

## RECENZII ȘI NOTIȚE BIBLIOGRAFICE REVIEWS

**Thomas Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace*, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 2010, 158 p.**

Whether triggered by economic competition or by identity—in most cases by both—our world seems to fully subscribe to the inevitability of violence, whether inside the family, the church, the school, the civil society, or between states. Haunted by fear, by ideological realism, and by zero-sum rational calculations, numerous policymakers seem trapped by a worldview of evolutionary determinism, where the big fish eats the small fish, or as a cynical Romanian proverb would put it, a world in which “every godfather will eventually find his own godfather.” Yet, as the Peace Nobel Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it in a lecture given a decade ago at the Episcopal Divinity School, the question becomes, “what the heck is the use of theology?” Fortunately, this volume, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace*, authored by Thomas Porter, gives an answer to Archbishop Tutu’s question, by showing that religious faith is not a return to a primitive survival instinct, but perhaps the very reason for human progress.

Anxious about the question, “[h]ow do we create a culture of *justpeace* in our relational life,” (p.1) Porter persuades the reader to realize that, “in an age of weapons of mass destruction, we cannot allow our religions to be sources of conflict.” (p.2) Yet, for Porter, this book is more than an intellectual exercise expected of any respectable academic; it is a life story—*The Journey* of his life. A trial lawyer by formation, Porter experienced a dramatic change of heart in South Africa, where he went to study the inner workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, only to discover the South African concept of *ubuntu*, and perhaps rediscover a new meaning of the Gospel. The worldview of *ubuntu* and the precepts of the Gospel—successfully applied by leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela—were in fact the secrets of the bloodless transition from the Apartheid to racial pluralism. This South African experience was what convinced Porter to believe that the retributive legal system practiced in the United States is neither designed to restore relationships, nor to encourage truth telling; it leads to dehumanization and the continuation of cycle of violence. And this change of heart is fully revealed in Porter’s personality, as well as in the tonality of the book, which, as he confesses, he wrote out of gratitude, humility, wonder and “awe at the power of human beings to come together to talk about difficult issues, find healing and even reconciliation.” (p.3)

Focused on the individual, this book goes beyond the basic technicalities of conflict management or conflict resolution. It displays a masterful combination of theology, theory

and practice of conflict transformation – a way of life and a deliberate attempt to transform our culture in tune with the precepts of the Gospel understood in its literal sense, as “good news.”

Split into two parts, the first part (chapters one through four) delves into the “self”-understanding as an agent of change, by giving meaning to a peacebuilder’s attitudes, theology, relational skills, and personal character. The second part (chapters five through ten), focuses on building specific aptitudes needed to enable the process of conflict transformation, including the designing of a good process, creating ritual, building an appreciative inquiry, identifying the interlocutor’s interests, restoring relationships after harm has been committed, and healing the community by creating a culture of justpeace. A striking metaphor that pervades the book in its entirety is the metaphor of the well. Though of theological depth, this metaphor not only tantalizes a play on words—*well* as a noun (fountain), vs. *well* as an adjective (being well)—but it is a metaphor of survival by having access to water, particularly “the living water”(John 4:14).

It is beyond the scope of this review to provide a detailed description of each chapter. However, it is important to note that the book is structured on the methodology of preparation and engagement in conflict transformation. While preparation includes several metaphorically-branded steps such as: ‘Create a well, not a wall,’ ‘Allow the well to fill,’ ‘Be well prepared,’ and ‘Be well! Be a well!;’ engagement includes the steps: ‘Create a common well together,’ ‘Share the well,’ ‘Appreciate the life-giving waters,’ ‘Go beneath the surface,’ ‘Drink deeply the healing waters,’ and ‘Be well together.’

Although Porter does not address structural aspects in a conventional sense, he approaches religious institutionalism in a phenomenological sense, where the powers of ritual and covenants are being introduced as the primordial glue for structure building. While the power of ritual is the liminal element that marks transitions in relationships, the covenant is the product of the circle process. (p.94)

The final chapter is a definite testament of the author’s faith and theology. Secure on his own theological beliefs, Porter never trivializes his faith in the process of displaying gentle attitudes and comfort with other faiths.

Adding an element of bias to this review, if Porter’s methodology were to be brought into the sphere of Orthodox Christianity—the faith that I belong to—I would find nothing that could contradict the dogmatic heritage of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Indeed, there may be areas of negotiation and adaptation needed to create more synchronicity between Porter’s model and the Orthodox ecclesiastic restraints; particularly with regard to the creation of rituals and the circle process. For instance, in light of the heavy ritualistic tradition of Orthodox Christianity, Porter’s recommendation of an impromptu ritual may need to become synchronized with the standardized Orthodox worship—such as prayers for special occasions—while the circle process can be developed in combination with the sacrament of confession; given the reliance on the triangulation model used by Orthodox clergy, whereby the confessor plays a crucial role in mediating conflicts.

Compared with other books in the field, Porter’s “art of conflict transformation” is indeed a piece of art in the way it captivates the reader’s attention, and in the way it