public theater, but also to an innovative amnesty agreement that attempted to steer a middle course between the “blanket” amnesties associated with previous political transitions and the unimpeded pursuit of prosecution on the model of the Nuremberg trials. Many have claimed that without that agreement—which eventually resulted in the TRC’s uniquely individualized “truth for amnesty” arrangement—South Africans would have lost the linchpin of their negotiated settlement, an essential element of their successful transition.

By the time Villa-Vicencio addressed his Notre Dame audience in the fall of 2001, these associations were well known. In the aftermath of the South African commission, the language of reconciliation had proliferated widely, and the TRC was being repeatedly touted as an innovative “model” that transitional states in Africa and elsewhere might emulate. There had already been noteworthy emulation on the part of practitioners of “transitional justice” operating

in other national locations, and even more international attention on the part of academics, journalists and transnational activists. In the late 1990s, Antjie Krog had complained publicly about the dozens of scholars that were flooding South Africa to study the TRC, providing material for the stereotypical image of the jet-setting international academic who flew in for a few days of TRC hearings, a visit with Archbishop Tutu, and a trip to Kruger National Park. By 2001, Desmond Tutu was a much sought after global prophet of reconciliation, and others associated with the TRC—including Villa-Vicencio and the former Deputy Chairperson of the TRC, Alex Boraine—were traveling the world to talk about their experiences with the commission and the various “lessons” it might afford.

Although they were in no position to constitute their own national, state-sponsored truth commission, Americans seemed peculiarly captivated by the South African story of reconciliation.¹ In 1999, a group in Greensboro, North Carolina, began discussions that would lead to the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for that city, a truth seeking body charged with investigating the “Greensboro Massacre” of 1979, “as a means to fostering reconciliation and healing in the community.”² The Greensboro TRC would draw explicit inspiration from the South African commission. A year later, Princeton University Press published an edited volume entitled *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Rotberg and Thompson 2000). The product of a 1998 conference held in South Africa, the volume consisted almost entirely of chapters written either by U.S.-based academics or by South Africans associated closely with the TRC. At Emory University in Atlanta, the 2000-2001 academic year was christened the “Year of Reconciliation,” and Villa-Vicencio participated in one of numerous campus workshops, speaking about his role in the design of an MA “program in reconciliation,” offered jointly by three South African universities.³ “The world, especially the

United States, is much more fascinated and impressed by the TRC than people in South Africa are,” wrote Frederik van Zyl Slabbert a few years later, referring to his friend Alex Boraine’s successful academic adventures at New York University as “a case of the prophet not being honoured in his own country” (Van Zyl Slabbert 2003: 321). Meanwhile, new truth commissions were being formed throughout the world, including Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Nigeria, Peru, and Sierra Leone. “The truth business,” as Jonathan Tepperman wrote in a 2002 article for *Foreign Affairs*, was “booming.” So, one might convincingly suggest, was the business of “reconciliation.”⁴

Despite all the acclaim, truth commissions, and the reconciliation they sought, were not without their vocal critics. As a result of the prominence of South Africa’s TRC, wrote Reed Brody of Human Rights Watch, in a 2001 article for *The Nation*, the “international community” had become “blindly besotted with truth commissions.” The international human rights movement, he argued, was facing a “South Africa problem,” since the conditions that made the TRC a notable success were difficult to replicate elsewhere, though far too many were beginning to try. For Brody, as for countless other international human rights activists, the “heart of the matter” was “whether to prosecute those who have committed atrocities,” and in that respect South Africa was far from the perfect model. Truth commissions, Brody worried, were too easily “seen by abusive governments as a soft option for avoiding justice.” As for “reconciliation,” it was at best an ambiguous concept, difficult to define and “too contested an ideal on which to base policy.” Yet international donors were attracted to the “feel-good idea” of reconciliation, an idea that Brody contrasted with the “potentially messy affair” of retributive justice, “in which there are not only winners but losers.” Articulating a widely held view among human rights activists, Brody argued that the vigorous pursuit of prosecutions was the best way to advance an

ongoing struggle to “end impunity.” “The perpetrators of atrocities should be losers,” he wrote. “If the leaders used repression to empower themselves, then in an ideal transition they are disempowered, something that trial, conviction and punishment does most effectively” (Brody 2001).

Brody was not alone in his identification of a “South Africa problem,” and his serious reservations regarding the concept of reconciliation were representative of widely held concerns among human rights activists, academic analysts, and others within the rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field of transitional justice. Not all concerns about the TRC had the same source or rationale, however, and not all reservations about its quest for reconciliation were articulated in the same spirit. Indeed, some prominent academics had largely welcomed the discourse of reconciliation associated with the TRC, even when they viewed truth commissions as only one option among several, and not always ideal. Martha Minow’s consideration of the South African case provided a compelling centerpiece for her 1998 book, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, which represented the TRC as admirable in its pursuit of social and national healing. Truth commissions that pursued and promoted reconciliation could offer a viable, and at times a preferable, alternative to prosecutions, Minow suggested.

