

# Reconciliation priorities for the Church: Some German remarks

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## ABSTRACT

### Reconciliation priorities for the Church: Some German remarks

*Reconciliation has been a topic of major importance in both the German and South-African theological and political contexts. Political events involving the Christian Churches in these countries have prompted a renewed consideration of what is understood by the concept. This article examines some aspects of reconciliation in the contexts of Christian ethics and argues that, from a theological and historical perspective, the nature and practice of what was called *reconciliatio* is thoroughly religious, although what exactly is involved has been perceived differently over the course of Church history. Reference is also made to the New Testament understanding of the concept and in an attempt to actualise the biblical *kerugma*, several propositions regarding the significance of a religious view of reconciliation in an eschatological context are provided as a conclusion.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Every theology reflects the life experiences of its theologian. Theology and biography are inextricably entwined and interact with each other in diverse ways. My own theological work has been formatively shaped by a particular historical constellation. I was born in West Germany in December 1948, and therefore belong to the first generation of German citizens born in the Federal Republic: I grew up with this democratic state.

Politically interested and intellectually sensitive members of my generation saw themselves faced with a specific challenge. They had to critically examine National Socialism and its horrific crimes. They had to find an answer to the question of why Germany's first democracy, the Weimar Republic founded in 1919, foundered and what made the Nazi experiment of an anti-liberal totalitarian state

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possible. For this reason, I began, at a relatively early age, to study the classics of Anglo-Saxon political theory, in particular liberal political theory. I was especially interested in the functional conditions of parliamentary democracy and sought, above all, to strengthen the individual's claims to freedom vis-à-vis state and society.

At the age of nineteen, I took part in a Japanese-German student exchange programme. I spent several weeks travelling through Japan and lived in Tokyo for some time. I became aware of just how particular, how relative my own native culture is. It was this experience that prompted me, relatively early on, to study the relationship between Christianity, particularly Protestantism, and other religions. Here, once again, my chief concern focused on the freedom of the individual. I began to investigate theological traditions which strengthen individual freedom and facilitate a peaceful co-existence between people with very different backgrounds and religious convictions.

As a student I transferred from the University of Tübingen to the University of Munich. In Munich, I came into contact with professors who introduced me to a new and fascinating world of thought: first and foremost, the traditions of liberal German 'Culture Protestantism'. I began to study Hegel and Schleiermacher, Troeltsch and Harnack, and not least Immanuel Kant. For me, Kant's critical philosophy represented the most reflective and important form of a rigorously liberal theory rooted in the German Enlightenment. In a word, I see myself as a Protestant Kantian. From Kant I have endeavoured to learn critical self-demarcation, tolerance, and to continually and sceptically question dogmatic truth claims.

The task of my generation was to examine modern political totalitarianism and its ideological promises, and ask why so many people in Germany accepted or actively supported anti-Semitism and the racism of the National Socialists. These questions have also shaped my view on the topic of 'reconciliation'. I do not wish to sing the praises of the Christian church as a supersubject of all-embracing reconciliation. Nor do I intend to speak of a global mandate of the churches to reconcile the world at long last. My aim is, rather, to point out the limits and contradictions of the term, and to raise a few critical questions which theological debates on the subject of 'reconciliation' have neglected or, indeed, suppressed. At the same time, I would like to outline how old religious ideas can be

reformulated in the sense of a modern political ethic on democracy. My central proposition is that the Christian discussion of reconciliation is ethically concretised by recognising each and every human being as the subject of elementary human rights which precede all social or political order.

## **2 DIFFUSE DIVERSITY, OR: WHAT DOES RECONCILIATION MEAN?**

“Christianity is, in the realisation of the idea of the unity between that which is divine and human, in the person of the Son of God, the religion of redemption and thereby the religion of absolute reconciliation<sup>2</sup>”. This quotation is taken from the classic theological work of the nineteenth century, published by the Tübingen New Testament scholar and church historian Ferdinand Christian Baur in 1835, *Die christliche Lehre von der Versöhnung in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*. Baur’s wording clearly shows that reconciliation is a fundamental concept of the Christian tradition, possibly the most central and all-decisive concept<sup>3</sup>.

