



# Reconciliation: A New Paradigm For Missions

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**A** SHORT WHILE AGO, WHEN INDIA CELEBRATED ITS 48TH INDEPENDENCE DAY, WE were reminded of the deeds of our heroic “freedom fighters,” those men and women who made it possible for us to have the privilege of living as free citizens. The vision, determination, and committed action of our country’s Mothers and Fathers made us feel proud: “India wins freedom!” But how free are we today? If you had been at Hyderabad’s Osmania hospital in December, 1990, or on the streets of Bombay in January, 1992, you would realize how much our rhetoric falls short of the reality. Witnessing the mutilated victims of organized violence—the battered and the dying, the terrorized and the orphaned, the angry and the hopeless, the poor and the voiceless—we realize how much of our humanity still eludes us as we rush to embrace aggression or destruction. Cloaked in righteous anger, we shake our fists at those who threaten us, and dream of the day when justice will be meted out. We may even help it along. We burn the shop of the one

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*As Christians consider the current status of interreligious relationships, to what ministry are they especially called? Those who live in conflict situations sense a particular imperative in the principle of reconciliation. Christian deeds of reconciliation within the critical problem situations, the writer suggests, are the acts of love to which Christians are particularly called.*

who takes the food from our children's mouths; we rape the woman whose brother tortured and abused us; we celebrate when our enemy hovers on the brink of death. Are we free? Is this what we are fighting for in Bosnia and Rwanda, Kashmir and Northern Ireland, Myanmar and Chile?

What does mission mean today? For those of us who work with Muslim communities and peoples, what is our Christian role? How do we begin a process of healing in a world where rigidity, intolerance, and violence – what some call “fundamentalism” – are escalating?

### I. THE THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:19-20)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines reconciliation as “the action of reconciling persons or the result of this; the fact of being reconciled.” “To reconcile” means “to bring (a person) again into friendly relations to or with (oneself or another) after an estrangement.” Other definitions are more evocative: “to set (estranged persons or parties) at one again”; “to bring back into concord”; “to reunite (persons or things) in harmony, to bring (a person) back to, into peace, favor, etc.” The key words are “friendly relations,” “harmony,” and “peace” – the restoration of which marks our goal. Thus we are talking about the peace-making activity to which Christ alluded when he said “blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called the sons/daughters of God.”

In the Gospels the word reconciliation is used only once, when Jesus teaches about the necessity of being reconciled with our brothers and sisters before we offer our gifts at the altar (Matt 5:23-24). We would do well to reflect on the challenging priorities that Christ has set for us here. Mark the words in the Gospel. Jesus says, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you....” We are asked to take the first step, not to wait till he or she comes to us. We must rebuild our own strained and shattered human relationships before we can build our relationship with God. In other words, the brokenness which alienates me from my son, or isolates me from the friend with whom I have quarreled, also separates me from God.

In Paul's letters we find the word reconciliation used quite frequently. In several places Paul notes that the death of Jesus has reconciled us to God and to each other (Eph 2:16; Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18-21), perhaps the most well-known reference being the verse from Colossians quoted earlier. If we read Paul's words carefully we uncover radical theology: he is not talking about the time to come or heaven above, but the here and now. Reconciliation is complete. Through Jesus, God *has* reconciled all things: he *has* made the peace. Dare we believe it? In our world of violence and bloodshed and conflict, what can Paul's words possibly mean for us?

“So we are ambassadors for Christ,” wrote Paul, “God making his appeal through us.” As Christians, we bring to our work the certainty of a restored re-

relationship with God and with humanity. In times of conflict we can draw on the peace which Jesus has promised and delivered, the peace which burns within us, freely given. Have we realized this great truth?