Others embraced the growing importance of truth commissions, while taking issue primarily with the South African approach to reconciliation. During a 1996 roundtable sponsored by the World Peace Foundation and held at Harvard Law School, a small group of scholars, journalists, and human rights activists were given the task of examining “the relevance and efficacy truth commissions and the truth commission concept.” South Africa’s TRC, then underway, was a recurrent topic of discussion. In one telling exchange, André du Toit, a

professor at the University of Cape Town who was involved in the commission's formation, noted a shift in the meaning attributed to "reconciliation" in the South African context. Initially discussed in political terms, he said, reconciliation in South Africa had taken a religious turn, coming to signify "something akin to forgiveness." Evincing concern over "the drift toward theological rhetoric in the South African case," Harvard political philosopher Dennis Thompson worried that his colleagues around the table were conceiving of truth commissions as inspired and informed solely either by "theology" or by "law." There had to be other alternatives. "How can we design a truth commission," he asked, "that does not get bogged down in legal procedures or the therapy of forgiveness" (Steiner 1997: 51)?

Along with Amy Gutmann, a Professor of Politics at Princeton University who would eventually go on to become President of the University of Pennsylvania, Thompson would later author an important contribution to *Truth v. Justice*. This chapter, on "The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions," considered South Africa's TRC as an example of a "paradigm" commission. Philosophically sophisticated and full of analytical nuance, Gutmann and Thompson's argument nonetheless extended an unambiguous critique of some of the TRC's fundamental and explicitly articulated ambitions. While Archbishop Tutu and others had voiced the hope that the commission's search for reconciliation would contribute to "the healing of the nation," what Gutmann and Thompson saw in Tutu's theological vision of reconciliation was the danger of a "deeply illiberal idea," an idea that involved the expectation that all of South African society would "subscribe to a single comprehensive moral perspective" (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 32).

Engaged in conversations with his RIREC colleagues, Villa-Vicencio was facing similar criticisms. Some in his audience in that inaugural workshop at Notre Dame were especially

mystified by the South African emphasis on “reconciliation.” As Villa-Vicencio recalled, the “secular academics” in the group reacted in a particularly “violent” way. “How can you call the South African project a ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’?” they stood up and asked him. The question was not an idle one. While a handful of significant “truth commissions” had been established prior to South Africa’s TRC, only one—in Chile—had prominently figured the notion of reconciliation. Other commissions had primarily highlighted their pursuit of truth, publicly construing their work as a matter of “inquiry” or “investigation.” In Guatemala, the truth commission was known as a “Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico” (Commission for Historical Clarification), and featured much less emphasis on reconciliation.⁵ South Africa’s TRC had been different, connecting the public articulation of “truth” with a national quest for “reconciliation.” While most in Villa-Vicencio’s audience were receptive to his compelling narration of the South African transition, however, there were those who thought he and others would do better to leave the word “reconciliation” behind. (One of the exceptions was the Mennonite theologian and Professor of International Peacebuilding, John Paul Lederach, who would later write a personal letter to Villa-Vicencio, encouraging him to hang on to the word.)

Villa-Vicencio’s response to the concerns raised about reconciliation that September day was to note that it was “a word that’s being adopted all over the world, whether rightly or wrongly.” If the academics in the room had problems with the word reconciliation, he suggested, why not “go and ask people out there what they mean by reconciliation.” Back in Cape Town, this was exactly what the staff of Villa-Vicencio’s new Institute would do. What they found, among the South Africans they surveyed, was that “reconciliation” was associated with a wide range of meanings, including a substantial association between reconciliation and “forgiveness.” Yet Villa-Vicencio was in broad agreement with Gutmann and Thompson’s view that

reconciliation ought not to be too closely tied to a theology of forgiveness, and in the very same newsletter in which the results of the Institute's initial survey on reconciliation were reported, he articulated a vision of "political reconciliation" that emphasized the pursuit of "peaceful coexistence" and the importance of "learning to live together," rather than the more "intimate" and theologically-loaded concept of forgiveness (Villa-Vicencio 2003).

There is little doubt that Villa-Vicencio's own conception of reconciliation had changed and developed significantly over time. Ordained as a Methodist minister, in the 1980s he joined a group of South African religious leaders who articulated a "prophetic theology" for the South African situation, collectively arguing that there could be "no true reconciliation and no genuine peace *without justice*."⁶ By the time he and others launched the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, his understanding of the relationship between reconciliation and justice had been turned around somewhat, and he had come to see practices of reconciliation as an important step along a path toward greater justice. While in an earlier period reconciliation had been conceived largely as a goal whose attainment required major social and political transformation, it could also be seen as a process through which such transformation might be further pursued. "Today," he told me a few years later, "I would want to take a more pastoral approach to reconciliation...and I would want to say that reconciliation can in fact be the vehicle through which we attain justice."

If Villa-Vicencio's ideas about reconciliation had changed over the years, so had—and so would—the views of others. The discussions of the Kroc Institute's RIREC workshop turned out to be one of the many venues in which such changes were manifest. Describing the debates over reconciliation that took place during his 2001 visit to Notre Dame, Villa-Vicencio recalled that the philosopher Pablo de Greiff, one of the participants in the original RIREC workshop, was at

the outset one of his “staunchest critics.” A professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, de Greiff had just become the Director of Research at the International Center for Transitional Justice in New York City, a recently established international NGO, amply funded by the Ford Foundation and led by Tutu’s former Deputy Chair at the TRC, Alex Boraine. While he was initially critical, however, by the time the RIREC workshop participants met again the following year, de Greiff—who would later defend a conception of reconciliation that was closely tied to the establishment of “civic trust”—appeared to have changed his mind somewhat, and his estimation of the value of “reconciliation” seemed to have shifted.

