

Dokumentation

Towards a Theology and a Ministry of Reconciliation.

(Paper presented to the Mission Council of EMS, Stuttgart, 3. July 2001) by Rev. Dr. Klaus Schäfer. "Since about thirty years we can observe that the term reconciliation has been exceedingly, almost explosion-like, drawn into public language, in ever new associations and applications. This interest in the term reconciliation is nourished from a yearning for peace, increasingly felt in a widely divided world, may it be in Europe or in other regions of the world."

Towards a Theology and a Ministry of Reconciliation. - Tentative Explorations into the Relation of Mission and Reconciliation

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In the introduction of a recent book on "Reconciliation´ as Theme of Theology" I read the following remark about the current prominence of the word "reconciliation": "Since about thirty years we can observe that the term reconciliation has been exceedingly, almost explosion-like, drawn into public language, in ever new associations and applications. This interest in the term reconciliation is nourished from a yearning for peace, increasingly felt in a widely divided world, may it be in Europe or in other regions of the world."

Interesting is that this statement comes almost along with a sense of resentment. Resented is that the wide-spread and sometimes vague talk on reconciliation threatens, according to the author, to blur the Christian perception of reconciliation focusing on the relation of God and human beings. This book then, with its collection of classical theological texts on the Christian doctrine of reconciliation, seeks to function as a reminder of the truly Christian notion of reconciliation. The whole book, however, does not venture at all to creatively connect the Christian vision of reconciliation with the burning issues of a fragmented world.

I quote this book here in order to show the rather sad situation of theology, particularly in the West, and the failure to engage creatively in an exploration of the significance of the Christian narrative of reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ with the realm of struggling and agonizing humanity in many conflictive contexts in the world. In dogmatic treatises on reconciliation and in theological dictionaries we find hardly an exploration of the social significance of reconciliation. Theology, so it seems, is out of touch with the realities of human suffering and struggle, and it may not be a surprise that the political and social discourse on reconciliation - as we find it in writings on conflict mediation etc. - does not draw on theological resources either.

It is also noteworthy that the theology of mission has until recently not really paid attention to the issue of reconciliation. The famous and in many ways praiseworthy book of David J. Bosch on "Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission" (Maryknoll 1991) elaborates extensively on "Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm", but it does not mention reconciliation as a mission concern at all. The book, in spite of its great value, is still a missiology coming from the era of the cold war; it does not deal adequately with the new challenges of the time of globalisation. It was not aware yet of ethnic and national conflicts of the kind we have experienced in former Yugoslavia and Central Africa, and it had not heard yet of the new threat of the "Clash of Civilizations". Whether the perception of Samuel Huntington is right or not - I personally think that there are severe flaws in his conceptualisation of the world -, it should be evident today that the fall of the Berlin Wall as the symbolic end of a historical era has not brought about world peace. What we find today is a greater awareness of the pluralism of cultures which give way to new kinds of conflicts and as a consequence aggravate the search for reconciliation and peace.

It seems that Christian theology has been ill-prepared for the recent outbreak of conflicts

associated with ethnic, national, social, political and religious undercurrents - what also may explain the complicity of Christians in some of the conflicts. Till today, there are still only a few substantial writings dealing with "Reconciliation as a Model of Mission", most noteworthy the North American Catholic theologian Robert J. Schreiter and the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf. In trying to draw on insights and suggestions from those authors - and, of course, from some others as well as from discussions around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa -, I would like to explore the meaning of the Christian vision of reconciliation and relate it to the world of today. I group my reflections in *three chapters*: First I will give at least a glimpse of the context in which we have to speak today of the ministry of reconciliation; secondly, I want to explore the biblical vision of reconciliation as the basis of Christian identity and ministry in the world, and thirdly, I would like to relate the insights of those two chapters and attempt to spell out more forcefully the theological vision and the church's commissioning for a ministry of reconciliation.

1. The context of reconciliation: Group identities in conflict

There is no time and space to enter into an overall analysis of conflict situations in various countries of the world. Nor is there a chance to explore the various - and partly contradictory facets - of the process of globalisation with its economic and - for our topic of special interest - cultural dynamics which, in my view, form much of the backdrop for our topic. The forces of homogenisation on the one hand, and the (re)assertion of identities - cultural, national, ethnic, religious, social - on the other hand, have brought about situations of tension and conflict between peoples. Such conflicts emerge in situations where groups of peoples of different identity live close to each other or share a common territory.