What does *reconciliatio* mean exactly? In order to answer this question, it is important to recall the great variety of meanings this term has come to embrace, first of all in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and then later in the political and social discourses of modern societies. Although the term is fundamental to Christian theology, the latter’s history has afforded *reconciliatio* a very broad spectrum of highly diverse meanings<sup>4</sup>. The terminus is also structurally unclear and ambiguous. What do we mean exactly when we say that x and y are reconciled? How is reconciliation fulfilled and what does it engender? Who is the subject behind the act of reconciliation? Who takes the initiative each time and, by way of conciliatory acts, achieves reconciliation?

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2 Cf. Baur (1838:5): „[...] das Christentum ist, wie es in der zur Wirklichkeit gewordenen Idee der Einheit des Göttlichen und Menschlichen, in der Person des Gottmenschen, die Religion der Erlösung ist, so auch die Religion der absoluten Versöhnung” Cf. Graf (1983:89-110).

3 Cf. the classic works of Ritschl (1870) and Wenz (1984).

4 For the latest attempt to apply the Christian doctrine of reconciliation to modern political and social issues cf. Sauter (1997:7-48); for an English discussion on the development of the theological doctrine of reconciliation, see also McGrath (1986).

A glance at theological and philosophical lexicons reveals that ‘reconciliation’ originally denotes the carrying out of atonement, expiation, redressing the balance through compensation (or restitution)<sup>5</sup>. In many religious traditions, the term ‘reconciliation’ (or its possible equivalents) refers to the relationship between God (or some higher, transcendent power) and humankind (or a group of human beings). The terminus always presupposes that this relationship is disturbed. Religious acts serve to remove the fault troubling the relationship, to the end of ‘reconciliation’. In several religious traditions, God (or some higher being) is considered to be the decisive subject of reconciliation; in other religious traditions, it is the ‘atonement’, that is to say, the compensatory performances of man which come to the fore.

The texts of the Hebrew Bible and scriptures of the New Testament also mirror a variety of highly diverse interpretations of the term *reconciliatio*. It is not my intention here to expound on the findings of exegetical research. However, as a systematic theologian and especially as an ethicist, I would like to stress that even for the leading theologians of the old Church, as far back as the ‘Fathers’, *reconciliatio* stood for a wide spectrum of ideas on the new order of God’s relationship to those who trespass against Him. The term came to play a prominent role in Christian theology when it was rendered the central systematic concept of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. In the theology of the early Church, *reconciliatio* mostly signified a state of peace, brought about by God alone, which led those who had become His enemies through sin back into a ‘friendship’ with God. From the time of Irenaeus, the reconciliation of the heavenly Father was very often conceived as an act in which the divine mediator (or *logos*), Jesus Christ, makes peace with his Father – for instance, in the sense of pacifying the wrath of God (*placatio*). Other theologians, by contrast, placed the emphasis on the sinner and his need for reconciliation. From this perspective, the complete and absolute *unio* of God and man was regarded as the eschatological goal of the reconciliation between God and His trespasser, as mediated through Christ. In the language of the old dogmatists, moreover, the term *reconciliatio* was linked to the vision

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5 Cf. Kim (1908:552-576); Kettler (1962:373-1378).

of an all-embracing and final unity that integrates all differences, analogous to the general religious usage mentioned above<sup>6</sup>.

Here I do not wish to enter into a detailed discussion of the systematic problems surrounding the doctrine of reconciliation in classical dogmatics. As is well known, there are profound differences between the Christian denominations, above all concerning the question of how the effectiveness of God and a possible part played by man are related to each other in the 'process of reconciliation'. Aside from the old denominational controversies surrounding the doctrine of grace – Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants are particularly divided over the exclusive effectiveness of divine grace – of far greater importance are the long-running debates on the metaphysical premises of the old, dogmatic language games. Since the late sixteenth century, following the criticism levelled by the Socinians at the traditional teachings of the Church and, then, with greater intensity since the seventeenth century<sup>7</sup>, these fierce intellectual debates have focused on the old European concepts of the dogmatic doctrine of *reconciliatio* which were strongly shaped by Aristotelian metaphysics and juristic ideas<sup>8</sup>. At the core of these controversies we find the theory on the sufferings of Christ (as developed in its classic form in St. Anselm's legally conceived doctrine of satisfaction), the talk of the wrath of God, the question of the relationship between divine grace and human freedom, and the concept of original sin. Generally speaking, it can be said that the metaphysical premises of the traditional Christian doctrine of *reconciliatio* are facing a crisis that began in the eighteenth century, at the latest. There is no eminent theologian of the modern age who, in view of this crisis, has not attempted to develop other, innovative interpretations of the old Christian thoughts on reconciliation. This notwithstanding, the old questions remain unresolved<sup>9</sup>.