The shifting personal perspectives of Villa-Vicencio, de Greiff, and others theorists and practitioners of reconciliation were, it should be emphasized, not simply a matter of individual changes of heart or mind, but embedded in and consonant with a broader series of historical changes. As proponents of reconciliation in South Africa moved from the challenges of political struggle to the compromises of political transition, and as a South African tale of “truth and reconciliation” subsequently became a familiar subject of intense international scrutiny, increasingly diffuse conceptions of reconciliation were being subjected to a contentious set of historical transformations.

By the time Villa-Vicencio gave his talk at the RIREC workshop, signs of a burgeoning “field” of transitional justice were emerging. Not only had the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) recently been founded, but academics were increasingly turning their attention to the various issues raised by truth commissions and reconciliation, as well as to questions specific to other modalities of transitional justice, including the push for reparations and the operation of international war crimes tribunals. These developments occurred in tandem, and were importantly related, though I

will not consider them in detail here. What I want to emphasize, however, is the fact that such developments were marked by increasingly widespread debate over the relationship between the institutional efforts of truth commissions, the promotion of reconciliation, and the pursuit of “justice in transition.” In the context of political transition, some charged, processes of “truth and reconciliation” were little more than a poor substitute for the criminal justice that ought to have been meted out in response to human rights abuses committed under previous regimes.

Proponents of reconciliation such as Desmond Tutu responded by claiming that the pursuit of reconciliation carried out by vehicles of transition such as the TRC were, in fact, concerned with questions of justice. But this was justice of a different sort. Tutu and others referred to the efforts of the TRC as an exercise in “restorative” justice, an emphasis that resonated well with the concept of “reconciliation,” which might be defined in a fairly general way as “the restoration of right relationship.”⁷ Yet even as the stakes and substance of the international debate over reconciliation and justice seemed to some to be settling into a somewhat predictable pattern—with champions of a “prosecutorial approach” in the human rights movement being pitted against mostly South African proponents of “reconciliation” and the “restorative approach” to transitional justice⁸—developments within the field began to call the sharp distinction between these two models into question. Perhaps the two approaches were not as mutually exclusive as the debates sometimes seemed to assume.

As these debates continued, and as the field developed and expanded, discourses of reconciliation proliferated. Thus, the expansion of the field of transitional justice corresponded with an extension of reconciliation’s transnational reach. There was not simply a proliferation of a singular discourse, however, but rather a *profusion* of multiple discourses of reconciliation. The meanings associated with the word multiplied madly, as new definitions, typologies, and visions

of reconciliation sprouted in the offices of NGOs, at international conferences, on the op-ed columns of prominent newspapers, and within the pages of academic books and journals—not to mention in the programmatic statements of newly emerging truth commissions. Some of these renderings of reconciliation drew substantially on the well-established religious origins of the word, while others sought distance from its theological inflections and assumptions, pursuing instead an association with the wildly prolific tropes of “democracy,” “human rights” and liberal “tolerance.” At the same time, there was no small amount of promiscuous mixing of reconciliation’s various significations—indeed, the South African TRC’s own representations of reconciliation had amounted to an only loosely unified amalgamation of meanings and associations—and this gave rise to the production of still further discursive hybrids.

In the midst of this profusion there was also struggle—not simply between advocates of restorative justice and human rights activists firmly wedded to the widely cited “duty to prosecute” (although such debates were considerable and significant), but also among the proponents of reconciliation themselves. What emerged from this were a series of competing conceptions of reconciliation, each vying for prominence within the emerging field. While the South African TRC had been an important site of such contestation, both national and international—and was, I would suggest, a pivotal and field shaping “historical event” (Sewell 1996)—the debate soon emanated outward, taking on a semi-autonomous shape of its own. And in the process, as “reconciliation” came in for both global celebration and vigorous critique, the shape of its dominant meanings shifted.

Although it would be misleading to chart a uniformly linear or strictly developmental trajectory for theories and discourses of reconciliation, historical patterns do emerge. The most significant of these patterns, from my perspective, has been a trend towards the attempted

“liberalization” and “secularization” of reconciliation discourse, especially among elite international actors, the globetrotting cosmopolitans who occupy influential positions within global civil society. If the results of these attempts have been uneven, as specifically theological and at times anti-liberal discourses of reconciliation continue to resonate widely, they nonetheless help to illuminate powerful political currents and intellectual presuppositions within the elite segments of transnational society. In their most familiar, forthrightly theological formulations, theories of reconciliation challenged the secular, broadly liberal orthodoxies that reign within this sphere. Such theories were—and are—in this sense, heretical, representing the articulation of a distinctly heterodox position.

Broadly considered, the recent historical transformations of “reconciliation” might be traced through three major periods, as the language of reconciliation has been mobilized in the multiplying contexts of: struggles for national liberation; state-sponsored truth commissions such as the South African TRC; and an international organizational field that has sprouted to manage and assist the politics of transition. Simplifying considerably, we can identify the prominent theories of reconciliation that circulated during each of these periods—being taken up and defended to a greater or lesser extent, depending on historical, social and institutional context—by referring to the ways that such theories emphasized one or more of the conceptions of reconciliation represented in the two-by-two table below.⁹

Conceptions of Reconciliation

	“Individual”	“Collective”
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“Religious”	<i>“Forgiveness”</i>	<i>“National liberation”</i> <i>“National healing”</i>
“Secular”	<i>“Tolerance”</i>	<i>“Civic Trust”</i> <i>“Amnesty”</i>

