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Megan Shore. *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.

How did Christianity influence the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process? Unlike any of the other books on South Africa's transition, Megan Shore's *Religion and Conflict Resolution* asks an important question about Christianity's influence on the TRC process and systematically answers it. In the tradition of Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, Shore demonstrates how some religious leaders in South Africa drew on Christianity, first to justify racist apartheid, while others later used Christianity to help foster personal, communal, and national truth-telling and reconciliation.

People both laud and denounce South Africa's TRC process, noting its successes and flaws in moving the country out of apartheid tyranny. Some see the TRC as a "model" that could be exported elsewhere, to countries like Afghanistan or Colombia that remain divided and war-torn after decades of violence. Others see the TRC more as a "miracle" resulting from the distinct leadership of Nelson Mandela and TRC Chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Shore offers an analysis of Christianity's ambiguous role in the TRC process. On the one hand, the TRC successfully guided South Africa through the perilous post-war context and created an atmosphere safe enough for perpetrators to "confess" the truth of their crimes in exchange for amnesty. By drumming the "reconciliation" mantra, the TRC effectively contained potential chaos seen sporadically through street justice where apartheid's perpetrators were "necklaced" with burning tires.

Religious leaders hold a tremendous ability to influence people through moral language that resonates with people's basic values. In South Africa, the call for people to reconcile became a surround-sound campaign, with preachers linking faith with political transition every week and on radio stations across the country. Religious institutions are widespread and provide places for meetings, and their hierarchical structure allows for connecting local people to national and international offices and communication structures. The TRC used churches as meeting spaces to hold hearings on human rights violations. In many ways Christianity infused the entire TRC process.

On the other hand, the TRC process sold short the dream of a just South Africa. By focusing more on reconciliation than on justice, the process did not lead to the intended financial reparations promised to victims. In most cases, victims received only the “truth” of what happened in exchange for their cooperation in the process. But restorative justice requires offender accountability or “truth” along with real and adequate reparations. Many argue the TRC process did not lead to interpersonal victim-offender reconciliation or any real sense of justice.

Most troubling is that the TRC process did not extend beyond addressing individual harms. Addressing the needs of individuals who had lost loved ones to torture and violence during apartheid was an important first step. But addressing the structural violence of the state was an essential part of moving the country toward justice. Today, economic justice remains elusive in South Africa because the TRC process did nothing to hold those who benefited from the apartheid system to account for their wealth garnered from decades of economic privileges bestowed on whites.

Some criticize the role of Christianity in the TRC process as pacifying demands for increased perpetrator accountability or greater economic justice. Shore notes the Christian discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation emphasized social stability and nonviolence while it “delegitimized civil resistance . . . [and] punishment for prior human rights violations and provided the new leaders with the means to consolidate power”(147).

To human rights scholars like Richard Wilson, the TRC conflated religious values and processes with secular nation-building processes. Shore alludes to Wilson’s conclusion that human rights lost out to forgiveness.

At the end of the day, South Africa’s transition was an experiment. The TRC offers real lessons in the power of a religiously inspired process of “truth-telling” to transform a nation’s tolerance for untruths. The TRC process also offers some lessons in humility and prompts a commitment to “we can do better than this” – both in South Africa’s ongoing process for real social justice and in other countries that can learn from South Africa’s successes and failures.

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