

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

THE HEALING TASK IN EUROPE

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THINK PEACE 2

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The 1991 synod of the European Catholic bishops claimed that the Christian faith is a permanent part of the enduring and fundamental basis of Europe. However, it has to be said that violence was another important basis and that this violence was often connected with Christianity. The wounds of this history of violence have only partly been healed. One of the wounds is the division between Eastern, Byzantine Christianity and Western Christianity; another is the division between the Catholic and the Protestant traditions, which are still characteristic of the difference between Western Europe in comparison to Eastern Europe, and between Northern and Southern Europe. Another wound is the difficult relationship between Europe and the Islamic world, which is brought sharply into focus by the question of Turkey's accession to the European Union.

The first time we come across the word 'Europeans' is in the context of the battle of Poitiers in 732 when a raid of Arabs was repulsed. Later, this battle became upgraded to a battle against 'Muslim conquerors'. The 'Europeans' are the members of this victorious army. Charlemagne's court theologian Alcuin formulated a definition of Europe as the 'continent of Christian faith'; Europe was synonymous with Christendom. As such the term 'Europe' has defensive overtones. Europe was the Christian continent over against the Islamic world, represented first by the Arabs, later by the Ottoman Empire. For a long time, Europe was seen as a continent under siege, surrounded by mainly Muslim enemies.

However, the divisions within this Christian continent were numerous as well, often with one feudal lord fighting against another. A group of women, men, priests and bishops came together in Charroux, a small town south of Poitiers in 989 to put an end to all this local fighting. Everyone who tried to enter a church by violence and stole from it, or plundered the possessions of farmers and the poor or maltreated a priest, was to be excommunicated. This was the beginning of an important peace movement that resulted in new rules: it was forbidden to take up arms against those who were defenceless; fighting was not allowed in Lent and Advent, and only in the first three days of the week for the rest of the year.

They tried to enforce these rules by using violence: every Christian should be willing to take up arms against anybody who violated the peace. Understandably, peace was not the result. In November 1095 Pope Urban II tried to put an end to the internal fighting by pointing to the conquest of Jerusalem by the Ottoman Empire in 1071. He called on those who had been fighting their brethren, to become knights of Christ.

Three years later the pogroms against the Jews started. They were asked to join the Christians 'so that we shall become one people'. Striving for peace turned into bloody massacres. The crusades failed to achieve any lasting success, and the spirit of war, persecution, violence and religion never left Europe. Christians often condoned the wars and even promoted them with phrases such as 'It is God's will' or 'God is with us'.

The doctrine of the "just war" was an attempt to reduce the number of wars, but it looked as if the different parties always found a sound reason to wage war.

The colonisation of the rest of the world started with the attempt to find a way to Asia without being forced to travel through the Ottoman Empire. Religion and mission went hand in hand with colonisation and the slave trade, and at the end of the period of colonisation the Ottoman Empire was carved up.

Between 1300 and 1945, the Europeans made 182 plans to unite Europe. During this time numerous wars took place; many of them were supposed, rightly or wrongly, to be associated with the Christian faith.

One of the last of them was the Northern Irish conflict between Catholics and Protestants which was not a religious war, but an ethnic one between the Irish and a group without a proper name who call themselves 'Protestants', 'loyalists' or 'unionists'.

Only one attempt to unite Europe and to put an end to the internal violence was moderately successful. Robert Schuman, foreign minister of France and a devout Catholic, proposed the formation of an economic Coal and Steel Community in 1950. He wanted to prevent a new European war or even a Third World War by pressurising Germany to become incorporated into Europe so that it could not embark on a course of its own. His ideal was to create a political and spiritual unity.

This ideal of a Christian, yes, even a Catholic Europe, is still reflected in the European flag that, in spite of official denials, was clearly inspired by the image from the book of Revelation chapter twelve: the woman with the crown of twelve stars, symbolising Mary and the Church.

Schuman's ideal did not materialize. Under the influence of Jean Monet the partners of the new community placed all the emphasis on economic development. Monet thought of economics as a rational enterprise ruled by scientific laws; his ideal was a European community where the politicians could not influence economics but would leave this field to experts who would work together in large buildings independently.

Meanwhile, we all know that economics is a matter of the heart, or rather, is dominated by human desire. The value of an object depends on the strength of the desire; the more people rival with one another in order to get the same object, the more valuable it appears to us. Politicians thus are bound to deal with economic issues, and the same applies to the Churches and to civil society.

The common market that emerged in the fifties and sixties of the last century needed a work force. It called on people outside the common market to come and work in Europe. Many did come and this initiated a new relationship with the Islamic world. These migrants were supposed to leave Europe again for their countries of origin but most of them preferred to stay. Soon they established themselves in Europe, with their families.

In my own country, Holland, within the next twenty years, the biggest religious group in our large cities will be Islamic. This time, Muslims were entering Europe, peacefully.

Peacefully? Muslims have fascinated people in Europe for centuries. They are strangers, and also interesting because they are different. And they are hated and often maltreated – one in every eight Muslims in the Netherlands has a bad experience of violence at the hands of Dutch people – because they are strangers and are different.

It seems impossible to call Europe a Christian continent any more. It received its historical identity, at least partly, by differentiating itself from Islam. In the near future Europe may have a very different identity, no longer solely based on the Christian past that is receding more and more, but on the basis of some kind of European Islam, on the economic tradition of the so-called free market or capitalism and on the new religious awareness which is emerging at the beginning of this century.