Modifying a pair of interrogatives once put forth by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), the typology I have laid out above seeks to show how some of the most general and widely circulating meanings of reconciliation can be represented, by investigating how they answer the following two questions: Whose reconciliation? Which rationality?¹⁰ First, it attends to the ways that rival conceptions differ regarding the level—“individual” or “collective”—at which reconciliation is taken to operate most appropriately. Second, it attends to the competing rationalities—“secular” or “religious”—that are taken to underpin and inform different understandings of reconciliation’s appropriate articulations and aims. Asking both questions, and seeing how their different answers intersect to generate distinct conceptions of reconciliation, lays the basis for an examination of the historical trajectory of dominant conceptions of reconciliation through each of these three periods. From their articulation in a substantially theological, anti-state, movement discourse of liberation, to their close associations with the “forgiveness” and “amnesty” of the state-sponsored TRC, to their “secular” and “liberal” reformulation at the hands of elite academics and transnational activists, conceptions of reconciliation have undergone substantial transformations, transformations that can be both traced historically and analyzed sociologically.

In South Africa, Apartheid-era debates over reconciliation—carried out in the public sphere and specifically in the theological field—led to the generation of theories of reconciliation that emphasized liberation and political struggle, conceptions laid out in an attempt by avowedly radical proponents of “just war” (against agents of the Apartheid state) to distinguish their political and theological visions of reconciliation from those offered by a more “mainstream” opposition, one that figured reconciliation as the hoped for outcome of nonviolent “witness” against oppression. Both sides in these debates drew substantially on theological traditions, and

these conceptions of reconciliation were figured largely in collective terms. Under Tutu's leadership, the TRC continued this emphasis on reconciliation as both a theological ideal and a collective social end. But it also worked in the context of a larger process of national transition that made reconciliation a prominent part of political, nation-building discourses, in which the prerequisite of the "political" was something like "secularity" (nonetheless, secular and religious discourses of reconciliation in South Africa remained difficult to pull apart, even in this more narrowly political realm, though some would try). The TRC brought the specifically theological concept of reconciliation more fully into the political realm, making it an integral part of the stated purposes and day-to-day workings of the state-sponsored commission.

Significantly, the commission also mixed discourses of reconciliation with an individualizing discourse of "human rights"—becoming widely associated with tales of personal forgiveness and individual healing (or lack thereof), but also with the specter of impunity. Reconciliation in the TRC was associated with attempts to build a "human rights culture" in the new South Africa. But it was also associated, in both South Africa and around the world, with individual amnesty for some of those who had committed human rights abuses, with challenges to its authority to grant such amnesty, and with the images of forgiveness its leaders hoped would accompany the amnesty process.

In my estimation, it was largely the international prominence of the TRC that brought concerns about the specifically "religious"—and, more particularly, Christian—connotations and assumptions of reconciliation discourse to the fore. It's not that these issues were absent from the debates in South Africa that accompanied the TRC. Such debates—interestingly and importantly—did occur. But as the TRC garnered increasing international attention, debates over its religious particularity proliferated, expanding well beyond South Africa's borders. Critiques

of the overt religiosity associated with the South African quest for reconciliation eventually led to attempts to transform the concept, with the aim of making it more widely, and less controversially, applicable to situations of national transition and the post-transition politics of peace and justice. I take both Villa-Vicencio's articulation of a "political" conception of reconciliation and de Griefff's elaboration of a conception of reconciliation as "civic trust" to be significant examples of this trend. On the level of the "individual," more overtly secular representations of reconciliation forwarded its potential associations with liberal "tolerance," as an antidote and preferable alternative to both the political valorization of "forgiveness" and the frequently ambiguous rhetoric of "national healing" (a rhetoric that sometimes mixed Christian discourses of reconciliation with more therapeutic tropes of personal and social repair).

The history of reconciliation's intimate associations with amnesty—and thus, in the eyes of some, with impunity—was a slightly different matter. For transnational activists and human rights lawyers who had cut their teeth in the context of Latin America, the aversion to the rhetoric of "reconciliation" was a strong one—precisely because it was seen as just that, a rhetorical subterfuge intended to hide the grim reality of the state's failure to carry out its "duty to prosecute" perpetrators of human rights violations. The association of reconciliation with the history of impunity in Latin American countries such as Argentina and Chile was thus one important source of critical responses to the South African TRC, where the offer of amnesty was individualized and made demands of those who would apply for it, but resulted nonetheless in amnesty for some of the most notorious agents of the Apartheid state. Politically, one activist scholar told me, the conjunction of "truth and reconciliation" in Latin America had sought to satisfy claims emanating from both ends of the political spectrum: "truth" was for "the left," and "reconciliation" for "the right." Some would attempt to apply a similar logic to the South African

situation, a comparison that threatened to miss the different trajectories and significations of reconciliation in that context. But the South African TRC's visions of reconciliation had seemingly made the prospect of political amnesty more palatable, and as a result both the TRC and its prominent conceptions of reconciliation became a lightning rod for debates over amnesty within the human rights movement, and within the "international community" more broadly. Reed Brody's diagnosis of a "South Africa problem" was one indication of this, and his concerns were widely shared by other advocates of the "prosecutorial approach."