To illustrate this world of tension and conflict I refer to one exemplary story from a Muslim woman. It is a very distressing witness coming from the war in former Yugoslavia. I dare to retell this story here because it brings us close to the heart of naked brutality, hatred, grief and agony which we have to face when we want to talk meaningfully about reconciliation. Here is how the woman told the story:

"I am a Muslim, and I am thirty five years old. To my second son who was just born, I gave the name `Jihad.` So he would not forget the testament of his mother - revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, `May this milk choke you if you forget.` So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me. No pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Ilijas and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: `You are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman...` I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad, `Ustasha, ustasha...` And kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad - was. This is the only way..."

This distressing story may help us to grasp some of the aspects of a world crying out for reconciliation. And if we ponder about this witness, there indeed emerge a number of observations and insights, grave questions and disturbing truths. What does this story tell about the context of reconciliation?

1. The story speaks not simply about individuals, but about *group identities*. The woman begins: "I am a Muslim", and then we hear about Serbs, who speak of a "stinking Muslim woman". We also read about "everything that is not of the Orthodox faith". Earlier, these group designations may not have been (so) important, people were good neighbors, shared a common life in society. But today these identities matter: People perceive themselves not simply as individuals, but as members of certain ethnic, national, religious groups. "We are Serbs", "we are Bosnians", "we are Croatians", "we are Muslim", "we are Orthodox", "we are Christians", "we are Germans". Conflicts emerge from the assertion of group identities.

2. It may not be bad to affirm the identity of one's own group. The group gives a sense of belonging. But here, group identities are being affirmed strongly *against other groups*. The

construction of identity goes along with the *exclusion of the other*. Otherness is given no space, the identity of the other is denied, degraded to the utmost: "You stinking Muslim woman"; "to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith". The issue is not only the question of identity, but at stake is the issue of identity and difference or alterity. It is "we" and "the other"; my identity is affirmed, the identity of the other is denied. Enmity and hatred rule, "ethnic cleansing", the total eradication of the other is the brutal consequence of this attitude. Group identities in conflict is the root cause of many a conflict today.

3. There is a *cycle of violence and counter-violence*. The Muslim woman was physically abused and humiliated, and she thinks of revenge: "'To my second son... I gave the name Jihad.' So he would not forget the testament of his mother - revenge." Violence produces violence, there is a mechanism which can hardly be broken. One wonders how people can escape this mechanism.

4. The story does not give any reason for that brutal violence; one gets the impression of total irrationality. Of course, world opinions hold the Serbs responsible for the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Even though there is truth in this charge, one is in such conflicts often faced with a situation where *each party has its own claim about justice and liberation*. It belongs to the nature of identity conflicts of this kind that the issue of justice becomes blurred. In the course of time it becomes difficult to say who is fighting for which cause; the just defense of the UCK, for instance, will tomorrow turn to be the aggressive invader. The attempt to solve conflicts with reference to justice becomes difficult; each group has an idea of justice of their own.

5. And yet, there is a *victim* and there are *perpetrators* in the woman's story. Injustice has been committed toward this woman, and therefore perpetrators have to be punished or need to repent, reparation has to be made and memories have to be healed. Listening to the woman's story one realizes that forgiveness is a very difficult task; one wonders how it is possible and whether it would matter at all or whether it would not simply be regarded by the perpetrators as a sign of weakness of a powerless and crushed woman and her community who have no resources for defense left. One wants culprits be punished, and at the same time one feels that only something like forgiveness would provide a way out of the cycle of violence and counter-violence.

6. In such a conflict of identities - the Orthodox Serbs against the Muslim Bosnians - we find *religion* implicated. Religion is being used to stimulate and aggravate cultural, ethnic and national tensions. Religion is an accomplice in the ethnic strife. Religion, so it seems, does not only have no resources to resist the brutal violence. One can not even speak of a confusion of loyalty between the claims of the religion and the claims of ethnicity; there is no difference felt. It seems that in a such a situation the most aggressive elements of religions are being remembered and (re)employed in order to legitimize and guide the cause of one's own group: The son of the Muslim woman is named "Jihad"; the Serbs "destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith". It is distressing, from a Christian perspective, that here as well as in other cases - in Rwanda, but also in parts of Indonesia or in the Sudan and elsewhere - the Christian community is not simply the victim of the violence of others, but part of the problem; religion, and also the Christian religion, is implicated in the conflict and even fuels conflicts.

