

Read the Archbishop's opening speech in his House of Lords debate today on the role of reconciliation in UK foreign, defence and international development policy.

Lords reconciliation debate

My Lords, I am grateful to the usual channels for permitting this debate, to the noble Lord, Lord Collins of Highbury for responding on behalf of the Opposition, the noble Lord, Lord Alderdice, and to the Minister, the noble Earl, Earl Howe, for their time and contribution today.

I am greatly looking forward to hearing from noble Lords, whose combined expertise and experience are sure to provide us much to reflect on.

This has been a week of deep division, and reconciliation will be something that, although applied to foreign policy in this debate, must become central to our future in this country as well.

At the very heart of the doctrines of the Christian faith, and Christian practice is – should be – the doctrine of reconciliation of humanity to God through Jesus Christ. As a result the Church has historically, at its best, been involved in reconciliation. And it has been the most significant part of my own experience of ministry.

We live with the expectation, with the hope, of life transformed. We live in a world where hospitality to the stranger, peace without violence and even hope of life everlasting is promised within the terms of our faith – and of other of the great world faiths.

We also live in a very human world, a world that is often messy and never perfect, and yet I hold firm to the belief that we can create a society where mutual flourishing is possible, disagreeing well – a key phrase I will come back to – is central and respect for difference is paramount.

We can anticipate a world where, as Psalm 85 tells us, ‘mercy and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other’.

I realise that these deeply Christian, and indeed Jewish, foundations might be alien to some. Indeed, it might even turn some off altogether.

But the concepts that are central to reconciliation – words like forgiveness, peace and grace – not only in the Christian faith but in other world faiths, and in many of the philosophies around humanism. Their application can benefit all alike.

It is worth noting too, when I speak from a faith position in a debate on foreign policy, defence and development that 85% of the world’s population ascribe to some faith, and that figure is rising, not falling. Whether or not we believe and ascribe to a particular faith, it is nevertheless something that sets the world view for the overwhelming majority of our fellow human beings.

My Lords let say that peace does not mean the absence of conflict or indeed simply putting a sticky plaster on wounds after conflict. Peace and reconciliation is the ability to deal with conflict by non-violent means.

Reconciliation is the strategic end state of sustainable peace using every tool available to us to create a framework that can transform violent conflict into non-violent disagreement.

Tactically, it incorporates mediation, arbitration, and even the use of armed force in a quasi-policing capacity through the UN and similar agencies.

Reconciliation is needed before, during and after conflict. Pre-emptive reconciliation is essential.

I think it was Bill Shankly who said, "I teach my lads to get their retaliation in first."

We need to learn to get our reconciliation in first.

Reconciliation happens from the top of society down, from the bottom of society up and from the middle of society out. It must include women, youth, and minorities – if any group is left out, peace will not be sustainable.

My Lords, in our democratic tradition going back to the 17th century, we can say that general elections are essentially reconciled civil war.

The work we do in this chamber, in this parliament, is an example of successful reconciliation in process. Every day, in this Parliament, we disagree – often forcefully and passionately – but almost invariably, non-violently.

A world at peace, furthermore, is in Britain's interest. It enables trade, facilitates development, reduces migration, trafficking and refugee numbers, inspires innovation and permits human flourishing.

Peace and reconciliation, moreover, are always local.

I have spoken of the strategic and tactical aspects, but there is essentially the operational, the pre-emptive work of averting conflict. Which incidentally is itself a massive economy over the deployment of troops, or the post conflict reconciliation to avoid repeated cycles of violence that is so typical of so many areas of conflict.

Every conflict is distinct – [reconciliation] must be locally led by local reconcilers, served from outside, not ruled from outside; and every conflict is different, as I know from my own experience.

How then do we replicate this example of successful reconciliation – the examples we see in this country, across Europe and where we see it elsewhere – and what lessons can we learn from situations of failure when it comes to British foreign policy?