Significantly, the typology I have produced here has no place for critics of reconciliation such as Brody, since they generally have not put forward a positive conception of reconciliation of any sort. They are an integral part of the story, however, in good part because of their powerful presence within the international human rights movement. When such critics have approved a specific conception of reconciliation, it has most often been an ostensibly "secular" one—and, indeed, the relationship between concerns about reconciliation's association with amnesty have frequently overlapped with concerns regarding its Christian vision of political forgiveness and national healing. Yet this does not represent an essential connection. "Secularism" and "liberalism" (including liberal commitments to the "duty to prosecute" those responsible for human rights violations, a point of view associated with "mainstream" human rights organizations and their representatives) are often closely related. But, depending on how each is formulated, they need not be. Religious liberals and secular non-liberals are not a complete anachronism, and their defenses or critiques of reconciliation should not be overlooked.¹¹ Moreover, distinct efforts to "secularize" and "liberalize" the concept of reconciliation do not require, and have not always involved, the same sort of intellectual or political work, nor had the same sort of discursive and political effects. For example, while the

attempted secularization of the concept of reconciliation has involved efforts to loosen the grip of its theological underpinnings and complicities—and in particular its strong association with forgiveness—such efforts have not always overlapped neatly with attempts to sever it from a close association with amnesty, or to critique it on the assumption that such a dissociation was relatively unviable. Put somewhat differently, while for some the problem with reconciliation has been largely its seeming justification for various state failures to exercise a “duty to prosecute,” for others the essential problem has been located elsewhere—not in reconciliation’s associations with impunity, but in its established affiliations with Christian theology.

According to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for instance, any amnesty-granting truth commission “carries a heavy moral burden,” since it would sacrifice the pursuit of justice in the name of truth and reconciliation. “In a democratic society,” Gutmann and Thompson have written, “and especially in a society that is trying to overcome injustices of the past, trading criminal justice for a general social benefit such as social reconciliation requires a moral defense if it is to be acceptable” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 22). Yet while Gutmann and Thompson—whose analysis, like so many others, took South Africa’s TRC as its exemplary case—concluded that such a defense of amnesty would in the last analysis be feasible, they remained noticeably skeptical of the overt religiosity with which reconciliation was represented in South Africa, and with its close associations with a theology of forgiveness.

Critically considering both therapeutic and theological approaches to the understanding (and moral justification) of truth and reconciliation commissions, as well as their civic and seemingly more secular (and liberal) cousins, Gutmann and Thompson suggested that an adequate defense or justification of a justice-sacrificing truth commission would be moral in three important respects. In keeping with a “consistent democratic perspective,” it would be

moral in principle, moral in perspective, and moral in practice. By *moral in principle*, Gutmann and Thompson meant that the justification would “explicitly appeal to rights or goods that are moral and therefore are comparable to the justice that is being sacrificed.” By *moral in perspective*, they meant that the reasons offered by such a justification ought to be “as far as possible broadly accessible and therefore inclusive of as many people as possible who seek moral terms of social cooperation.” Given “the need for citizens of a morally pluralistic democracy to work together in seeking fair terms of social cooperation,” this requirement of inclusiveness demands, ideally, a justification that “cannot reasonably be dismissed by people who seek moral terms of cooperation.” And by *moral in practice*, the authors meant that the justification “should offer reasons that are to the extent possible embodied or exemplified by the commission’s own proceedings” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 23). Since the possibility of just punishment was sacrificed in order to create a truth commission, the commission itself—and not simply future government policies or programs—should involve compensating practices, practices which concretely justify the sacrifice of justice.

In addition to considering “realist” and “historicist” responses to the moral burden of truth and reconciliation commissions—which emphasize necessary political compromise on the one hand, and the establishment and acknowledgement of past wrongs on the other—Gutmann and Thompson also considered responses that emphasize reconciliation, restoration and forgiveness. How well had these “compassionate” approaches to truth and reconciliation—theological, therapeutic, and civic—lived up the “moral burden” imposed by the TRC’s “sacrifice” of justice? As the theoretical umbrella of these various approaches, they wrote, *restorative justice* “remains a relatively undeveloped conception of justice” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 29). Yet, in the name of victims of historical injustice, this incipient alternative conception of justice did offer an

explicitly moral response to Gutmann and Thompson's burden, thus meeting their first challenge. Nonetheless, they questioned the extent to which truth and reconciliation commissions "actually serve the victims who testify before the commission as well as these justifications claim" (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 30). Citing reports from Cape Town's Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Torture indicating that "50 to 60 percent of the victims they had seen suffered serious difficulties after giving testimony," they suggested that claims regarding the promotion of individual healing needed to be carefully considered, especially in light of the limited counseling resources the TRC employed (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 30).

The most demanding of Gutmann and Thompson's criticisms of the so-called "compassionate" approach, however, were reserved for "proponents of forgiveness" such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. "The difficulty," they wrote, "is that many victims do not share Archbishop Tutu's Christian faith, and even those who do may hold a different view about the appropriateness of forgiveness in such situations" (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 30). To Tutu's spectacles of forgiveness and personal reconciliation, therefore, Gutmann and Thompson counter-posed a South African story indicating the limits—and indeed, refusal—of forgiveness. Careful not to dismiss the goal of forgiveness out-of-hand, they nonetheless suggested that forgiveness was an aim that might be "reasonably" resisted, thus challenging its ability to meet the requirement of inclusiveness:

Many citizens (including the victims themselves) may reasonably believe that it is morally inappropriate to forgive people who are unwilling to be punished for their crimes or unwilling to offer their victims restitution. Many may also reasonably think that although forgiving does not logically entail forgetting, it makes forgetting much easier, and the crimes of apartheid should not be made easier to forget (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 31).

Not only had restorative justice of the South African variety problematically emphasized forgiveness and therapy, it had done so at the apparent expense of "establishing a more

democratic society for all South Africans who are willing to recognize the reasonable demands of a democracy” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 32). As such, it failed to be as inclusive as it might.