The story of the Muslim woman is a bitter one and may not be representative of the conflicts we face in our societies. And yet, the pattern of group identities in conflict, the cycle of violence and counter-violence, of blurred justice, and of perpetrators and victims who have to face each other and find ways of living on and not at least the instrumentalisation of religion are not unfamiliar features in today's world. This kind of pattern can be observed in Nigeria and Sudan, in Indonesia and in Fiji. But it is also found in Germany, a country that has moved from its traditionally monocultural character towards a multicultural society where today right-wing people affirm their "Germanness" - "proud to be a German" - against others who are regarded as invaders taking away our jobs. The outburst of violence may not be as widespread as in other regions of the world, but the threat of violence is felt everywhere in Germany by people who have come to live among us.

What does reconciliation mean in such a context? It is evident that the answer to such a question is not easy in view of the complexity of identity and justice issues. But the fostering of a theology and of a ministry of reconciliation is urgent.

2. The biblical narrative of reconciliation

In order to reflect on a theology of reconciliation for our times we need - in a second step - to look at the biblical resources for reconciliation.

Interestingly, the words "reconciliation" and "to reconcile" occur in the New Testament apart from Mt. 5:24, where it relates to the reconciliation of individual human beings, only in the writings of the apostle Paul. References are found in 2. Cor. 5:18-20; Rom. 5:10f.; Rom. 11:15; 1. Cor. 7:11, and then in Eph. 2:16 and Col. 1:20.22.

In spite of the - perhaps surprising - fact that there are only those few references of the word "reconciliation" in the Bible, I agree with most theologians that the concept of reconciliation is nevertheless one of the important theological categories in the New Testament. The biblical narrative of reconciliation leads us straight into the center of the Christian faith; it grasps and expresses the nature of the Triune God and ought to shape the individual, communal and missionary identity of the Christian people.

There is still some argument among New Testament scholars about the background of the word reconciliation. Some have assumed that the Pauline usage of the word derives from the Hellenistic environment of the New Testament. Scholars have referred to traditions which celebrate an earthly ruler as the god-sent bringer of world-peace and reconciliation of peoples. Those traditions speak of a pacification of a divided and fragmented world and hail the new ruler as reconciler of hostile peoples, groups and nations. Other exegetes have advocated the opinion that Paul draws on Old Testament traditions on the atonement for the sins of the people. Even though one has to acknowledge that such a view fits well with some of the elements of Paul's reflection on reconciliation through the death of Christ, one must nevertheless note that the word "reconciliation" itself does not appear in the Old Testament. One may therefore agree with the findings of the South African New Testament scholar Cilliers Breytenbach who has in his treatise on the Pauline teaching on reconciliation forcefully argued that Paul has employed the word reconciliation from the realm of politics and peace-negotiations, particularly from the language of diplomats and their efforts to negotiate peace treaties and serve as ambassadors of their respective rulers to offer peace to peoples.

These considerations might already give some hints as to the range of the meaning of the word reconciliation in the Pauline letters. More important, however, is a survey of the actual application of the word through the apostle (and his pupils, if we consider Col. and Eph. as letters of pupils of Paul). I would like to list the major features which are associated with Paul's concept of reconciliation.

1. One has, first of all, to note that the Pauline writings apply the notion of reconciliation to *three very distinct, though overlapping, aspects*. All have in common that the word reconciliation occurs in the context of a situation characterized of enmity, hatred, exclusion, division, fragmentation - in short: in a situation of *distorted relationships*. In a tentative way one can say that the notion of reconciliation looks at a *mending of that broken and distorted relationships*, but the realm, in which reconciliation occurs, is different:

- *Reconciliation between God and human beings - the individual-soteriological dimension* (cf. 2. Cor. 5:17-20; Rom. 5:10f.; also Rom. 11:15).