Paul rightly points out that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." As Christians we can bring restoration and harmony because we carry the peace and presence of God who acts through us. But we cannot bring this gift to the world if we remain cloistered behind our desks or in our homes or even in our churches. Nor can we succeed if our own ignorance or violence blocks our transformation. We must leave aside our cherished prejudices, shed our conflicting emotions, and touch those who have suffered, speak with those who are angry, be in the midst of conflict and trial. Paul reminds us that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." We are transformed through Christ. Dr. Hildegard Goss-Mayr puts it less mystically:

I convert myself to be able to be a person of reconciliation in society and the world...[through] my inward change to the values that I have received through the Gospel and Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Thus transformed, we can bring the peace which Jesus promised, the reconciliation which God has accomplished. This, then, is our biggest task: to be the vessels through which God can act.

## II. THE MANY FACES OF VIOLENCE

On 26 December 1993, an attack on a cathedral in Davao City in the Philippines killed six worshipers and wounded 130 others. The next week a group calling itself the New Christian Democratic Army threw grenades into three mosques during prayers.<sup>2</sup> In Fiji, a recent convert from Hinduism and an active member of the Baptist church in Nadi set fire to the nearby Sri Jai Maha Shakti Temple in the belief that burning the idols was the will of God.<sup>3</sup> In Pakistan, an illiterate boy was brought under trial and almost killed for the charge of scrawling obscenities against the Prophet on the wall of a mosque. We have only to read our newspapers to find situations like this where fanaticism and hatred escalate into violence. Let us think about the situations which give rise to violence.

Robert H. Schreiter, in his book *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, distinguishes three types of violence: war between nation-states or among groups of nation-states; war among cultural groups or between ideologies within the state, i.e., civil wars; and violence "which allows the ideologies of colonialism and racism to sustain structures that do violence to peoples in subtle and not so subtle ways." It is this last category that is, in some ways, the

<sup>1</sup>In an interview with Paula Green, recorded in "Reconciliation: Reflections on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation," IFOR Occasional Paper Series, *Patterns of Reconciliation* 1/1 (1994) 18.

<sup>2</sup>Reported briefly in *Reconciliation International* 9/5 (October 1994) 12.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Ucko relates this incident in his report of an "Inter-religious Team Visit to Fiji," *Current Dialogue* 27 (December 1994) 14.

most sinister, because it is not easily perceived. Western domination has woven such web-like structures that in the guise of security, balancing of power, safeguarding interests, development of resources—even the development of countries—colonial aggression is continued on economic, political, and social levels. The victims of this type of war are found not only in the developing countries but in the developed nations as well: men and women whose lives of grinding poverty are the direct outcome of oppressive structures.<sup>4</sup>

Another type of violence which Schreiter neglects to mention is the violence against nature. As Christians who take the Bible seriously, we have interpreted God's invitation to us in Genesis to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...every living thing that moves upon the earth," to mean dominating God's creation to the point of squandering, exploiting and, in fact, destroying it. What a difference between this attitude of dominance and the native American sense of oneness with nature. Barbara Kingsolver in her powerful novel *Animal Dreams* delicately contrasts the "anglo" attitude with that of America's native peoples. "God put the earth here for us to use," asserts the white man, while the brown-skinned native people see themselves as "permanent houseguests."<sup>5</sup> We would do well to reflect on the historical decimation of people who have been branded as pagans by Christian and Muslim conquerors and colonizers. Today we are coming to see that our undeclared war of domination over nature, the rape of our own "mother," can only be halted by radically shifting our world-view to embrace one espoused by people we had long ago dismissed as "animists."

### III. THE INNER ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

It is often fear, a sense of insecurity, or a perception of threat that sparks off and nurtures violence. This can happen, for example, when a community feels that it is in danger of losing its numerical advantage through religious conversions or migrations or differing birth rates. Or when we perceive our economic position to be threatened—perhaps by migrant labor, or women entering the work force, or changing social expectations. A particularly powerful fear is that of losing our identity. As Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Máiread Maguire observes,

We are fiercely protective of these things [which serve to identify us], be they our religion, our nationalism, our lifestyle, our reputation—whatever makes up our identity. We can be quite murderous in protecting these things....In Northern Ireland we are definitely faced with an identity crisis. People will kill to defend their identity, their British or Irishness. Somehow we have to learn to let go of these things, and rise above them to our common humanity.<sup>6</sup>

The fear of losing one's identity is at the heart of many of the conflicts taking place in South Asia today, whether among Buddhists and Tamils in Sri Lanka, upper and lower castes in India, or "orthodox" and "liberal" Muslims throughout

<sup>4</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (New York: Orbis, 1992) 83.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991) 2.