This was an important and illuminating aspect of Gutmann and Thompson’s critique, and it deserves particular attention. If reconciliation was taken to mean “comprehensive social harmony,” then the authors perceived it to be a profoundly *illiberal* idea. “Reconciliation,” they wrote, “is an illiberal aim if it means expecting an entire society to subscribe to a single comprehensive moral perspective...Reconciliation of this comprehensive sort is also deeply undemocratic. A democratic society should still seek reconciliation on some fundamental matters of political morality...but a democratic society that strives for consensus on such fundamental matters of political morality must still recognize that moral conflicts in politics more generally cannot be overcome or avoided” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 32-33).

Reconciliation of this “comprehensive sort” would thus be problematic for reasons particular to liberal or democratic political theory, reasons closely tied to what Gutmann and Thompson call the “requirement of inclusiveness” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 23).¹² If the project of reconciliation involved seeking “comprehensive social harmony,” then it would fail to respect reasonable moral pluralism, a form of respect central to liberal democratic societies. Likewise, although Gutmann and Thompson did not make this point entirely clear, reconciliation-as-forgiveness would also be suspect for similar democratic or liberal reasons, to the extent that the concept of forgiveness is particular to a “single comprehensive moral perspective,” or what political philosopher John Rawls called a “comprehensive doctrine.” In the context of a truth commission—a public, state-sponsored institution that is one element of a transitional political project aimed at creating a more democratic society—the official invocation

of forgiveness represents an unwelcome intrusion of religious discourse into the public, political sphere.

To what extent does this line of thought help illuminate Thompson's earlier worries—articulated in the context of the roundtable discussion on truth commissions at Harvard Law School—that truth commissions under leaders like Tutu could get “bogged down in the therapy of forgiveness”? Such worries might be seen as of a piece with the broadly liberal concern to keep the invocation of particularistic religious commitments from undermining the deliberative potential of public reason. But they also might be read as an explicit manifestation of an otherwise partially obscured secularist antagonism, a hostility toward the specific substance of Christian theologies of forgiveness, and indeed, more generally, toward those conceptions of reconciliation tagged as specifically “religious,” and therefore out of touch with secular realities and inappropriate to the public sphere.

As Gutmann and Thompson would write, “If ‘the healing of the nation’ is taken to mean forgiveness by the victims and repentance by the perpetrators of apartheid crimes, it is a utopian aim, and not even a positive one” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 32). Indeed, in their own outline of a possible justification for amnesty-granting truth commissions, Gutmann and Thompson would approvingly cite Arendt's declaration that “only love has the power to forgive,” and “love...is not only apolitical but antipolitical” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 39). Their version of liberal democracy and disagreement would therefore not require democratic citizens to “love,” but rather to develop, in the name of reciprocity, some degree of respect for one another. Acting in accord with a principle of the “economy of moral disagreement,” such citizens would “search for significant points of convergence between their own understanding

and those of citizens whose positions, taken in their more comprehensive forms, they must reject” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 38).

With this model of democratic deliberation and disagreement in sight, the discourses of reconciliation prominent in South Africa’s TRC begin to look especially suspect. Although Gutmann and Thompson were at pains to emphasize the successes as well as the limitations of the South African model, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that their ideal truth commission would look quite different. In particular, it would resist demands for convergence around one particular rendering of a repressive history, and—in the name of inclusion and respect—also resist a discourse of reconciliation that emphasized public calls for forgiveness or aimed to produce psychological or spiritual redemption. In the context of such a commission, benevolent acts of forgiveness would be considered “supererogatory” and thus officially unexpected (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 42). “Reconciliation” would be re-figured as a somewhat more mundane—as opposed to transcendent or transformational—task. It would be a matter not of absolution or admiration, but of “civic acknowledgment” and “recognition” (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 39). Thus—or so it seems to me—although critical of certain prominent renderings of reconciliation, Gutmann and Thompson did not reject the concept of reconciliation outright, but rather sought to re-articulate it to fit their own democratic aims and liberal dispositions.

Returning to the question of amnesty and forgiveness, impunity and theology, when Gutmann and Thompson located in certain South African representations of reconciliation a “deeply illiberal idea,” they were responding in good part not to the amnesty provision of the TRC, but rather to the theological particularity of Archbishop Tutu’s vision of truth and reconciliation. Drawing implicitly on a specific “mode of secularism,”¹³ their aim was to make a

case that truth commissions, properly established and conducted, could in fact meet the complaints of their critics with a “robust justification for their moral foundation,” and without necessarily foregoing the provision of amnesty (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 42). Indeed, as we have seen, the task of their entire argument was set by the demand that truth commissions meet the “heavy moral burden” imposed by amnesty provisions. In contexts such as South Africa’s TRC, they argued, which involved the “sacrifice [of] the pursuit of justice as usually understood for the sake of promoting other social purposes, such as historical truth and social reconciliation,” a truth commission whose moral foundations were based on “democratic reciprocity” represented the best alternative (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 22, 35-38). Yet reconciliation (appropriately understood) remained, in this argument, closely associated with amnesty. Thus, the thrust of this argument was not simply to critique the language of reconciliation as a form of ideological cover for the unpleasant reality of amnesty, nor to show how the two concepts had been unhappily married in South Africa and elsewhere. That task would be left to others.¹⁴ From Gutmann and Thompson’s perspective, the dangerous illiberality associated with prominent South African conceptions of reconciliation lay not, fundamentally, in their association with political amnesty, though the sacrifice of justice such amnesty involved did impose a substantial burden on the institutional bodies and political processes that granted it. Rather, it was the close association of reconciliation with the language of forgiveness that needed to be guarded against. For the concept of reconciliation to be serviceable, it would need to be secularized.