The most famous text is here certainly 2. Cor. 5:17-21 where Paul speaks of the "ministry of reconciliation":

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The situation of a distorted relationship between God and human beings is presupposed through such words as "trespasses" and "sin". In Rom. 5 Paul is more explicit about the distortion when he speaks of the reconciliation of "sinners", "the ungodly", even of God's "enemies" who are saved from the "wrath of God". The relation between God and human being is defined as a relationship of enmity, and this enmity is overcome by the reconciling activity of God.

- *Reconciliation between different groups of human beings, that is Jews and Gentiles - the anthropological-ecclesiological dimension.*

The letters to the Ephesians and also to the Colossians add a different aspect. In Eph. 2:11ff. we read of peoples who are "separated from Christ", who were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel", who were "strangers" etc. Reconciliation with God in Christ is certainly in the mind of the author, but it is interesting that he particularly speaks of the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ. The "dividing wall of hostility" between different groups of peoples has been broken down, the "hostility" has been overcome. What we find here is clearly a vision of a new humanity reconciled in Christ and living together in a new community.

- *Reconciliation of the cosmos - the cosmic dimension.*

Col. 1:15ff. adds still another feature to these dimensions of reconciliation. We read not only of the reconciliation of people with God and with one another - "you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind" -, but we find also references to a reconciliation of "all things", that is of the whole cosmos. In the context of the liturgical hymn, that has been quoted here, there is obviously a presupposition that the order - the balance and beauty of the cosmos with all its created beings "in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities" - had been distorted and is being reconciled in Christ.

This setting of the notion of reconciliation in the context of a fragmented world, in which sin, hatred, enmity, violence and group differences are common, fits well with the secular usage of the world reconciliation in the N.T. environment to which I already referred. In the political contexts, where the word predominantly occurred, reconciliation had to do with the restoration of relationships, the ending of conflicts, the overcoming of violence, and the mending of fragmentation and brokenness. What is new in the Pauline texts - and what is, of course, the very center of the teaching of the apostle - is the application of reconciliation-language to the relationship of God and human beings. That reconciliation with God, however, shows social implications, is quite evident from the vision of a reconciled community of Jews and Gentiles - as well as free men and slaves, men and women (cf. Gal. 3:28) - in the one body of Christ.

2. Reconciliation brings about peace and a new creation.

One should immediately add that reconciliation in the biblical sense is not simply regarded as a mending of broken relationships. Reconciliation brings about peace. Here again we find the different dimensions of peace. Paul speaks in the context of reconciliation certainly about peace with God (cf. Rom. 5:1 and 11 where "peace" and "reconciliation" appear as equivalents). But he also speaks of peace between human beings in the community of faith: "he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14), and he also envisions the cosmic peace in the reconciliation of all things: "and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20).

Integral to the Pauline talk of reconciliation is the notion of a "new creation" which occurs not only in 2. Cor. 5:17, but also in other relevant texts. The category of "new creation" shows that there is not only a going back to the previous stage, a mending of brokenness, but a totally new quality of being. And from the various texts in the Pauline writings we also gather that "new creation" not only relates to a renewal of the individual; envisioned is also the renewal of human relationship and finally the renewal of the whole creation. Reconciliation is a process of renewal of life with individual, communal and cosmic dimensions. The Christians and the Christian community, one can assume, are the forebearers, the foreshadowing of a renewal of the entire creation in the horizon of the kingdom of God.

3. *It is God who initiates reconciliation and who has already brought about reconciliation.*

Against some misconstrued interpretation as if human beings have to reconcile God through some kind of sacrifice, stands the strong biblical emphasis on the fact that it is actually God who initiates and brings about reconciliation: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2. Cor. 5:19). Human beings are, according to Paul, not in a position to reconcile themselves with God. The initiative as well as the effectiveness of reconciliation lies entirely on the side of God; human beings are the recipients of the gift of reconciliation. This gift flows out of the grace and mercy of God; it is an act of the abundant love of God.

Important in this context is also that Paul speaks of reconciliation as already being achieved by God in Christ. Though it remains true that human beings are invited through God's ambassadors - apostles and missionaries - to accept the gift of reconciliation, it is significant to remember that reconciliation has already been effected by God. Christian life and attitude is grounded in the experience of divine reconciliation; Christians discover what God has already done in Christ. Human beings are certainly invited to participate in the process of reconciliation, but they must not forget where reconciliation actually comes from and who continues to guide the world towards reconciliation. The notion of God being active in the process of mending the brokenness of the world and bringing about the new creation is, so to say, a counterforce to agony and despair holding victims of conflicts so easily in its grip. The biblical narrative of reconciliation works against fatalism, quietism and resignation; it inspires a vision for faith and hope to engage in reconciliation and peace making.