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6 Cf. Büchsel (1933:254-260); Breytenbach (1989).

7 Cf. Wenz (1984:87-127).

8 Cf. Sparn (1973).

9 See Baur (1968:68-110) and Aner (1929:110-143). However, a comprehensive study of the development of the doctrine of reconciliation in the period between the Reformation and the Enlightenment remains a desideratum.

Since the eighteenth century, the term ‘reconciliation’ has become far more than just a religious or dogmatic concept in the vernacular of theologians. Time and again in the complex transformation processes of theological theory since the Enlightenment, we meet the problem of how the old dogmatic content of *reconciliatio* between God and man squares with ethical ideas of a reconciliation between men: not only theologians but also philosophers like Hegel reacted to the crisis of the old dogma on *reconciliatio* and sought to grasp the concept in primarily ethical terms. The old dogmatic content – God’s reconciliation with those who trespass against Him, viz. sinners – faded in importance, giving way to the talk of reconciliation in the sense of a new order of relations between men (and women) or the reform (or revolution) of society as a whole; instead of focusing on God and man, the emphasis shifted to the relations and co-existence of human beings, or to the attempts to legitimise and underpin, by way of old religious termini, the desire for far-reaching changes in our lives with others<sup>10</sup>.

It is crucial to the history of this term since the Enlightenment that the symbol of reconciliation, which was originally employed in a primarily religious sense and afforded a rational interpretation by theologians, is now playing an important role in very different social milieu. It is no easy task to find a significant modern philosophy of culture or social theory in which the terminus ‘reconciliation’ does not perform an important function. Since the late eighteenth century, ‘reconciliation’ has grown into a fundamental concept of philosophical theories and sociological analyses of the modern age. The more intellectuals experience modern society, formatively shaped by the logic of capitalistic exchange, as a place of competition, struggle, strife, alienation and division, the more they deploy old religious semantics of reconciliation in their demands for and drafts of a better, more just society. In other words, since the late eighteenth century, the term ‘reconciliation’ has served the development of ethical analyses of modern society – which are, in the main, critical of the elementary affliction experienced in the existing society,

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10 For a discussion of the developments in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries towards a more philosophical and ethical understanding of ‘reconciliation’ Cornehl (1971) and Sauter, (1997:37-41). For the doctrine of atonement and reconciliation in German idealism, especially Schelling, see Mandel (1916:254-279).

together with its deeply suffered deficiencies – and the drawing up of models of another, better social order, based on justice and peace.

‘Reconciliation’ is a promiscuous term that lends itself to the power struggles of political parties, as a leitmotiv for social reform or revolution, or for marginalised groups (of whatever kind) to epitomise their hope for a very different life. Left-wing Marxists lay claim to the term just as much as right-wing nationalists, who use the model of the ‘national community’ (*Volksgemeinschaft*), for e.g., to propagate their belief that they can fully ‘reconcile’ people, beyond all social and political differences. The term can also be linked to anti-liberal, authoritarian or, indeed, totalitarian concepts on the communisation of human beings. At all events, ‘reconciliation’ was also an important symbol for the predominant totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, that is to say, the new ‘political religions’ of communism and National Socialism. In psychoanalytic circles, reconciliation stands for memory, discussion and disclosing traumata of the past. Alternatively, it can be associated with ritual acts at certain religious celebrations, for instance, where people can supposedly experience symbols of a new spiritual community. The common denominator is always overcoming the separation of people. Above all, the asymmetric relationships between offenders and victims play an important role. In a word, it is extremely easy to appropriate and manipulate this concept, and implement it for socio-political ideologies. The more the term ‘reconciliation’ is used in very divergent contexts by very different authors or actors, each with a particular objective for his analysis of the present day or model of a better society, the broader the spectrum of its meanings will become. As a result, its semantic content is at risk of becoming ever more vague and diffuse.

