

Session Three: Practical and Social Theology I
RESPONSE TO TATIANA CANTARELLA AND PRAKASH NEMADE

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I have read both papers with great interest, first, because of the authors: theologians and practitioners from two parts of our region where reconciliation is a major challenge, and, second, because of my ministry context in the Netherlands. The shooting down of flight MH17 in Ukraine in the summer of 2014 with 298 casualties of whom 193 had Dutch citizenship, and the significant influx of refugees in the autumn of 2015 have brought the problems of the world into our own cities. This is having a significant impact on our society. What both authors described in the opening paragraphs of their papers is now also a harsh reality in my country.

The urgency

Two sentences struck me. Cantarella wrote in the concluding part of her paper: “But we need to *begin* with transforming our church’s mentality, challenging our people to realize that they are a community that has been welcomed into the family of God and is to be a caring community of hospitality”(italics added). And Nemade wrote: “The church needs to experience the breaking of barriers within the church itself. *Only then* does the embracing of the outside community become possible” (italics added). Transforming our church’s mentality and the breaking of barriers within the church are mentioned as prerequisites for the church to become an agent of reconciliation. The impression given is that the church is not ready to be an agent of reconciliation.

Their assessment of the church strikes me because of the growing tension and polarization in many of our societies. In times such as these the people need a church to show and teach them the ways of reconciliation. But if the church is not adequately equipped for this ministry, we face a double crisis; both in our societies as well as our churches. With a variation of words taken from Isaiah 6:5 my cry is: “Woe is us, for we are ruined! Because we are people of lacking reconciliatory behavior, and we live among people with lacking reconciliatory behavior.” This is the urgency I feel in my ministry, and also sensed in the two papers.

How to break the barriers within the churches?

Nemade states that his paper intends “to establish the foundations for breaking barriers.” He first describes these barriers as conflicts, broken relationships, revenge, hypocrisy, religious fanaticism and self-righteousness, and then states that the church needs to first break these barriers within in order to be an agent of transformation in society. Further on he states: “The ministry of reconciliation becomes effective only by experiencing and practicing it in the homes and local churches.” But the assumption of this statement is that the barriers within the church have been broken down, as the rest of the paper builds on this assumption.

The major question for me is how these barriers within the church can be removed. Unfortunately Nemade did not address this in his paper. This is an urgent question for me because my observation as a pastor is that the “Amen” of many church people to a radical message does not automatically imply a change of behavior, let alone a radical change of someone’s life pattern.

The church as a window

Nemade works in his paper with the metaphor of walls. Believers have built walls around them with no windows to see the world outside. Later in his conclusion he proposes a church with windows for the people inside to see the brokenness outside and for the world to see God's reconciliation inside (or unfortunately the lack of reconciliation).

Nemade's use of the metaphor in his paper is different from "the church *as* a window" as stated in the subtitle of his paper. In response I would like to play a little more with this metaphor. In order to embrace people we do not need windows but doors to go out and to bring people in. Or, even more radical, we may need to tear down the walls so that we become a vulnerable and open community of people living in the world but not separate of the world. In this way the church can become a window instead of making a window in an existing wall of separation.

The situation of the church is so critical that more radical measures are needed than creating windows. We need to break down walls. In my reflection I was drawn to the seven letters to the churches in Revelation. Five of the seven receive the call to repent (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), or as it is translated in one of the Dutch translations: "Break with the life you live." This is what needs to happen in our churches in order to become agents of reconciliation in our societies.

Being specific

In her paper, Cantarella wants to replace "the worldly rhetoric and attitudes of xenophobia by those of philoxenia" through a careful reading of the Gospel of John, and deepen our concept of hospitality. Her conclusion is that hospitality as exemplified in the revelation of the Word is basic to the very nature of God and that the church is to reflect this hospitality in its community.

Cantarella's assessment of the church today is that it is "not even a pale reflection", quoting words of Butin, of God's intention. So again, my burning question is what are we to do about this? Cantarella's answer is that "we need to begin with transforming our church's mentality", and "rethink and reshape our priorities", "allow space for uncertainty, contingency and human tragedy", and practically respect others and care for them.

I agree, but the haunting question is the same I had in reading Nemade's paper, what do we need to do to cause this? Preaching from the Gospel of John on hospitality or lecturing on hospitality in the New Testament is needed but it is not sufficient. The church is too far gone and more radical measures are needed.

As I have asked this question myself many times, my answer so far is that we need to become far more detailed and specific in our preaching, teaching and talking. Too often we are too abstract and not specific enough. Becoming specific requires very often a second mile in our journey of reflection and meditation. Like to prophets we need to name what is not right and become specific in how this can be changed.

Identity and hospitality

Last, I want to comment on the paragraph concerning preserving our identity in relation to fear, mentioned in Cantarella's paper but also addressed by Nemade. I do agree with the

statement by Cantarella that hospitality challenges the notion of an enclosed identity. But I want to state that hospitality at the same time requires a unique identity of the host, reflected in values the guest needs to respect. Hospitality is always extended from a clearly identifiable environment. Hospitality extended in the Netherlands is different from hospitality in Armenia.

The issue is that the church is not called to show hospitality but to show *Christian* hospitality. The body of Christ has a certain identity, and as we welcome guests from completely different backgrounds we “enact” our identity. This still implies that the host will be enriched by the company of the stranger-guest. But the occasion could also arise when the host says to the guest: “This is something we do not do in our house; I hope you will respect this”. In this way we preserve our identity.

Conclusion

As disciples of Christ we are called to extend hospitality to the people who cross our paths. As we welcome these “strangers” we become aware of who we are as disciples of Christ and at the same our horizon will be widened. God will use these blessed encounters to transform his own people and their church communities. In this way the crises in our societies can become means of transformation to the church. This way, the twofold crisis I described earlier can become a twofold blessing; for the church and society. This is my prayer for the time in which we live.