

Book Review

**Reconciliation in Divided Societies:
Finding Common Ground**

by Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin

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University of Pennsylvania, 2007, 338 pages*

Daly and Sarkin base their inspiration to write *Reconciliation in Divided Societies* on their realisation that, despite 'the enormous amounts of political and economic capital being spent in transitional nations on reconciliation-promising projects, there is almost a complete failure to understand reconciliation and to confront its multitudinous and sometimes contradictory relationships'. Despite the authors' legal backgrounds, this book attempts to develop thicker conceptions of reconciliation that encompass a range of disciplines, including theology, political science, sociology, psychology and economics, as well as law. In his foreword to the book, Desmond Tutu describes the resulting text as the first 'comprehensive effort ... to ask the difficult questions and develop a full idea of what reconciliation actually means'. As someone who lives and works in a jurisdiction still struggling to come to terms with the meaning of reconciliation, I wholeheartedly agree.

The book opens by exploring the history of reconciliation within political transitions, its appeal for leaders in transitional states, and the tools of transitional justice that could help to achieve it. The authors then address the first of their two basic goals: to 'deconstruct the current understanding of reconciliation by analysing various strands'. These strands represent the 'layers' at which reconciliation can occur: individual, communal, national and international. The layers are explored to identify individual and group needs for reconciliation and to suggest holistic approaches that transitional governments can adopt to promote reconciliation at each layer. Daly and Sarkin argue that transitional governments should 'spend their limited capital creating political and economic structures that are rooted in the needs of the particular society at that time, but that are inclusive enough that all people in the polity are able to participate in public life on an equal footing', rather than focusing their efforts on backward-looking policies. The approach is significant as it highlights that transitional justice should be designed to address the unique conditions within the transitional societies rather than simply applying existing international models.

The exploration of the 'layers' of reconciliation is extremely useful for illustrating why perceptions of the impact of different transitional justice approaches may differ, depending on the objectives for which the measures were designed and on the understandings of reconciliation among stakeholders. Despite these valuable insights, the authors reach the conclusion that understandings of reconciliation which 'stress inter-personal relationships' are not satisfactory for 'explaining what reconciliation can contribute to the process of political transition'. In attempting to address this issue, the authors make their most significant contribution to our understandings of reconciliation.

Daly and Sarkin propose that transitional governments should adopt forward-looking approaches that focus on creating political and economic structures to address the needs of all sectors of society, rather than concentrating their limited resources on the crimes of the past. The authors contend that such policies should aim to 'bring people together', to restructure society and develop community. They argue that achieving such goals could require substantial reforms, including reforming the 'judiciary, police, military and educational institutions'; 'addressing issues of language, political participation, and economic equity'; and 'developing a national narrative that would reflect and respect the values and experiences of all the different groups'. This is clearly a more structural approach, emphasising the establishment of inclusive institutions and the creation of 'common destiny', rather than focusing on the 'psychological aspects' of reconciliation and demanding 'agreement on specific aspects of the past'. The authors believe that such forward-looking approaches could contribute to creating a 'new paradigm' in which all groups have a common view of the future and all feel committed to working towards it.

The authors recognise, however, that such forward-looking approaches could be criticised as 'unprincipled' where they prioritise the goals of peace and coexistence over justice for victims. They argue, however, that where a transitional government is faced with serious threats from the *ancien régime*, 'reconciliation may be less costly, more peaceful, and ultimately more effective than any alternative'. They further argue that reconciliation could be viewed as principled where 'it accords with other values of the transition, respect for individual dignity and promoting a culture of human rights and community integrity', and where it protects human rights today rather than threatening the peace and provides a framework for former adversaries to coexist within a diverse community. In exploring the view of sceptics that reconciliation represents a denial of justice and undermines the rule of law, the authors respond that 'a reconciliation program may avoid punishment but it must not appear to condone the actions of the perpetrators'. They argue that restorative justice, which can encompass truth and forgiveness, 'may have more success in

ending cycles of violence' than retribution, particularly where distinguishing between victims and perpetrators is murky and 'borrowing Western conceptions of justice may be inimical to the local culture'. This more flexible approach to addressing past crimes is a positive development, as the recognition of such policies as legitimate tools of transitional justice creates more space for fledgling governments to design policies that are responsive to the particular conditions within their states.

The conclusions reached in this book are based on extensive analysis of the current writings in the field, as evinced by the detailed bibliography. These conclusions are supported by extensive use of case studies from all regions of the world. The authors' writing style in explaining their conclusions makes the book enjoyable to read, as it is clear, direct and accessible but also very engaging. In pursuing an interdisciplinary approach to reconciliation, the authors have included a wide variety of factors in their assessments, rather than simply focusing on the effectiveness of individual transitional justice mechanisms. The broader approach is essential as transitional justice does not occur in a vacuum, and often perceptions of the effectiveness of these mechanisms will be influenced by political developments and improvements in the standard of living within the state. Therefore, the authors' discussion of economic reform is particularly useful, as this has been neglected in much of the transitional justice literature, and the authors raise many interesting points for further research. Similarly, the authors' advocacy of the utility of developing indicators to monitor progress and identify impediments should be given serious consideration by policy makers.

This book tackles a core issue which, to date, has been under-developed in the transitional justice literature. Reconciliation is a warm and fuzzy concept which has been crying out for a proper and rigorous scholarly analysis which is grounded in the realities of societies emerging from conflict and mass atrocity. It makes an original and striking contribution to a field that often makes false dichotomies between pragmatism and the pursuit of harmonious relationships between sectors of society. It is, in short, a great book. I heartily commend it.

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