

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND RELIGION

Essays on Faith, Power,
and Relationship

Edited by
Ellen Ott Marshall



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palgrave
macmillan

Ellen Ott Marshall
Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia, USA

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ISBN 978-1-137-56839-7 ISBN 978-1-137-56840-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56840-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016943666

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Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company is Nature America Inc. New York

To our students

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the fall of 2012, the Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding initiative of Emory University funded a gathering of 14 individuals to share their work on conflict transformation. Everyone present that weekend contributed to this volume whether they ended up writing a chapter or not. So, I begin by recognizing the contributions offered by Tom Crick, Itonde Kakoma, David Anderson Hooker, Tom Porter, and Kathryn Poethig. Kyle Cristofalo, an M.Div. student at Candler School of Theology at the time, helped with all dimensions of that gathering, from logistical organization to note-taking to substantive participation in the conversations themselves. Joe Wiinikka-Lydon was a doctoral student at Emory pursuing a concentration in Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding then; and he too lent his considerable gifts for organization and hospitality, as well as subject area expertise, to the endeavor. As that gathering developed into this book, I have been so grateful for the thoughtfulness, dedication, and goodwill of all of the contributors. In the “hurry up and wait” process that typifies edited volumes, they have been an absolute joy to work with. In the later stages of editing and formatting, I have relied heavily on Isaac Horwedel, my research assistant at Candler, who has offered excellent editorial input on several of the essays, chased down footnotes, compiled the bibliography, and graciously fielded an assortment of requests. I am also grateful to Janelle Adams, another wonderful Candler student, who contributed her gifts for research, writing, and enthusiasm to this project. It is educational to interact with thoughtful people; it is inspiring to interact with good people; and it is fun to interact with interesting people. This book project afforded me the opportunity to do all of the above. For the interactions that have happened and the interaction that continues, I am so very grateful.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth M. Bounds is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at the Candler School of Theology and the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University where she teaches classes on justice, development ethics, reconciliation, and conflict transformation. She volunteered at Metro State Prison for Women from 1998 until 2011, including teaching a weekly course in creative writing. She helped to establish the Certificate of Theological Studies at Arrendale State Prison. Her books include *Coming Together/Coming Apart: Religion, Modernity, and Community* (1997) and the edited volume, *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques* (1999). Bounds has a BA from Harvard University, an MA in English from Cambridge University, and an MDiv and PhD in Christian Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary, New York.

Elizabeth Corrie is Associate Professor in the Practice of Youth Education and Peacebuilding at Candler School of Theology and director of the Youth Theological Initiative. She draws on commitments both to peace with justice and to the education of young people as a foundation for her work in the development of pedagogical and youth ministry practices that empower young people for global citizenship. Corrie was elected as a lay delegate for the North Georgia Conference to the 2012 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference of the United Methodist Church. She received her MDiv from Candler School of Theology in 1996 and PhD from Emory University in 2002.

Sarah MacDonald is pursuing a PhD in Ethics and Society at Emory University. Prior to beginning this study, she worked as a full-time activist with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a ministry that offers international accompaniment and supports nonviolent resistance in conflict zones. With CPT, Sarah served on teams in Colombia and the West Bank of Palestine, helped facilitate nonviolence trainings, and led educational delegations. Her current research questions, exploring how to think ethically about privilege and power in movements for social change, arise from these experiences. She has an MDiv from McCormick Theological Seminary and is working on her dissertation on the ethics of international accompaniment.

Ellen Ott Marshall is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Conflict Transformation at Candler School of Theology. She serves as co-convenor for the Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding Program of Emory's Graduate Division of Religion. With a master's degree from the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and a PhD in Ethics and Society from Vanderbilt University, she has taught peace and conflict studies courses at the undergraduate level and conflict transformation courses in theological education for 15 years. Her books include *Choosing Peace Through Daily Practices* (2005), *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom* (2006, 2015), and *Christians in the Public Square* (2008, 2015).

