

The relationship between war and reconciliation in Europe

Europe has experienced a drama of biblical dimensions in the 20th century: Cain has killed his brother Abel – even more: He tried to eradicate his whole family. But instead of being expelled into exile, the outlaw was offered a place at the table and invited to help build a common house. A house founded on forgiveness and reconciliation. I am talking about the European history of the second half of the 20th century. In comparison to what we are used to in the history of mankind, I would call it Europe's miracle. Having inherited the most ugly part of German history and being part of the breathtaking changes in European political life for more than 50 years I personally feel deeply moved in looking back on this miracle.

Let us go back to May 8, 1945, when Germany's fascist regime broke down and the German Wehrmacht had to surrender. The allied forces had won the just war against an unjust aggressor – even though war crimes had been committed on all sides. The Nazis had aimed at wiping out the Jewish nation as a whole, killing 5.5 million Jews in concentration camps. 19 million Russians died during the war, soldiers and civilians lost their lives in Poland, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, England, Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Italy, and Norway. Almost 40 million killed all over Europe.

Germany lost 5.5 million of its population. 12 million German refugees – as well as 3.5 million Polish refugees - had to flee westwards. But most of all, Germany had lost its soul. Having worshiped nihilism, the politics of pure power and disrespect, and the ideology of segregation, the theater was over after Hitler's suicide: There was nothing to believe in and nothing to be expected. Germany's future was that of an outlaw, having broken basic laws of humankind in the most radical way.

Guilt, whether an individual, a group of people, or a nation is burdened with it: It is beyond our ability to undo what has been done. My people cannot undo the holocaust, we cannot bring back to life the 40 million Europeans killed during the Second World War and we cannot undo the destruction of families, cities and souls. There is and was no way of deleting guilt. Even the admittance of guilt will not delete what had been done. Karl Rahner called it „die

unheimliche Ewigkeit der Schuld“¹, the sinister or weird eternity of guilt. Who would be willing to invite Cain into his house again and offer him a seat at his table. Realistically, after 1945, Germany could expect nothing more than to be blamed and treated like an outlaw.

But history developed differently. I will not focus on the political reasons of the Western allies to reintegrate West-Germany into the community of democracies but on the precondition of that reintegration, the process of reconciliation between Germany and its neighbors.

Looking at the history of reconciliation in Europe one can discover a pattern: Individuals, motivated by a profound Christian belief, take the first step. Having been a hostage in a German concentration camp, the french bishop Pierre Marie Théas supported the “crusade for reconciliation between Germany and France”, a call for prayer of 40 French bishops. In the hands of a German Capuchan, Father Martin Hörhammer, it became the beginning of Pax Christi, the international peace movement quickly spreading over Germany, France and Italy. Only 2 years after the war, 18 Germans traveled to Lourdes to meet with Bishop Théas. Meetings like these and symbolic acts fuel the process of reconciliation: In 1955, a lady from Cologne learned about the complete destruction of the french village Oradour by the SS in 1944 where most of the local population was massacred in a church. This lady sold her family’s jewelery for a chalice and sent it to the Church of Oradour as a personal sign of atonement.

Individuals or groups taking responsibility hope to transform society as a whole. Individual actions are necessary to form a political process, as Donald Shriver has shown.²

While talking about reconciliation between peoples we assume that the mechanisms of guilt, the admission reconciliation, i.e. guilt and the act of forgiveness work in a similar way between groups as between individuals. But what exactly is collective admission of guilt or a collective form of forgiveness?

In 2000 the former German president Johannes Rau adressed the parliament in Israel saying: “I am asking for foregiveness for what Germans have done.”³ Johannes Rau himself was 14

¹ Karl Rahner, Versöhnung und Stellvertretung, in: Geist und Leben 83, 98-110, 102.

² Vgl. William Bole/ Drew Christiansen/ Robert T. Hennemeyer, Forgiveness in International Politics, Washington DC 2004, 77.

years old at the end of the war. It is obvious that he was not talking about his individual guilt. Acting as a representative of the nation he was asking for forgiveness for crimes that had been committed by other members of his nation, by representatives as well as by individuals. In a similar way we understand that representatives of a people can offer forgiveness for the injustice that their people has suffered. But still two questions arise from that form of representative reconciliation:

- Why do we suppose that heads of state or other representatives of the nation are able to enact a process of reconciliation in asking for forgiveness? And what happens if a greater part of the nations does not follow and is not willing to either ask for forgiveness or offer forgiveness?
- How do we explain that guilt is inherited over generations? How do I explain to the generation of my children that they bear responsibility for the crimes of their great-grandparents?
- And it seems obvious to me that we can suffer from the injustice our grandparents had to go through. But are we affected in a similar way by injustices that our grandparents have committed?