4. *The narrative of reconciliation, initiated by God, is the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

When Paul speaks of reconciliation in its theological significance, he makes usually a reference to the death of Christ. Many people today have difficulties with this kind of language. They even reject the Christian faith for what they perceive as an unbearable image of a revengeful God whose wrath can only be appeased by the spilling of the blood of his only beloved son.

Such a picture, however, is a total misrepresentation of the meaning of the cross. Without being able to enter into an extended exploration, I need nevertheless to sketch out a few aspects of a biblical theology of the cross relevant to the understanding of the process of reconciliation.

1) The story of the death of Christ *takes the experience and history of human suffering very serious*. The violence experienced by Jesus in his innocent suffering, his crushed body and his agony on the cross relate him to the suffering of humanity. Robert J. Schreier writes: "The violence of our situation is met with the violence of Jesus' death; the dawning of the resurrection heralds that 'new place' in which those reconciled hope to find themselves. The symbol of the body is the vehicle for restoring the shattered bodies of those who suffer and for gathering the scattered community of those driven apart in the situation of violence and oppression. The symbol of blood carries the memories of violence to be healed and portends new life for those who have shed their own blood." The cross is therefore not an act of patriarchal sadism, but an act of *deep solidarity of God with suffering humanity*.

2) The passion of Jesus, the innocent victim, is a *protest against a world in which violence is met by violence*, revenge by counter-revenge, where the cycle of violence and counter-violence is never broken. "Hanging on the cross, Jesus provided the ultimate example of his command to replace the principle of retaliation ('an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth') with the principle of nonresistance ('if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also') (Matthew 5:38-42). By suffering violence as an innocent victim, he took upon himself the aggression of the persecutors. He broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it, taking it upon himself. He refused to be sucked into the automatism of revenge, but sought to overcome evil by doing good - even at the cost of his life." His suffering and death as an innocent victim meant a demasking of the powers of this world who resist truth, justice and love. The cross of Christ stands in the world as a sign of human viciousness, seeking to protect itself against truth and justice, and it is at the same time a symbol of divine discontent and struggle against this world of violence. The message of resurrection of the crucified Messiah provides hope that the destructive powers of this world will not succeed in the last instance.

3) The repeated notion that "*Christ died for our sake*" gives a radical expression of God's *proexistence for others*. These others, however, are not simply "friends" - people of the same (cultural, ethnic, religious) "in-group", so to speak. The "others" are portrayed as God's "*enemies*", the "ungodly", the "sinners": "Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:7f.) God's *proexistence* is actually a *proexistence for the perpetrators* embracing them with love and forgiveness. God, who actually represents the offended party in the drama of the distortion of the relationship between God and human beings, creates space within himself for the offender.

4) The divine love of the others has an aim. When Paul states that "*Christ died for our sins*", then he states that God in the death of *Christ has set right what was wrong*. "At the core of the Christian faith lies the claim that God entered history and died on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ for an unjust and deceitful world. In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world. When God was made sin in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21), the world of deceit and injustice was set aright. Sins were atoned for. The cry of the innocent blood was attended to. Since the new world has become reality in the crucified and resurrected Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) it is possible to live the new world in the midst of the old in an act of gratuitous forgiveness without giving up the struggle for truth and justice. One can embrace perpetrators in forgiveness because God has embraced them through atonement."

5. *Sharing in the Gospel of God's reconciliation of the world in Christ fosters a new life characterized by a commitment to love and reconciliation.*

The last remarks have already lead into an exploration of the consequences of the Gospel of reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ. By faith in the divine narrative of reconciliation of the world in Christ, Christians are drawn into the process of reconciliation. The Gospel as the "word of reconciliation" does not only provide a faraway vision of a new creation. Reconciliation is a gift, but this gift lays also a claim upon its recipients. The Gospel of reconciliation leads to and therefore implies a commitment; it becomes an obligation to be lived out in the life of people in this world.