Gary Mason a Methodist minister, is the director of Rethinking Conflict, based in Belfast. He is a research fellow at the Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention at Maynooth University in Ireland and a visiting faculty member at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Mason spent 27 years in parish ministry in Belfast where he helped to establish the Skainos project, a world-class urban center developed as a model of coexistence and shared space. During the Northern Irish peace process, he was instrumental in facilitating negotiations with paramilitaries and government officials, and his contribution was formally recognized by the Queen in 2007. Mason holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Ulster and completed his theological studies at Queens University.

Joshua M. Noblitt is the Minister of Social Justice at Saint Mark United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. He is also a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, Registered Neutral, and Mitigation Specialist, having worked for eight years with the public defender office on cases involving

clients who are facing the death penalty. Noblitt completed his Master of Divinity at Emory University in 2004 and was ordained at the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2009. He has served on the Board of Directors for the Reconciling Ministry Network, which seeks full inclusion for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in the United Methodist Church and is a member of the volunteer Chaplain Corps for the Atlanta Police Department.

Edward L. Queen is Director of the D. Abbott Turner Program in Ethics and Servant Leadership and Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies at Emory University's Center for Ethics. At Emory, he also serves as Director of Research for the Institute of Human Rights. Queen received his BA from Birmingham-Southern College, his MA and PhD degrees from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and his JD from the Indiana University School of Law, Indianapolis. Queen has written, coauthored, and edited numerous books, including *Serving Those In Need: A Handbook for Managing Faith-Based Human Services Organizations* (2000), *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions* (1998), and *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (1992, rev. ed. 2002, 3rd rev. ed. 2009).

Shelly Rambo is Associate Professor of Theology at Boston University School of Theology. Her book, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (2010), forges a theology of the spirit through engagements with postmodern biblical hermeneutics, a theology of Holy Saturday, and contemporary trauma theory. Through a series of faculty grants funded by the Center for Practical Theology and the Lilly Endowment, she has developed and presented workshops that offer religious leaders critical tools for thinking theologically about trauma. She received her PhD in Theological Studies from Emory University and holds master's degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary and Yale University.

Chris Rice is senior fellow for Northeast Asia at Duke Divinity School and Northeast Asia Director for the Mennonite Central Committee (responsible for engagements in China, North Korea, and South Korea). From 2005 to 2014, he served as co-founder and director of the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation. His books, *Reconciling All Things* and *More Than Equals*, each won book awards from *Christianity Today* magazine, and his book, *Grace Matters*, was named a Best Adult Religion Book

by *Publishers Weekly*. Chris holds an MDiv and DMin from Duke Divinity School, and is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Marcia Riggs is the J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics at Columbia Theological Seminary. Riggs is interested in the relationship between social oppression and socio-religious ethical praxis, ethical discourse that bridges the gap between womanist religious scholarship and the church's practice of ministry, the moral foundations for public policy, and the church's role in social justice ministry. Her recent books include *Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources* (2011) and *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women, An Anthology* (1997). She holds an M.Div from Yale Divinity School and a PhD from Vanderbilt University.

Debbie Roberts is Assistant Professor of Reconciliation Studies at Bethany Theological Seminary and part-time Pastor in the Church of the Brethren. She has served as Chaplain and Director of the Peace Studies Program and Mediation Center at the University of La Verne, as a Patient Advocate and translator for a rural Washington Community Health Center, and is a Community Conflict Consultant. She holds a BA from Berea College, an MA(Th) from Bethany Theological Seminary, and a PhD from Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California.

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Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation

Ellen Ott Marshall

Conflict can be a site for constructive change. This assertion sits at the heart of the theory and practice of conflict transformation. It is also the starting place for this volume in which teachers and Christian ministers describe the ways that conflict and their efforts to engage it constructively shape their work. Each chapter begins in a different place: the South Hebron hills of Palestine, the streets of Belfast, a Catholic seminary in Uganda, an urban park and a dormitory in the southern USA, and US classrooms at a seminary, a college, and a prison. Each chapter begins with a different experience of conflict: a physical confrontation among Jewish settlers, a Palestinian family, and the international volunteers accompanying them; shooting and killing during the Troubles in Belfast; ethnic violence in Eastern Africa; a hate crime against a gay couple; overt and covert racism; the structural violence of the prison system; interpersonal conflict related to religious practices within a family; and the ongoing marginalization and surveillance of youth. Each chapter draws on different theoretical resources to analyze and respond to conflict: strategic peacebuilding, feminist theory, relational theology, engaged pedagogy, narrative theory, theology of grace, adolescent studies, transformative mediation, and womanist thought. In their diversity, these authors reflect myriad theoretical and practical responses to conflict. As such, they expand the repertoire for transformation.