Following Walter Schweidler I would argue that the reason lies with the collective identity of a people. According to him there is a continuity of responsibility to the acts of the older generations. This continuity is realized in participating in a common knowledge, common memory, common language as well as a common system of symbols.⁴ The injustice committed by the older generation is then understood as part of the collective identity, as part of the collective history. Acknowledging the historic guilt of my people means not to acknowledge personal guilt but to acknowledge a moral responsibility in face of that historic guilt.

Acknowledgment of guilt on the one side is a prerequisite of the process of reconciliation. Forgiveness is a free act and cannot be claimed. But what about if a nation is not ready to acknowledge guilt, at least in the way the victim expects? We witnessed this experience in the process of the German-polish reconciliation, when, many Germans felt, the price for reconciliation demanded by the Polish side was too high.

³ Johannes Rau, „Ich bitte um Vergebung“. Rede vor der Knesset, in: KNA-Dokumentation 3 (2000) 8-11, 8.

⁴ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, München (1992) 139.

During the Second Vatican Council the Catholic bishops of Poland wrote a courageous letter to their German colleagues offering reconciliation with the famous words: "... we forgive and ask for forgiveness"⁵. In spite of sharp criticism from the Communist regime, the Polish bishops were willing to go ahead. At that time both nations showed little inclination towards reconciliation. Germany could not accept the loss of its eastern territories to Poland, where millions of Poles had been resettled due to Stalin's shifting of Russia's western borders and occupying Poland's eastern territories. Within this situation the letter of the Polish bishops was a breakthrough, a milestone of modern European history that enabled European integration we encounter today.

In asking for forgiveness, the German bishops did not offer what the Polish bishops and people expected: An acceptance of the existing border between the two nations - the Oder-Neisse-border - as a precondition of a peaceful order in Europe. The political organization representing displaced peoples from the former eastern German territories like Pomerania and Silesia, many of them Catholics, was both influential in itself and supported by the German government under Chancellor Adenauer, who fuelled their hopes of one day returning home – a position in no way acceptable to Poland.

While the Polish bishops - one of them being the young bishop Karol Wojtyła - had courageously offered forgiveness against all obstacles, the German bishops were hesitant to go along, anxiously taking into consideration the reaction of opposing groups and politics. Over a generation involving innumerable acts of reconciliation, including the politics of détente of Willy Brandt, this obstacle between Germany and Poland was finally overcome by an official peace treaty in 1990. This experience shows that reconciliation is a very long process. It may take an entire generation or more for the larger part of a nation to be ready to go along and still, there is no guarantee!

Today, Europe faces two challenges in the Balkans, one of them in Bosnia, the other in Serbia. Both illustrate the difficulty of reconciliation after a war.

More than ten years after the war, ethnic groups in Bosnia show little disposition to discuss their own responsibility for war crimes. Each of the three groups -- Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosniacs -- prefer to view themselves as victims over taking a

⁵ Wir gewähren Vergebung. Wir erbitten Vergebung. Die Botschaft der polnischen Bischöfe an die deutschen Bischöfe vom 18. November 1965, in: Stimmen der Weltkirche (1978) 4, 76-87, 85 und 87.

critical look at their role during the war in the nineties.⁶ Even though small groups take a different stand, the vast majority neglects the question of its own responsibility and comprehends “guilt” as a category of the other side. If Bosnia is to reconstruct its society and migrate towards the European Union, the process of reconciliation must begin among its own ethnic groups.

The last war in Europe, the military intervention in Kosovo, has also caused numerous problems. One of them is a popular Serbian interpretation of its history. According to the Serbian myth its nation often had to bear the role of the martyr: It defended Christian Europe against the Turks in the Middle Ages (the famous battle of Amsfeld). It suffered under the Habsburg Emperor, who wanted to convert the Orthodox Serbs into Catholics. Finally, through the NATO intervention in Kosovo, Serbia lost its historic territory, “the holy Kosovo”, the birthplace of its culture and nation. This – extremely brief – interpretation of the regional history needs to be confronted with a true and scholarly based study. Serbia – now far from being ready to reconcile with its neighbors – needs to face its own history and critically analyze its own role in the region. Part of it being the development of an enlightened understanding of the terms nation, nationality and national interest. Peace in this region will only have a chance if others give helping hands in a critical and solidary manner. In my opinion, Europe has a specific responsibility if it wants to avoid the next war.

⁶ Cf. Tania Wttach-Zeitz, *Ethnopolitische Konflikte und interreligiöser Dialog*, Stuttgart 2008, 93.