Issuing in good part from their own approach to deliberative democracy, Gutmann and Thompson’s critical response to the South African TRC sought to assimilate “reconciliation” to liberal democratic theory, cautioning in the process against potentially illiberal understandings of

the concept. To the extent that the pursuit and promise of reconciliation was at odds with their deliberative conception of democracy, or with the fundamental value of democratic reciprocity around which that conception was constructed, it was the approach to reconciliation—not the democratic theory—that would have to give. Reconciliation would need to be reshaped in light of the norms and ideals that characterized a liberal—and secular—model of democratic deliberation. But to what extent must reconciliation be at odds with liberal theories of democracy? Just how compatible is reconciliation with political liberalism?

This is precisely the question taken up by political scientist Daniel Philpott. Reconciliation, Philpott has argued, referring both to its recent proliferation in contexts of transitional justice and to its ancient and theological roots, “goes beyond politics as usual”—and to the extent that it does, it is in tension with liberalism. Indeed, from Philpott’s point of view, it is difficult to see how the approach to reconciliation associated with South Africa’s TRC could be adequately defended or embraced from within liberalism. “The liberal tradition,” he writes—having just rehearsed the perspectives of a range of liberal critics and defenders of reconciliation, including Gutmann and Thompson—“yields too many strong objections and does not provide strong warrants of its own for viewing justice as centrally concerned with the restoration of wounded individuals and relationships” (Philpott 2006b: 40). In this light, any “properly deep arguments” or “grounds” for reconciliation—theological or otherwise—are “likely to lie outside liberalism” (Philpott 2006b: 41).

At the same time, Philpott suggests, a productive “association” between reconciliation and liberalism “may not be entirely impossible” (Philpott 2006b: 41). Given the “promise” of reconciliation, he writes, “we should not abandon hope for the prospect of grafting reconciliation into liberal thought” (Philpott 2006b: 13). Yet the graft of reconciliation will only hold if the

form of liberalism to which it is attached is suitably receptive. Adopting certain attributes not always associated with contemporary versions of political liberalism—such as a flexible view of retribution and a chastened version of the public-private distinction—this form of liberalism would also “renounce any strong requirements for ‘public reason’ and be open to importing into the political order concepts whose roots lay in theology or other comprehensive conceptions” (Philpott 2006b: 41).

Thus, while Gutmann and Thompson were significantly wary of a conception of reconciliation with close associations to, and ethical roots in, a “comprehensive moral perspective,” Philpott would argue that these suspicions—and by implication the assumptions and presuppositions associated with them—must be revisited and rethought, with a view to easing the tensions between reconciliation and liberalism. And while Gutmann and Thompson suggested that reconciliation be reconfigured in order to fit more smoothly with their model of deliberative democracy, Philpott would suggest nearly the reverse—attempting to motivate a reconfiguration of widely held liberal understandings of democratic deliberation and public reason, a rethinking of liberal theory prompted by both the promise and the challenge associated with political theologies of reconciliation. The upshot, only hinted at and hoped for in the context of Philpott’s book chapter, would be an alternative conception of democratic deliberation. This conception would call for, among other things, a reflexive reconsideration of the secular demands associated with political liberalism and the idea of public reason. And, in doing so, it would involve the articulation of a form of liberalism that would open more space for the legitimate circulation of explicitly theological conceptions of reconciliation, both within the workings of truth commissions and other transitional bodies, and within broader public spheres.

Within the increasingly vast scholarly literature devoted to reconciliation, truth

commissions, and transitional justice, it has become commonplace to highlight the “religious” and even “theological” dimensions of reconciliation. Yet—the iconic importance of Tutu, along the efforts of Philpott and others, notwithstanding—political theologies of reconciliation continue to occupy a relatively uneasy place within both the international field of transitional justice and the world of liberal political theory. Much more common than defenses of such theologies, especially among the elite segments of the field, have been efforts to tame, to contain, and to substantially reconceive reconciliation. Thus, while it would be misleading to suggest that Gutmann and Thompson’s critical approach to reconciliation be taken as paradigmatic or representative, or even to suggest that they are important players within the wider field of transitional justice, their push to secularize reconciliation is indicative of a broader trend among both liberal theorists and elite practitioners.

What have been the results of these and other efforts to “secularize” reconciliation—or to significantly “dissociate” conceptions of reconciliation from “religious or spiritual concerns”?¹⁵ This is an empirical question, and not one that admits of any easy answer, especially given the proliferation and profusion of “reconciliation” discourses to which I have referred. While I have suggested that there has been a trend towards the *attempted* secularization of the concept of reconciliation within the elite and cosmopolitan segments of a loosely defined field of transitional justice, I would not argue that such attempts have resulted in anything like widespread uniformity or consensus. Here, as elsewhere, the extensive usage of the word “reconciliation” continues to hide a great diversity of meaning. Reconciliation, wrote Jonathan Tepperman in 2002, has come to be a “much used” but “seldom defined” word. On the contrary, I would suggest. While reconciliation has indeed been a “much used” word, it has also been much defined. The wonder of reconciliation is not an absence of definitions, but an abundance of

