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Can Churches Contribute to Post-Violence Reconciliation and Reconstruction? Insights and Applications from Northern Ireland

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In Northern Ireland, the churches could be judged to be hopelessly implicated in a violent, sectarian system. However, some have argued that religiously informed reconciliation could or should be part of Northern Ireland’s uneasy – and sporadically still violent – post-conflict transition. Their arguments are based on the assumption that while the conflict in Northern Ireland cannot be considered strictly religious, it has had religious dimensions. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the Northern Ireland case while asking how its churches might contribute to post-violence reconciliation and reconstruction.

Much of the research on the role of religion in Northern Ireland has emphasized reconciliation. But as Maria Power observes, ‘The terms “reconcile” and “reconciliation” are incredibly problematic within the Northern Irish context and a definitive definition has yet to emerge’. Similarly, John Brewer, Gareth Higgins and Francis Teeney argue that reconciliatory discourses have been divisive in Northern Ireland because reconciliation means different things to people, and because reconciliation’s advocates have focused on personal relationships at the expense of socio-structural forms of reconciliation. Despite these misgivings about reconciliation, I argue that a return to reconciliation could provide a focus for Christian activists to contribute to Northern Ireland’s transition. Drawing on the work of three prominent organizations – Corrymeela, the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) and Evangelical...
Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI) – I identify two main themes in their approaches to reconciliation: reconciliation is relationship-centred, and includes addressing socio-structural aspects of sectarianism. ECONI adds a valuable emphasis on critical self-reflection and repentance. In recent years, discourses of reconciliation have slipped somewhat from Northern Ireland’s public agenda, and the emphasis on relationship-building has been lost along with other socio-structural aspects. Joram Tarusarira and I have identified this tendency also in Zimbabwe, although here Christian activists have emphasized relationships at the expense of structures. Accordingly, we ‘advocate incorporating the term reconstruction as a companion to reconciliation, seeing this as an effective way to encourage the intentional reform of social structures’.6 That is why the title of this chapter includes both terms.

Transforming relationships and structures are difficult tasks, particularly in a context where Christian activists have limited political power and diminished influence. In this Northern Ireland is not unique, as churches and Christian activists also have limited political power and diminished influence elsewhere due to secularization (i.e., in the West) or oppressive states (i.e., some African nations). In their relatively powerless positions, Christian activists could adopt some of the tactics of new social movements. By that I mean grass-roots-focused tactics that attempt to transcend the structures of Northern Ireland’s sectarian system, deliberately working outside that system in an attempt to subvert it. These tactics include educational programmes, adopting the principles of ‘neo-monastic’ living, and liturgical reforms. Such seemingly small actions can demonstrate to others that there are ways to transcend the sectarian system. If Northern Irish Christians consistently employed these tactics, they might begin to regain some moral authority. This would make them better placed to contribute to a wider, secular, civil-society-based movement that could challenge politicians and policymakers to make political decisions that could dismantle and reconstruct Northern Ireland’s sectarian system. Religiously motivated activists in other contexts could learn much from the ways these groups have drawn on and continue to develop the religious resources of their own traditions in their work for peace.

Analyzing reconciliation

The case for Christian activists to return to reconciliation must be grounded in the approaches to reconciliation already developed in Northern Ireland. Previous research has emphasized that it has been