<sup>6</sup>From the interview with Paula Green in "Reconciliation," 15.

the region. India's Hindu-Muslim divide hinges on this question of identity, with the minority community being aggressively urged to "join the mainstream" by a vocal segment of the majority population whose own position of dominance is being threatened by changing social and economic conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Does all this mean that violence is endemic to our very human nature? Yes, almost certainly. Whether we label it "human sin" in familiar Christian terms, or the "weakness of human nature" as do Muslim theologians, we can find the subtle presence of this type of violence everywhere – in our homes, our offices, our classrooms, our marketplaces, on our streets. It took us a long time to recognize this inner pull to violence. Working at an institution whose main ministry is to bring reconciliation, we are constantly struggling to channel and transform feelings of anger or frustration. These feelings may emerge when personal ideas of what is best are rejected by others; or when those in whom we invest turn their backs or become narrow; or when someone betrays our trust; or when despite efforts at transparency our motives are challenged or suspected. These situations create a tension which we have learned is the precursor of violence.

Here is a familiar example to help you see what we mean. Try to bring to mind the last time you were caught in a traffic jam. You are in a hurry: you have to reach home or the office or an appointment. As you grow more and more impatient, someone tries to squeeze in front of you. Oh, how we rage at such a flagrant violation! If we are to be people of reconciliation, we need to be aware of this personal potential for violence. Only when we have acknowledged our own weakness can we begin to take steps for change.

Particularly striking are Máiread Maguire's reflections on this point. She notes that as activists for peace, we need to understand what drives people to violence:

We cannot take a holier-than-thou attitude to those who agonized over the merciless slaughter of loved ones. There is deeply in every one of us, the potential for the passionate defense of the defenseless from mindless cruelty. If we seek to deepen our power to love, then we must know that power can very easily turn to hate when faced with organized cruelty. The will to love and the will to hate is the same will. What we need to cling to, in a world in which political power presumes the right to murder, is the will to love, even if it means our own deaths – and even harder to contemplate, the suffering and deaths of our nearest and dearest.<sup>8</sup>

Following the terrible slaughter of innocent men, women and children that took place in our city of Hyderabad in 1990, both of us remember wishing that the men who had orchestrated this orgy for political gain would themselves be tor-

<sup>7</sup>An additional factor is what Theodore P. Wright calls the "majority backlash"; that is, the deliberate attempts by a majority who were at an earlier time dominated by a minority group to "pay back" their oppressors. See, "The Babri Masjid Controversy in India," in *Islam, Politics and Society in South Asia*, ed. André Wink (Delhi: Manohar, 1991) 179-89. For a look at this in the South Indian context of Hyderabad, a former Muslim state, see Javeed Alam, "Communalism on the Ascent," *Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute* 10/4 (1991) 23.

<sup>8</sup>Máiread Maguire, "An Excess of Love," *Patterns of Reconciliation* 1/1 (1994) 20-21.

tured to death. Andreas was haunted by the pale, bandaged face of a child whose parents had been gutted before his eyes and who had himself been caught up by the legs and swung against the cement wall of his home. He was the same age as our daughter. "There is deeply in every one of us, the potential for the passionate defense of the defenseless from mindless cruelty." How true is Máiread's insight. Like Mahatma Gandhi, she challenges us to "somehow practice, until it becomes our true nature, how to love those who would make themselves our enemies, to love without self-deceiving sentiment, those whose activity arouses in us the deepest anger and disgust."<sup>9</sup>

Máiread suggests that we might succeed at this if we learn to think of hatred as an "excess of love"<sup>10</sup>—a passion to defend from oppression or violence the members of one's own family or neighborhood or community. An excess, however, which swiftly hardens the heart into "a murderous determination to defeat, by whatever killing is deemed necessary, those who threaten one's community." If we want to be engaged in the work of reconciliation, reflects Máiread, we must not separate ourselves from those who kill, but move closer to them, for they are more truly our degraded fellow human beings than are their victims.