meanings.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that sharp distinctions between the “religious” and the “secular” are themselves particularly difficult to draw. As scholars of religion and the secular have increasingly emphasized, these categories are not only inextricably interdependent and frequently overlapping, they are also shifting and contingent, contested and contestable.¹⁶ In this light, the typology I have laid out above, with its rigid distinction between secular and religious conceptions of reconciliation, appears as something of a fiction. And—of course—it is. Yet it is not without it a certain analytic utility, I would suggest, since it helps to illuminate an important dynamic at play in recent engagements with the politics of reconciliation, as secular forces have confronted calls for forgiveness and promises of redemption within a still evolving conversation about truth, justice, and transition. To investigate these recent attempts to secularize reconciliation, as I have only just begun to do here, is neither to seek an essentially religious origin or identity for the concept of reconciliation, nor to plot a linear historical narrative for the concept’s recent development or deployment. It is, rather, to ask whether these discursive efforts, along with various responses and resistances to them, may not themselves have represented and initiated “breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones” (Asad 2003: 25)—and, if so, to suggest that these breaks, along with the shifts that they have marked and enabled, are worth exploring further.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ Proposals for a United States “truth commission” have referred overwhelmingly to South Africa’s TRC. For a detailed argument in favor of such a commission, see Valls 2003a and Valls 2003b. President Clinton’s Commission on Race, Valls suggests, looked in some ways like a truth commission, but was significantly different in important respects (for more detail, see Valls 2003b: 166).

² <http://www.greensborotrc.org/>

³ <http://www.emory.edu/PROVOST/ReconciliationSymposium/>

⁴ There has been a great deal of writing, academic and otherwise, about reconciliation, truth commissions, and transitional justice, and in particular about “truth and reconciliation” in South Africa. And the books and articles keep coming. Among the several recent books on reconciliation in South Africa, see especially Doxtader (forthcoming) and Philpott 2006a.

⁵ The full formal name of the Guatemalan commission, translated into English, was the *Commission to Clarify Past Human Rights Violations and Acts of Violence That Have Caused the Guatemalan People to Suffer*. See Hayner 2001, and Ross 1999.

⁶ The results of these explicitly “prophetic” efforts were published as *The Kairos Document*. On the Kairos theologians, see Doxtader 2001 and de Gruchy 2002.

⁷ On reconciliation as “restoration of right relationship,” see Philpott 2006b: 14.

⁸ This master distinction was employed by Leebaw (2002), among others.

⁹ Two-by-two tables, it seems, have a relatively long history in American sociology. Stephen Turner suggests that Samuel Stouffer was responsible for their introduction in the early 1930s, reporting a bit of disciplinary folklore involving an incident in which Stouffer showed Paul Lazarsfeld how to use them—on a cocktail napkin (personal communication, December 4, 2005). Perhaps the most widely known example of the two-by-two table is Talcott Parson’s formulation of AGIL—adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency (Parsons 1961). A more recent and prominent usage is Michael Burawoy’s formulation of four types of sociological knowledge in his ASA Presidential Address on “public sociology” (see Burawoy 2005).

¹⁰ I am borrowing here from MacIntyre only in a very rudimentary way.

¹¹ Consequently, while one might elucidate some of the various strands connecting the presuppositions of liberalism and the forces of secularism in the context of debates over reconciliation, secularism and liberalism should at least provisionally be considered as distinct. As William Connolly (1999: 10) has put it: “Secularism and liberalism are connected, though neither is entirely reducible to the other. There are instances of theological liberalisms and non-liberal secularisms.”

¹² For a detailed treatment of the shared theoretical perspective that formed the background for Gutmann and Thompson’s intervention in the debate over reconciliation and truth commissions, see Bashir Bashir’s chapter in this volume.

¹³ For “modes of secularism,” see Taylor 1998. Following Taylor, one mode of “secularism” can be seen in demands that a political ethic be defined and justified independent of any particular religious tradition or even of any specific moral philosophy. A more general understanding of “secularism” is that it involves an assumption—articulated variously—that religious commitments, values, and language do not have an appropriate place in public debate or political discourse. See also the discussion of multiple understandings of “secularism” in the introductory chapter of Taylor 2007 (forthcoming). Asad (2003) seeks to situate the political ethic of secularism by attending to the “practices” and “formations” of “the secular.” “Secularization,” the term most familiar within sociology, is both a project and a process. Often seen as a “macrosocial” phenomenon—as in the well-known and now widely critiqued “secularization thesis” (crudely summarized as the claim that modernity generates the decline of religion)—processes of secularization can nonetheless be figured in more fine-grained ways. For a “rethinking of secularization,” see Smith 2003.

¹⁴ “Reconciliation,” writes Richard Wilson in his book about truth and reconciliation in South Africa, “was the Trojan horse used to smuggle an unpleasant past (that is, impunity) into the present political order, to transform political compromises into transcendental moral principles” (Wilson 2001: 97).

¹⁵ The verb “to secularize” may be defined, as it is by the OED, as an effort to “dissociate from religious or spiritual concerns.” While not the only available definition of the term, this is nonetheless closely connected to a widely held understanding of secularization, as José Casanova has emphasized. “As indicated by every dictionary of every Western European language,” Casanova writes, secularization “refers to the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use, possession, or control” (Casanova 2006: 7-8).

¹⁶ See Connolly's (1999: 21-22) critique of "the OED story," to take only one example, as "a partisan secular history of the sacred/secular division in the West, adopting as neutral terms of analysis several concepts and themes that became authoritative only through the hegemony of secularism."