Above all I want to argue that we need a holistic approach. The Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, and the Stabilisation Unit, are steps in the right direction, but what is needed is a joined-up approach to reconciliation straddling humanitarian, economic, social, ethnic, cultural, political, spiritual and religious factors in which different departments of government work together under the umbrella of a Joint Reconciliation Unit (JRU).

More than that, because all reconciliation is local, and because it requires such a wide range of partners and expertise, government cannot and should not try to do it all, and thus a JRU must work hand in glove with NGOs, civil society and faith-based organisations – including churches – outside government, neither ignoring them nor co-opting them.

As you would expect, I think faith-based organisations – and in the case I know best, the Anglican Communion, in its 165 countries, with its 85 million people, the average a woman in her thirties in sub-Saharan Africa on less than four dollars a day, that's the average Anglican – are especially important. They are there before, during and after conflict.

I have, before holding this role, visited a colleague, now a bishop, in the Eastern DRC, during a period of heavy fighting, when, like the boy who stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled, most NGOs had gone. But this clergyman stayed on and I was working with him and learning from him as he went out to bring refugees through the battle lines to safety. Before, during and after conflict.

Whitehall discussions lead me to believe that a JRU, involving public and private groups, and faith-based organisations, is indeed possible.

By supporting this motion, noble Lords will also support this approach, and I will be interested to hear what discussions the Minister, the noble Earl, has had in his department on the subject.

Earlier this year, Noble Lords discussed the National Security Capability Review, in which the development of a joint approach to security, the Fusion Doctrine, was announced.

This approach acknowledged the importance of economics, security and influence in our policy, but it doesn't say anything about religion in a religious world.

In St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we read that 'we are many parts, but we form one body - The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" The head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"' Partnership must bring in all those who are capable of making a difference.

I offer just one of many examples in which faith leaders and their communities are contributing to the process of reconciliation in the midst of violent conflict.

In May this year, the Anglican Archbishop in South Sudan facilitated dialogue between leaders of government and opposition groups at international peace talks that were said to make more progress in two days than international efforts over the last four years.

The Archbishop facilitated the leaders – many of whom had not sat at the same table since the start of the conflict – to go further than expressing their opinions and party positions to the deep, heartfelt pain and injustice they had experienced during an ongoing conflict that has sent two million people into exile and over a hundred thousand to their deaths.

The South Sudanese have an expression for such conversation. They call it 'vomiting truth' and its palpable effect was noted by all sides.

I know this area a very little, having visited several times in the last few years, including to a town taken and retaken, with more than 3,000 bodies unburied, and consecrated a mass grave with the bodies of local clergy and their families at my feet. There is a lot of truth to vomit.

Yet the courageous Archbishop has since addressed thousands of South Sudanese citizens, the President and the Leader of the Opposition at a celebration to mark the signing of a new peace agreement. He not only prayed for the leaders but called upon them to make good on their promises and turn peace on paper into peace in practice.

Of course the work he is doing cannot be done with government coming in and supporting. Without the willingness of the population. Bottom up, middle out, top down. Outsiders coming in and serving. But that combination is capable of turning an area of war into an area that begins the long, painful, stony path of reconciliation.

To follow up this kind of momentary burst of hope, which can so easily slip back into conflict, needs a joint approach of the sort I am seeking to propose.

We know there is still a long way to go, and that that Archbishop Justin is not alone in the contributions he is making towards peace in South Sudan. Faith leaders across all denominations are playing a role in the journey.

The work of reconciliation is not only elite diplomacy – faith leaders work across the country, their unique networks of thousands of grassroots communities, to mediate between different tribes and stand against the factors that fuel the conflict, from corruption to gender-based violence.

Youth and women's groups, including the Mothers' Union – the oldest and largest women's group in the world – reach across urban and rural areas, into refugee and IDP camps, to support trauma healing.

Of networks close to the United Kingdom the reconciliation work of the Commonwealth especially deserves to be more widely known and understood.

The very existence of so diverse a family of nations cooperating in a spirit of goodwill speaks eloquently of the reality of reconciliation.

Pathways towards self-determination and independence were often painful. Yet the Commonwealth story shows relations of trust swiftly being established on the new basis of equal partnership.