This reflection is particularly important for us as we consider the context of "fundamentalism." In our world today, particularly in western countries, we tend to demonize the other. It is "us," the sane and balanced, against "them," the demented, violent, and inhuman. We must resist this attempt to polarize "the good" and "the bad," for it leads to complacency at best, and to the rationalization of violence, death, and destruction at worst.

#### IV. CONFLICT, CONFRONTATION, AND CONDITIONS FOR RECONCILIATION

The agenda that we have set for ourselves is a challenging one. It is one thing to speak of a ministry of reconciliation, but to bring it into being is an enormously difficult task. The killing, violence, and destruction during recent Hindu-Muslim clashes have been so brutal that in India today we are witnessing a change in the very face of our neighborhoods and villages. The friendly intermingling of people—which used to occur irrespective of religion—is increasingly giving way to suspicion, isolation, and exclusiveness. In an atmosphere of fear, where communities have little interaction, prejudices grow, leading to distrust, animosity and, ultimately, violence.

As Christians, we should be particularly aware of this spiral to violence because we have often been its cause. There are still places where Christians teach hatred and alienation. Hans Ucko, part of the World Council of Church's team on Inter-Religious Relations, relates the story of a Christian convert in Fiji who wrote to the school headmaster, demanding that his children be exempted from wearing

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>10</sup>Máiread Maguire credits this thought to the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who in his lament of the 1916 Irish uprising cries, "And what if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?"

a school badge which contained the sacred Hindu word/symbol “OM.” The man’s pastor had told him that there was “nothing sacred” in Hinduism, only paganism and superstition.<sup>11</sup>

In our glorious quest for conversion, we Christians have given little thought to the isolating, colonizing aspect of missions. We are sadly confused if we see a person’s estrangement from their native culture and heritage as the “new life in Christ” of which Paul speaks. The imperialistic and colonial interpretation of the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” has impelled and continues to impel “missionaries” from the colonizing countries to do their “discipling” work even by dubious and dishonest means. Why is it that we are not even conscious of the violence and aggression inherent in these attempts?

The heritage of colonial religious oppression is something with which we are uncomfortably familiar. The Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies (HMI) where we work was founded in 1930 as a school to train Christian missionaries for proselytization among Muslims. Although the Institute has since then changed its focus, passing through a stage of “dialogue” to its present, more active ministry of reconciliation, our history continues to haunt us. Recently we cooperated in the organization of a one-day workshop to help Muslim women articulate their vision, struggles, and goals in preparation for the World Conference of Women to be held in Beijing. Diane was the facilitator of the meeting and was pleased, as were her Muslim colleagues, at the good turnout. They were not prepared, however, for the ten fully-veiled young women who appeared, passed out handbills, and then began to heckle and totally disrupt the workshop. Challenging HMI’s “hidden” motives in helping to organize the meeting, the women insisted that the real purpose of the gathering was to Christianize Muslim girls. What marked the situation, aside from the growing frustration and anger of the participants themselves, was the deaf insistence of these young women that they possessed the truth. They *knew* that there was a hidden agenda, and were not open to any discussion on it. Dialogue was simply not possible.

This incident is very illustrative, for in examining it we can begin to unpack the word “fundamentalist” – which is surely what the world press would have labeled these women – and also learn something of reconciliation. The first condition for defusing any conflict, after our serious commitment to act non-violently, is the “sincere search for truth.”<sup>12</sup> The protesting women made certain allegations against HMI, to which Diane listened carefully. On this occasion, the young women were determined (1) to be heard and (2) to disrupt the workshop. They were not prepared to verify the truth of what they heard because they already “knew” what they thought to be true. But we must realize, and be prepared to

<sup>11</sup>Ucko, “Inter-religious Team Visit to Fiji,” 8.