The interrelatedness of gift and claim - or, to put it differently, of the Gospel narrative of the reconciliation in Christ and its manifestation in the life of the recipients of the Gospel - occurs throughout the Pauline letters. The message of reconciliation is supposed to shape the life of the Christian individual and the Christian community as particularly the ethical teaching in Paul's letter unfold. The experience of reconciliation in Christ leads to the radical commitment to a lifestyle of love and reconciliation (cf. for instance Rom. 12:9ff.). The vision of a new community, in which Jews and Gentiles, slave and free men, women and men - groups whose relationship in the New Testament environment were strained and loaded with hostility, mutual resentment, feelings of superiority and inferiority etc. - lead actually to a new lifestyle of a community sharing together in brotherly and sisterly love and affection. It is true that the Christian community - and even the apostle Paul himself - fell often enough short of living out this vision of a reconciled community. But one must at least acknowledge that Paul forcefully argued for the vision that the Gospel of reconciliation must be lived out in the concrete realm of social relations. And the apostle himself perceived the "ministry of reconciliation" entrusted to him as a radical *proexistence for Christ and the people*.

3. The Commitment to reconciliation and the will to embrace

After having given sketches of conflict situations and the biblical narrative of reconciliation we need to proceed and relate the insights of the previous two chapters. One can do this certainly in affirming that the churches should pay much more attention to the issue of ethnic conflict and violence than it has done in the past. Such claims are increasingly made today, and the statement of Ralph Premdas in conclusion of his compelling article on ethnic conflicts in a number of countries may stand as an example for it:

"The leaders of the churches will have to take the issue of ethnic conflict more seriously. Of utmost importance is a better understanding of the social, political and theological factors involved. The churches will have to appoint committees that investigate the historical origin of the conflict, examine the social scientific

literature on ethnic conflicts, study the theory and practice of conflict resolution, and devise instruments of popular education that raise people's awareness of the issues at stake and communicate the biblical message of reconciliation."

One would certainly join Premdas in this demand, and the ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence may indeed help us to advance the churches grappling with issues of violence and conflict and nourish the Christian commitment to reconciliation. However, my interest in this concluding section lies not so much with concrete proposals for the ministry of reconciliation. According to the task assigned to me I rather want to continue the theological exploration and focus on some of the disturbing issues which emerge when we venture to develop a theology of reconciliation based on the biblical narrative of reconciliation. In my view the *relation of justice and reconciliation* is such an issue; and the *recognition of otherness* is another one. In addressing these issues, which I mentioned a few times in passing, more fully, we will get a clearer picture of what the ministry of reconciliation will look like in the world of today.

To raise the issue of the *relation of justice and reconciliation* is important, because our theological concerns in relation to politics and the social realm have in recent decades centered rather on justice and liberation than on reconciliation. This was particularly true of contextual theologies in the South and also of the recent theology of mission which developed often in close dialogue with liberation theologies. The struggle for liberation and justice in the context of colonial and neocolonial exploitation - or also of exploitation within societies, such as the struggle of the Korean Minjung or the Indian Dalits - has been given priority over against the notion of reconciliation. This was quite understandable and even right, not only in relation to the actual situation of severe exploitation and injustice, but also in the context of conservative forces proposing reconciliation as an alternative to justice. The best example for the latter attitude was probably South Africa. Harold Wells remembers in his essay on the "Theology for Reconciliation" the official South African rhetoric on reconciliation: "Living as I did for several years in southern Africa during the apartheid era, I often heard on the radio the white South African heads of state appealing to the people for reconciliation: 'Why must we always live with conflict and unrest? Why can we not live peacefully together in this beautiful land? Let us all work together for national reconciliation!'"

It was totally justified that the South African "Kairos Document", issued by concerned South African theologians in 1985, criticised sharply this kind of a "cheap reconciliation":

"In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unchristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. It is asking us to become accomplices in our own oppression, to become servants of the devil. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice."

No one wants to forget this lesson, and it is certainly not my intention here to cut the close connection between justice and reconciliation. Since we believe in the God of justice, we have to affirm that the struggle for justice is integral part of the Christian identity and certainly an obligation for Christian mission in this world. The issue of justice has to be attended to! And yet, I dare to ask the question whether the notion of the priority of justice and liberation over reconciliation - first must justice be achieved, reconciliation follows second-, so prevalent in our theological thinking, is still appropriate to deal with the some of the new challenges for the mission of the church.