E. Ott Marshall
Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

Moreover, in a striking way, the contributors to this volume utilize their experiences of conflict to transform their pedagogy and ministry. As these teachers and Christian ministers engage conflict constructively, they transform their approach to teaching, training, care, solidarity, and advocacy. Faith and theological vocation inform the context and substance of each essay, although some authors are explicit about this and others are not. They teach in Protestant theological schools, serve in parish ministry, and work with faith-related organizations. In the variety of scripture passages, convictions, and schools of thought they reference, relationality emerges as a central theme. The contributors describe practices rooted in a relational anthropology and a relational faith. They perceive connectedness among people and share a commitment to justice and mutuality within relationship. They complicate and deepen their writing on relationship by attending honestly and astutely to power. They write about the ways in which teachers, ministers, and advocates sometimes reinforce hierarchical structures or ignore the unjust power structures in which they work and from which they benefit. In racially and economically diverse classrooms, international accompaniment, journeys through trauma, circles of truth-telling and reconciliation, the prison system, and ministries with youth, these writers demonstrate the challenge and potential of power in the work of transformation. Like conflict itself, power is something that one must unveil, analyze, and engage constructively.

The reality of power, the centrality of relationship, the influence of faith, and the potential of conflict constitute inter-related themes running through the chapters. Their presence is neither coincidental nor inconsequential since they play a significant role in transformation. For each contributor, transformation requires constructive engagement with conflict, just and creative use of power, attentiveness to relationship, and commitment to a vision of mutual well-being in community. By exploring this process in the contexts of teaching and ministry, these essays draw from and contribute to the existing literature on conflict transformation.

1.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Like most new concepts and approaches, conflict transformation emerged as a response to changing circumstances and as a supplement to existing practices. In the 1980s, many scholars and practitioners found the conflict resolution framework increasingly problematic. They challenged the use of mediation in the context of asymmetrical conflicts and argued that gross power imbalances must be addressed first. They questioned a focus on

negotiating immediate needs without addressing underlying, structural issues. In the face of protracted and multi-faceted conflicts, they recommended process-oriented and relationship-focused strategies in addition to problem-solving strategies. They also criticized conflict resolution procedures that included only government actors and outside experts and called for increased involvement from non-governmental actors and local wisdom.

The 1990s witnessed the publication of several important articles and texts intended to articulate this shift in response to conflict.¹ Peace and conflict studies programs began to integrate conflict transformation material and courses into the curriculum; and some graduate programs in peace studies and in theological education have since developed degree programs related to conflict transformation.² Moreover, several organizations not only practice conflict transformation, but also regularly offer training institutes and workshops on conflict transformation.³ In practice and in scholarship, conflict transformation has assumed its place as the latest development in the lineage of approaches to conflict: conflict prevention, management, and resolution. While conflict transformation scholars and practitioners generally agree that conflict cannot be prevented and should be more than managed, they disagree about the relationship between conflict transformation and its immediate predecessor, resolution. Some issue a strong critique of resolution and emphasize a conceptual and practical departure; others perceive resolution as necessary but not sufficient to the goal of peace with justice. Taking a moderate position, Hugh Miall, Professor of International Relations at the University of Kent, describes conflict transformation as distinct, but not wholly separate from these other approaches. It “is best viewed ... as a reconceptualisation of the field in order to make it more relevant to [the asymmetric, protracted, and multi-faceted nature of] contemporary conflicts.”⁴

Miall is well known for his contributions to the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, an online resource maintained by the Berghof Foundation. In his essay, “Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task,” Miall offers this comprehensive description of the ways in which conflict transformation reconceptualizes the work:

Conflict transformation theorists argue that contemporary conflicts require more than the reframing of positions and the identification of win-win outcomes. The very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict. Conflict transformation is therefore a process of engaging with

and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict. Constructive conflict is seen as a vital agent or catalyst for change.⁵

To unpack this statement, let us consider these conceptual shifts more fully. First, conflict transformation theory understands conflict as a natural and necessary part of life. Diana Francis, former President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and Chair of the Committee for Conflict Transformation Support, defines conflict “as the friction caused by difference, proximity, and movement.”⁶ Like the ecosystem of which we are a part, human beings are changing and interrelated; therefore conflict is both natural and unavoidable. More than this, conflict is a dialectic and catalytic phenomenon as Professor of International Peacebuilding, John Paul Lederach, explains in his 1995 book, *Preparing for Peace*.⁷

Social conflict is a phenomenon of human creation, lodged naturally in relationships. It is a phenomenon that transforms events, the relationships in which conflict occurs, and indeed its very creators. It is a necessary element in transformative human construction and reconstruction of social organization and realities.⁸

Thus, one of the central features of conflict transformation is “understanding that conflict is dynamic and can be an agent of positive conversion.”⁹ Rather than beginning with the assumption that conflict can be prevented, this approach understands conflict to be a normal and unavoidable part of life. Rather than perceiving conflict as something to be managed and contained, conflict transformation intends to work constructively with conflict as a catalyst for change.

The second conceptual shift prompted by the transformative approach emphasizes the relational, historical, and systemic aspects of conflict. Because conflicts occur in a relational system and over time, they are not discrete, encapsulated events. Rather, conflicts are time-full and “nested” phenomena. Each conflict is embedded in a history of relationships, patterns of behavior, family systems, and social structures. Thus, a second conceptual shift in transformation approaches is to perceive the presenting issues in a conflict in connection to relational and systemic aspects. Maire Dugan introduced this form of analysis in her 1996 essay, “A Nested Theory of Conflict,” which used concentric circles to capture the relationship between an issue and its surrounding systems.¹⁰ Lederach uses a

distinction between episodes and epicenters of conflict to emphasize the same form of analysis and attention to sub-structure.¹¹ When one approaches conflict as a nested phenomenon, then transformation becomes a deep and wide endeavor. Resolution of particular issues may indeed be part of the process, but transformation pushes for “deep-rooted, enduring, positive change in individuals, relationships, and the structures of the human community.”¹²

This emphasis on the potential for deep-rooted, constructive change to occur through conflict reflects the attention that transformation scholar-practitioners pay to structural injustice. As mentioned above, the mismatch between asymmetrical conflicts and traditional conflict resolution approaches generated much of the criticism that led to the emergence of conflict transformation. In her work, Diana Francis has been very critical of conflict resolution practices that fail to address structural injustice. In doing so, conflict resolution “ignores the demands of justice and the realities of power.” Francis focuses her critique on the role of the impartial outsider brought in to mediate a dispute. If the procedure does not attend to unjust structures and the mediator is committed to impartiality, then there is “no room for moral judgements,” argues Francis. She then describes the cost of this approach as “an underemphasis on the potentially constructive roles of those directly involved in the conflict (the ‘primary parties’), and the place for advocacy and solidarity roles for third parties (Francis and Ropers, 1997).”¹³ Francis recommends linking conflict resolution to nonviolent resistance, arguing that these are truly “blood relatives” rather than antithetical practices and that they comprise the “twin halves of conflict transformation.”¹⁴ Thus, Francis situates her work among critics of conflict resolution who employ the language of transformation in order to emphasize “the need to address underlying structural and cultural violence and ... the inevitability of conflict in the process of change.”¹⁵

In Francis’s work, we see clearly the influence that nonviolent action theory has had on the emergence of conflict transformation. In his effort to track the development of this approach, Stephen Ryan, Senior Lecturer in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Ulster, describes nonviolent action as one of the intellectual streams that informs the meaning of the term transformation.¹⁶ He also notes political usage of the term “transformation” in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Israel/Palestine in the 1980s, as actors tried to articulate their visions for social change through violent and nonviolent conflict.¹⁷ Ryan’s observation is consistent with