<sup>12</sup>For this phrase, and for her thoughts on the conditions which are necessary for reconciliation, I am indebted to Hildegard Goss-Mayr, Honorary President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Although I differ on some points from Dr. Goss-Mayr, I was greatly stimulated by the observations she has made.

accept, that there was a kernel of truth in their allegations. Henry Martyn Institute *had* been founded as a missionary school with a particular mandate. More tellingly, it had for a number of years propounded the cause of "dialogue" on one hand, while on the other hand published tracts which were offensive to Muslims. The point to be stressed is that, almost always, protest and confrontation have *some* roots in truth. Even if it is not the whole truth, there is often a perception of injustice which has some basis in fact. For example, the Francophone population of Quebec has made the point that French-speaking Canadians have been discriminated against and abused by English-speaking compatriots. It is much, much less true in 1995 than in 1965, but this oppression does remain a historical fact.

"These women are fanatics!" one non-Muslim participant complained to Diane as tempers at the workshop flared. "No," she countered, "they believe they are under siege." Diane went on to explain how various incidents and situations have increasingly led Indian Muslims to perceive themselves as victims of injustice, oppression, and attack.<sup>13</sup> Their fears have been fed most recently by the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque, the pressure to abandon present *shari'a*-based personal laws for a common civil code, and the frighteningly disproportionate number of Muslims (as compared to Hindus) who have become the victims of organized violence. A sincere search for truth which is the first step of reconciliation necessitates that we be knowledgeable about the larger context which influences and shapes a particular violent incident.

The second condition for reconciliation is dialogue. Not the intellectual comparison of faith positions which dominates, at least in Christian circles, our use of that much overworked term. Here we mean listening – really listening – without interruption, self-explanation, or defense, to what the other person or group has to say: to their perceptions, hurts, and needs. And then, being listened to attentively in turn. This is not as easy as it sounds. Often as victims of violence and oppression we have suffered so much that we have difficulty hearing the truth of the other side. Dialogue, especially in situations of longstanding injustice and conflict, is a long and continuing process.

One of the biggest creative challenges which people working for reconciliation face is how to bring together individuals who have been kept artificially apart so that they may begin to know each other. The Peace People in Northern Ireland started a bus service to the prisons which would bring wives of loyalist and unionist prisoners together to visit their husbands.<sup>14</sup> In Hyderabad we and other groups have brought Hindus and Muslims together for income-generating projects, savings schemes, and schools for children. We need to keep exploring and expanding the ways we bring together estranged people so that listening, sharing, and the discovery of a common humanity can take place.

Finally, successful resolution of conflict requires forgiveness; in other words, the ability to pardon and the willingness to be pardoned. The most vivid example

<sup>13</sup>For background and discussion of this point, see Andreas D'Souza, "Indian Muslims: A Haunted Minority," *Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute* 10/2 (1991) 11-22.

<sup>14</sup>Related by Máiread Maguire in the interview with Paula Green in "Reconciliation," 7.



of the necessity and power of forgiveness was told to us recently by a woman who has been active for a dozen years in efforts to resolve tensions between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims.

Sushoba Barve is an impressive and committed advocate of reconciliation. During the horrendous violence of 1992-93 Bombay, she was on the streets, in the slums, and with the victims of violence, fear, and threat. One afternoon as she stood outside a police station waiting for a companion, a young man saw and recognized her. "Why are you standing here?" he asked, "There is trouble brewing at home." Urging Sushoba to come along, he hastened back to his neighborhood, meanwhile telling her of the escalating tension. When the pair arrived, they found the streets of the locality filled with angry people. After some moments Sushoba got the story: two of the local boys had been beaten up while passing through the neighboring locality which was occupied predominantly by members of the other religious community. Tempers were high and there were plans for a retaliatory attack.