Generally speaking, however, one can say that in most of these concepts ‘reconciliation’ is understood as the overcoming of an existential state of alienation or estrangement: man’s acts of reconciliation serve to reintegrate him into an ideal and harmonious whole. For this reason, many religious traditions associate ‘reconciliation’ with such ideas as ‘the end of all division and variance’, ‘all-embracing harmony’, ‘the peace of Creation as a whole’, ‘overcoming all conflicts’ and ‘the reintegration of individuals who have strayed from the safety of a sheltering community’. Religious as well as philosophical rhetoric on reconciliation very often reveals a strong harmonising trait and a

tendency to totalitarian ideas, viz. that all of reality, the entire cosmos or God's Creation as a whole is no longer determined by difference and conflict, but by an inner unity beyond all division. God's reconciliation with trespassers then becomes merely a symbol for the vision of a harmonious totality which denies the reality of all that is particular, individual or independent<sup>11</sup>. Owing to the deep moral respect for conciliatory acts, situations or states of affairs lacking in rapprochement or harmony are seen to be negative and socially destructive. As a result, we frequently find the religious talk of 'reconciliation' coloured by emphatic, exuberant language. Yet one must recognise the contradictoriness in this moral emphasis: Are all unreconciled states of affairs to be judged as negative in themselves and as such? Or can we not also interpret difference, division, variance and separation as legitimate consequences of the interest in individual freedom? Are conflicts to be viewed as negative per se?

### **3 RECONCILIATION AS A PROBLEM OF TRUTH**

As a white, male intellectual from Germany, I do not claim to understand the particular content of the debates in South Africa and what is meant exactly by *ubuntu*. In the last few months, I have made a concerted effort to read texts from and on the South African discussions and about the work of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. For a German of my generation, the endeavours here in South Africa to deal with the deep wounds of the past by setting up a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' are of great biographical interest. Both after 1945 (after the end of the National-Socialist dictatorship) and after 1989 (that is, the collapse of the communist dictatorship in East Germany), Germans were faced with a structurally comparable situation. We, too, were required to reflect on how we should address and handle the crimes of the past within the framework of a parliamentary, democratic state governed by the rule of law. I name but a few questions: Must all offenders be charged by the judiciary and be taken to court? Can the crimes of the past be adequately grasped and judged by juridical means? Is it permissible, for higher ethical reasons (above all, in view of the idea of inborn human rights), to administer the present positive law and to pass a judgement on deeds which, in the old legal system, did not

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11 This is also recognised by Sauter, (1997:30-36).

violate the law in force at the time? Can guilt be determined at all, in the light of the profoundly different perspectives on the past? Can one imagine that there is an appropriate atonement for this wrongdoing, or that there be any compensation for such injuries? Should there be a general amnesty, for the sake of promoting peace in society? From the perspective of theological ethics, we also ask: Are there specifically Christian answers to these questions? Do Christians have to speak here univocally and unanimously? Or is there for these questions, as for many other social conflicts, a variety of very different positions which can be deemed legitimately Christian? Do the answers to these questions not belong to the field of practical political reasoning, rather than to the sphere of religious certainties?

If I understand the mandate of the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ correctly, the commission’s work is intended to create reconciliation *via* truth. Not only are victims invited to tell ‘their story’ and bring charges against perpetrators; also the offenders (of whichever side) are expected to publicly confess their guilt and take responsibility for their crimes, so that the social dignity of both victim and offender be publicly restored. Clearly, certain concepts of classical psychoanalysis have been decisive in the development of this discursive process. Victims are encouraged to remember their injuries openly in public because, ultimately, only the memory of the traumata can promote the healing process. In a conversation with a German Lutheran theologian, Archbishop Desmond Tutu described his understanding of this process thus: ‘We are opening old wounds in order to clean them. It is terribly painful, but afterwards the wounds will heal better<sup>12</sup>’.