People are trying to find a language for their religious experiences and insights which may or may not have a relationship to Christianity. Christianity may change itself as well, and future groups of Christians may become very similar to the present African Independent Churches. It is uncertain whether there will be much left of the once powerful Churches and their organisations, because they are becoming increasingly irrelevant. The leadership of the Catholic Church in the early 21st century wants to maintain the Tridentine and clerical model of Church at all costs. It does not seem to be interested in listening to the people of God and their spiritual needs, because it presumes to know what is good for them. Churches are tough and they may always find people who believe in this form of Christianity that undoubtedly has its own beauty, but it is pre-modern.

It seems to me that we should not look for a European identity and certainly not for one that is based on the past. It would be more fruitful to ask ourselves what Christians can contribute to a peaceful and sustainable world?

I presume that Christianity's contribution will be small. Christians may only hope to bring about minimal changes. The idea that they can dominate the historical process in Europe and steer it in this or that direction seems to be presumptuous. However, minimal changes may be the beginning of profound changes, similar to the butterfly that flies above Tokyo and causes a storm half way across the world some months later, or like the woman in the brief parable of Matthew 13, 33 who took yeast and mixed it in the flour till it was all leavened so that many people could eat of the bread. In the same way, Christians may mix the yeast of the kingdom of heaven, the yeast of the gospel, in the European dough so that people, within and beyond Europe, can find a way to a better life for all.

Violence is, on the whole, an attempt to put things right in response to a perceived injustice or when there is a fear that this will happen in the near future. Trying to put things right by using violence often results in a new cycle of violence. It is not always directed against the party that brought about the injustice, for if this party is too strong, some other group or another individual may become the object of violence. Muslims may feel harmed and offended by the Europeans, the 'Europeans' may feel threatened by Muslims.

Both parties may be blind to the violence of their own history, culture and politics. Old wounds may fester, new injuries may be inflicted; suspicion and distrust can be contagious and so poison Europe.

Again and again the violence and injustices of the past have an impact on the present.

The Christian tradition has to offer something in this context: the unconditional forgiveness of sins is at the heart of Christianity. It may well be that the so-called public life of Jesus began when he pleaded for remitting all the debts at the occasion of Jubilee Year and preached that debts should be remitted every year, yes, even every day.¹

Jesus accepted people into his company who were sinners and were not able to fulfil the demands of the Torah. In the course of history this gift of forgiveness and compassion was often forgotten and often corrupted. However, forgiveness, granted and received, heals the wounds of the past and prevents new outbursts of violence. It is a brake on infinite economic growth; it changes the course of justice, and transforms human communication. It creates room, distance, difference and, if needed, hospitality. Forgiveness is the only way out of the vicious cycles of violence and opens up new ways to the future.

Reconciliation happens when a victim grants forgiveness and the perpetrator is in turn, willing to receive forgiveness. Both victim and perpetrator have to change and to enter new and just relationships. In many cases all of the parties involved are both victims and perpetrators.

I use forgiveness in a broad sense here: giving something to someone without demanding anything back or receiving something from someone without feeling forced to give something back. This transcends a type of justice that always has a mimetic character: imitating the person who harms me by harming him in turn, or by rewarding the person who rewards me.

Concerning the divisions in Europe, it is necessary to try to avoid quarrelling between the different Christian groups and between Christianity and Islam. However, groups as such cannot offer or receive forgiveness and become reconciled with each other, not even when the group is itself an agent of evil. Only individuals can do this: individuals meet one another, groups meet through individuals.

If we want to have a peaceful Europe, without festering wounds, individual people will need to be convinced that they must seek reconciliation. The question is: How to do the convincing?

The pressures of the group upon the individual are very strong. However, this can work in both ways. One person, for instance a president or a prime minister, can cast a spell on the crowd by declaring war on another country. It is considered disloyal not to support a government in war.

Still, the unity of a group will never be so strong that the voices of minorities and individuals will not be heard to some extent. Every individual has some power, however little it may be, and can try to influence other individuals, convince existing minorities or form a new minority that may become the voice of the majority one day.

This is, no doubt, a slow process and demands great endurance. One would hope that the leaders of the different groups would be proactive in this process, but generally their first task is to conserve the unity of the group and to guard its goals and its structure. So they are often the last ones to be convinced that a new course is desirable.

Connected with this tradition of forgiveness and reconciliation is the uniqueness of every individual. Every individual belongs to some kind of community, he/she is connected with other people in numerous ways, but the community is not the goal of the existence of the individual, rather it is the network without which being an individual is impossible.

An individual is the meeting point of numerous relationships. An individual is connected with many groups and communities and does not exist outside a community. His/her autonomy thus is limited, but is not absorbed by a community. The individual can belong to several groups and communities at the same time, even to different religious traditions.

This 'multiple religious belonging' is a phenomenon that is becoming more common in Europe. Christians may accept Buddhist or Muslim elements as an inalienable part of their faith, and may not identify solely with the Church they are supposed to belong to. Or, people also claim that they are ecumenical Christians. This independence underscores the uniqueness and human dignity of the person that several Popes have stressed repeatedly.

Upholding this dignity is another contribution that Christians can make for the future of Europe. Promoting democracy, the fight against poverty and the plea for restorative justice are all elements of this contribution.

While being different is often interpreted as negative and destructive, and seen as a source of conflicts and used to define one over against others, human life is not possible without differences. Difference makes it possible to structure the common life of individuals. It is not enough to be polite and tolerant and to cover up differences. These characteristics should be a permanent theme in all meetings and dialogues. Without mutual criticism wounds cannot be healed. The difference between our world and the coming kingdom of God may well still be another inspiring contribution Christians can make.

Living in a Europe in which the wounds are healed is a future full of promise that only can be made true by the power of forgiveness.

End Notes:

¹ W.R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation*, Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2000, pp. 105-108.

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VISION:

Embracing difference, healing division and enabling reconciliation.

MISSION:

To provide open, safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue, which moves society towards social justice, positive relationships and respect for diversity.

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