"Wait!" Sushoba pleaded, "Doesn't anyone know someone there whom we could talk to about this?" In the ensuing silence a voice spoke out, "I do." A woman in a bright sari stepped forward and agreed to take Sushoba to the home of a social worker in the neighboring locality. Once there, Sushoba questioned the woman about the incident. "What nonsense," she replied, "those people tell lies..." The woman went on angrily for some minutes. Then Sushoba again intervened, "Well, I don't know. I wasn't here. But the people in the locality are very angry. They say that two of their boys were beaten just this afternoon." The social worker paused for a moment and then, gradually, admitted that the incident had taken place. But couldn't these neighbors forget it, she railed, at least this once? The two localities had just come through a violent round of rioting. Debris still littered the roads. Could either community afford another violent confrontation? "Come with me," Sushoba pleaded, "Ask them yourself."

Telling the story to us, Sushoba shook her head at the bravery of that woman. "She came all alone into an angry neighborhood and listened while they told their version of what had happened. 'Yes,' she admitted, 'some of our people did that. I am sorry the boys were injured. I'm sorry. But – just this once – can't you let it go? Can you forgive us, just this one time?'" An eternity must have passed in the space of the two heartbeats before the elders answered, "Yes, we can forgive it...this once." With those words, calamity and destruction, and probably the loss of many lives, were averted. Let us never forget the power of forgiving words sincerely spoken.

#### V. HAVING THE COURAGE TO HEAL<sup>15</sup>

We have been speaking about the task of reconciliation as being a new mission paradigm, particularly because of the present world context of escalating violence, intolerance, and rigidity. This task is not to be taken lightly. It carries with

<sup>15</sup>I borrow this apt phrase from the editors of the IFOR publication "Reconciliation," cited earlier.

it inherent risks. When Andreas visited the Philippines for the Catholic church's bi-annual "Asian Journey" in 1995, he met men and women who are quite literally putting their lives on the line for this work. Fr. Golanzo is the chaplain of the University of Morawi and has been trying to shepherd his Catholic students to be open and appreciative of the Muslims in their midst. Attempting to resist all efforts at polarization in a countryside which is being pulled apart along Christian and Muslim lines, he counsels peace. The week previous to the conference, six students had been kidnapped. The day Andreas visited the university, friends and colleagues begged him not to go because of a terrorist threat to abduct him. In a climate of fear and tension, Andreas and the students he inspires are witnesses to a love which refuses to die, to a reconciliation which they believe has already come and which shines through them.

When Christians and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, Parsis and Jains joined together to assist the injured and curfew-bound in Hyderabad's old city in December, 1990, they had no guarantees for their safety. "We can't protect you if anything happens," the police had warned us. And with reason, for the narrow and winding lanes – now eerily deserted – were hard to patrol, and the tense and hungry residents difficult to restrain when they saw the food we had brought to their curfew-bound neighborhoods. But it was in the hospital, where stabbing victims were being carried in every minute, that we drew closest to the pain which drives us to bloodshed. "I'll kill anyone with a *bindi*!" screamed the Muslim man whose eighty-year-old father had just died in his arms. "I'll kill them! I'll kill them!" he cried, lunging for one of our colleagues whose dot of red on her forehead identified her as a Hindu. Six men struggled to hold him back as, wildly grieving, he raged at the mindless cruelty which had snatched away his father's life.

We suggest that the new martyrs of our Christian age will be the men and women who give up their lives for the work of reconciliation, peace, and justice. Like Mahatma Gandhi, whose action towards healing the rift between Hindus and Muslims cost him his life, or Sister Rani Maria, whose attempts to empower tribal villagers led to her murder,<sup>16</sup> we too will be tested and tried. Can we continue to stand for peace? Can we witness with our very lives to the reconciliation which Jesus has won? Dare we love our neighbors even unto death itself? These are the questions we will have to answer as we move forward in a ministry of reconciliation. ⊕

<sup>16</sup>On 25 February 1995, Rani Maria, a Clarist sister, was dragged from a bus traveling to Bhopal and stabbed to death, allegedly for her activities in support of rural tribals and bonded labourers. See "Her Soul Lives On," *The Independent*, 9 March 1995; "Assault on the Innocent," reported by Sunil Dasgupta, *India Today*, 30 April 1995.