Determination to build on good that is shared opens the way to overcome the bitterness or division of history.

What are known as the 'Good Offices' of successive Commonwealth Secretaries-General are a shining star in the Commonwealth constellation.

This patient and delicate work of defusing crises and upholding the values of the Commonwealth Charter – particularly as they relate to democracy, the rule of law and human rights – has been carried forward in ways which encourage continuing dialogue and engagement. That it is unpublicised and therefore unsung makes it more rather than less valuable.

Above all, the Commonwealth approach of consensus means its actions are grounded in a long tradition of uniting around agreement that all can own, rather than there being winners or losers. That is a vital component in lasting reconciliation.

I know that members of this house have contributed to Commonwealth work on reconciliation – including the noble Lord, Lord Alderdice, who was a member of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding. He also contributed to the Commonwealth Roundtable on Reconciliation held here in London in 2013.

My Lords, the cost of war and conflict is all encompassing. Those affected by violence pay for it in ways that linger for generations. We pay for violence with our prosperity, with our humanity and with our lives.

There is an unimaginable toll for those who suffer in conflict. There is also a toll on those who inflict suffering.

Constant strife leads to global poverty, oppression and displacement. We must have in our policy a strategy of reconciliation that aligns our values as a nation to alleviate that burden, and we must be bold - although not brash - in deploying it.

The process of reconciliation is long – generations long as we know from Northern Ireland, and as noble Lords may imagine from the story I told of South Sudan.

It will require a quality of leadership at all levels, which we are uniquely placed to offer as a country given our history and ties to nations around the world, not least through the Commonwealth and the Anglican Communion.

President John F. Kennedy reminded us that history shows us that we need a peace where the weak are empowered and the strong are just.

Reconciliation is not only about being the best that we are, but giving the space, platform and opportunity for others to be the best they are.

The factors that motivate violence are always complex, and our solutions must reflect that. That is why reconciliation – with its arsenal of tools – is so effective.

It is a unique approach to each situation. It doesn't simplify or generalise or indeed idealise, but rather empowers a community to find ways of living harmoniously, offering tools for disagreeing well; for peaceful disagreement.

The formation of a JRU would be fundamental in making reconciliation an integral part of our international policies. It would save money, time and ultimately lives.

The Book of Genesis takes us on a journey from violence to reconciliation through the stories of brothers – great, iconic stories – from the fratricide of Cain and Abel, to Joseph and his brothers, on the back of whose reconciliation the twelve tribes become no less than the nation of Israel.

We must adopt foreign, defence and international development policies that enable societies to reconcile and flourish together to bring about the prosperous, diverse and joyful world that is within our grasp.

I am sure many Noble Lords, particularly at the moment, here can sympathise with Marcus Aurelius when he says, 'When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: the people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous and surly.'

Indeed, people can be much worse than that. Our societies are not perfect. We ourselves are not perfect.

But we can strive to recognise, even when dealing with our enemies, as he goes on, 'that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own... we were born to work together like feet, hands and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower.'

Christian Aid has for its Christmas appeal this year the slogan 'Be a peacemaker'. It is the job of each and every one of us, wherever we are, from the local to the international, to be a peacemaker in our communities.

This is the time of gift giving. Let us resolve to begin the process of offering the gift of peace, however that may look, and to resolve to begin it this Christmas. I hope Noble Lords will support Christian Aid in this campaign.

I also desire to see reconciliation and healing take root in our hearts, and manifest in our actions, so that our policies at home and abroad are motivated by faith and hope, rather than fear.

Let our foreign, defence and international development policy reflect our commitment to understanding our enemies, recognising their pain and resolving our differences in a manner that acknowledges and embraces their humanity and diversity.

We need to find the balance of mercy and justice, forgiveness and reparation, of the kingdom of heaven and of our world today, as we move on from divided pasts into shared futures.

I look forward to what I'm sure will be a fascinating and hopeful debate, and I hope that Noble Lords might join me in their own way, one way or another, when I pray 'Give peace in our time, O Lord.'

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