

Book review

Marius J. Nel, Dion A. Forster, and Christo H. Thesnaar (editors) 2020. Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Violence in Africa: Biblical, Pastoral and Ethical Perspectives. Stellenbosch: SUNPress. ISBN: 978-1928480525.

There is no shortage of scholarly contributions grappling with the key concepts of “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” as it pertains to the African and more poignantly the South African context. These notions have a longstanding, yet, contested history and evokes an array of responses ranging from cheering enthusiasm to utter despondency. This contestation has to be understood in relation to the various forms of historical violence inflicted on the peoples of Africa as well as ongoing debates concerning the need to come to terms with the systemic nature of such violence. For the most part, reconciliation and forgiveness and its seemingly contradictory relationship with violence elicit further debates. The question thus remains: at the intersection of ethics and theology, how does one engage such complexity in a way that is distinct from what we have seen and heard before?

The volume *Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Violence in Africa: Biblical, Pastoral and Ethical Perspectives*, edited by Marius J. Nel, Dion A. Forster and Christo H. Thesnaar attempt to do just that, seeking new innovative ways to explore such ethical dilemmas from three distinct disciplinary perspectives. If looking for quick fixes, even worse, simplistic notions to deal with complexity is what you are after, you may want to look elsewhere, because this interdisciplinary effort provides the reader with a nuanced understanding of reconciliation, forgiveness, and violence in various contexts. This is done with a view to arriving at a theo-ethical juncture that engages notions of human dignity (and flourishing) at a deeper level. Clarified in the introduction, is an understanding recognizing the complex nature of human dignity as a concept. In turn, this invokes careful and robust consideration in the process of theologising, moreover, providing interested parties with the space to go beyond simplistic utilitarian conventions. The point is that a multifaceted understanding of the dignity of human persons has a direct bearing on ethical approaches with the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation.

This theme is further developed and outlined by the volume's contributors who provide vivid historical examples of how reconciliation, forgiveness and the connection to various manifestations of violence is enacted in various places on the African continent. Although somewhat limited geographically, this ranges from examples coming from South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, as well as Burundi. Nevertheless, there are three disciplinary or thematic areas that the contributors explore. Here they draw on their expertise in Biblical Studies, Practical Theology and Systematic Theology.

First, the first three chapters deal with reconciliation, forgiveness and violence from a New Testament perspective. The question addressed throughout is premised on a socio-historical hermeneutic, ranging from the Jewish messianic hope in the light of the violence inflicted by the Roman Empire. Moreover, how such violence, evil as it might be, is constructively transformed through the Messiah's atoning work. Thus, enabling an environment for reconciliation to be manifested in concrete terms. Here the focus is not only on the first-century adherents of the faith but also what this means in the contemporary context. In other words, how, in the light of political, social and economic strife is the Christian narrative to inform and redefine human relationships amid the alienation and estrangement experienced today?

Second, the next three chapters approach the matter from the perspective of Systematic Theology. Drawing on an empirical study the complexity of the politics of forgiveness amidst the challenges of socio-economic inequality based on race is explored in more detail. In turn, this invites notions of de-coloniality, or a postcolonial hermeneutic, as a means to reimagine how Jesus ministry is to find renewed relevance in pursuit of a flourishing created order. At the very least this means, coming to terms with societal structures that limit human flourishing. In this regard, the structural violence of empire and how this impacts on Christian perceptions of the Missio Dei is highlighted. This provides the framework for a renewed focus on how such violence impacts and undermines the most vulnerable in society.

Third, the next three chapters approach the matter from the perspective of Practical Theology. With many expectations not met and the absence of an

effective strategy to redress past injustices the relative peace experienced in countries like South Africa could indeed be described as a “frozen conflict” of sorts. In this context, the Christian community, through a proposed contextual pastoral approach, is challenged to address the lack of enthusiasm coming from the government, civil society and the religious fraternity in coming to terms with these unfulfilled expectations. Not entirely new, of course, but once again the Christian faith is cited as a means to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation amid tensions brought about by ethnic tension and political unrest in places like Burundi, as well as Nigeria. Here the focus is on the need for a contextual pastoral hermeneutic as a means to mitigate some of these challenges. This leads the reader to the final chapter of the volume, highlighting the difficulty of a reconciliation that is inextricably tied to justice. The advantage of this approach is the fact that there is broad consensus that reconciliation will only succeed if it includes the restoration of justice. Moreover, through this interplay, the reader is reminded of the need for an embodied reconciliation to effectively address justice-related issues on the continent.

Overall, Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Violence in Africa is a thought-provoking and analytically helpful contribution. It addresses some established assumptions as far as the subject matter goes and presents the reader with a well-integrated collection of chapters. The contributors’ diverse perspectives guided by their respective areas of expertise creates a synergy that stimulates as much as it challenges, prompting the reader to think beyond their area of specialization.

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