From my own perspective as a liberal German theologian, I do not presume to be able to sufficiently grasp and assess the complexity of the debates being conducted in South Africa on the work of the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’. With caution, therefore, I should like to briefly outline only nine theological propositions on my understanding of reconciliation. Whether these theological statements are of importance for the discussions in South Africa, in particular for the reflection in her Christian churches, is

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12 Cf. the interview between Desmond Tutu and Joachim Gauck „Gott ist nicht neutral” in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin* 5 (1997:20).

not for me to decide; only South Africans are in a position to judge this, each individual for him- or herself. I must confess, however, that certain contributions from the current discussions on reconciliation in South Africa do strike me as harbouring problematic tendencies. Now and then, at least, the emphatic talk of reconciliation is associated with the idea of being able to bring about a completely new, harmonious society, free of conflict. Yet the vision of a society without conflict is extremely problematic because conflicts are an expression and result of the freedom of individuals. The more individual freedom there is, the greater the differences will be. And, as a result, there will be a greater need to be able to live this diversity within the framework of the law. Conjoined to some pictures of the new reconciliation, however, are visions of a unified society which appear to have anti-pluralistic leanings and seem to threaten the legitimate variety of individual lifestyles.

#### **4 ESCHATOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE NAME OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM, OR: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING OF RECONCILIATION**

##### **Proposition 1:**

A strict distinction is to be made between the dogmatic talk of reconciliation between God and man and the ethical discussion of reconciliation between human beings. The subject of reconciliation between God and sinners can only be a merciful and gracious God who relieves man of his guilt. The idea of 'reconciliation' between human beings, by contrast, follows a significantly different structural logic of relations. The latter is a communicative process in which one person forgives another for a certain deed or wrong of which he or she remains guilty.

##### **Proposition 2:**

For a Christian-based ethical discussion of reconciliation, the concept of forgiveness is fundamental. 'Forgiveness' means renouncing revenge or relinquishing a legally defined expiation. It is not possible to sue for forgiveness. Forgiveness lies solely with the free decision of an individual person who, as a victim of an act of infringement, wishes to forgive the perpetrator(s).

**Proposition 3:**

The relationship between offender and victim is always asymmetric. Even if a perpetrator apologises for his deeds and asks for forgiveness, he is not entitled to the forgiveness of his victim, neither morally nor legally. He may plead for forgiveness, but it belongs to the victim's civil rights and liberties to refuse.

**Proposition 4:**

In religious terms, ethical talk of reconciliation presupposes the confession of one's own sinfulness, i.e. a declaration of guilt. Forgiveness is always a concrete act, referring to a certain deed or deeds committed by one or more identifiable perpetrator(s) and involving one or more victim(s). All abstract generalisations on 'victims' and 'offenders' are, against the background of the Christian tradition, to be rejected as extremely problematic. For generalisations threaten to abstract from the suffering and affliction of the victim's individual person.

**Proposition 5:**

Forgiveness is always offered by an individual subject or group of individuals who have experienced themselves as victims and, by virtue of a free decision, wish to jointly forgive the offending party. Forgiveness can never be conceived as an act of some supra-individual or general subject, as a service or provision of the state, for instance, or as an act performed by Group X or by People Y. For this would once again threaten to infringe the freedom of the individual victim: constitutive of this freedom is the elementary right to be able to decide for oneself whether to offer forgiveness or reconciliation, as well as how and to what extent.

**Proposition 6:**

Forgiveness between people can be expressed in countless different ways – by the victim's acceptance of the offender, in the willingness to receive symbolic compensation, in the rites of mutual respect, or in the intensification of exchange and relations.

**Proposition 7:**

'Reconciliation' becomes an extremely problematic term when extracted from genuinely religious contexts (or from the language games of theological dogmatics) and introduced into socio-political language. For, here, it can be very easily instrumentalised for the

authoritarian subjugation of the individual, or used as a linguistic weapon to suppress legitimate conflicts and to exclude different points of view. Naturally, it is better if people understand one another. But no one should or can force another. Conflicts are equally legitimate as a fundamental diversity of worldviews. In a democratic state governed by the rule of law only those conflicts that are dealt with in accordance with the legal system are acceptable.

**Proposition 8:**

In a democratic state, governed by the rule of law and based on pre-societal or natural human rights, it is our moral duty to recognise every other human being as the bearer of inalienable dignity.

**Proposition 9:**

For Christians, reconciliation is an eschatological concept. The perception of the eschatological difference between here and there, this life and the next, the world and the Kingdom of God prevents the religious talk of reconciliation from being ideologised and politically instrumentalised. Here, in this world, there will never be complete reconciliation. Here there will always be differences, separation, division and conflicts. Whoever seeks to form a society so as to realise *reconciliatio* in an all-embracing sense threatens to negate an individual's elementary right of personal liberty to live differently to others. More freedom walks hand in hand with more diversity – and more conflict.

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