We have become aware today, in a changed world situation, that the pursuit of justice and liberation as a prior task to reconciliation is beset with some major problems. For one thing, the struggle for liberation takes social and political responsibility seriously, but divorces the character of social engagement from the very center of the Christian faith - from the narrative of the cross of Christ which reveals the very character of the Triune God as the reconciler of the world. Second, it is suited only to situations of manifest evil in which one side is only the victim and the other only the perpetrator. Most conflicts today are, however, not so clean. Especially after conflicts have been going on for some time, each party sees itself as the victim and perceives its rival as the perpetrator, and has good reasons for reading the situation in this way. As a consequence, each can see itself engaged in the struggle for

liberation and the pursuit for justice, and thus the Christian faith ends up providing primarily legitimation for the struggle. Reconciliation is not even attempted - at least not until "our" side has won. Third, we realize today that issues of justice and liberation are not always providing the adequate concepts for the interpretation of conflicts and grappling with such conflicts. We certainly have situations of exploitation and oppression, and the struggle for liberation and justice remains tantamount. But situations of conflict emerge today increasingly around identity issues. "The struggle for the equality of individuals belonging to various social groups has given way to the struggle for recognition of communal identities", is an observation valid for many countries in the world. What is needed in this context is actually the construction of identity of peoples without the exclusion of others; what is called for is an attitude and even a politics of recognition. That communities - whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, German or whatever community - must construct their identity only in such a way that they give space to the identity of others is mandatory in a world of communal pluralism.

The experience of South Africa itself is perhaps again the best example for a reconsidering of the relationship of justice/liberation and reconciliation. The peaceful dismantling of apartheid in South Africa did not follow the pattern "first liberation, then reconciliation" advocated by the Kairos Document. John de Gruchy writes that in the negotiations for a transition in South Africa it became abundantly clear to Nelson Mandela "that there was no alternative. Neither the state nor the liberation movement had the capacity to achieve a decisive victory, and the prolonging of the vicious stalemate could only spell disaster for the country as a whole. Seeking reconciliation was, paradoxically, an instrument of the struggle to end apartheid and establish a just social order. The path of reconciliation was not only the goal of liberation but a means to achieve that end. It was an instrument in which the revolutionary struggle, political realism, and moral integrity combined to produce an almost irresistible force".

However, what John de Gruchy calls "paradoxically" hints in my view even to a different reading of the relationship of justice and reconciliation. De Gruchy himself speaks also of a "dialectical" relationship of justice and reconciliation, but he perceives it rather as a strategically than a fundamental relationship in which justice and reconciliation are seen as interrelated, as two sides of the same coin. In view of some of the conflicts today, but also in the light of the biblical narrative on reconciliation, one needs even to move a step further and state that the concern for reconciliation should within this dialectical relationship be given priority over the concern for justice and liberation: The concern for reconciliation provides, in a principal way, the framework for the struggle for justice. Miroslaf Volf, who has done much to advance the churches' reflection on the ministry of reconciliation affirms: "Within a dialectical relationship between the two, reconciliation has priority over liberation, and love over justice. It is essential to underscore both the *priority* of reconciliation over liberation and the *dialectical* relationship between the two. Apart from the priority of reconciliation, the pursuit of liberation will never lead to peace and love between former enemies; but without the commitment to justice within the overarching framework of love, the pursuit of reconciliation will be perverted into a pursuit of cheap reconciliation, a euphemism for perpetuation of domination and oppression."

Volf has called this demand for reconciliation, which for him is central to the Christian identity as grounded in the reconciling activity of the Triune God, "*the will to embrace*". And he suggests, "(1) that the will to embrace and the movement toward the other for the sake of reconciliation is prior to any reading of the justice of the other; and (2) that full embrace or complete reconciliation can take place only when matters of justice have been attended to..., (and) (3) that matters of justice will be adequately attended to only when justice is not seen in opposition to love, but love is understood as ultimately the only adequate form of justice". This justice then is the true biblical notion of justice: It seeks the healing of relations, the living together in equity and undistorted shalom.

Emphasizing reconciliation as the basis of Christian identity, grounded in and nourished by the biblical narrative of divine reconciliation, will also help us to tackle the issue of the *recognition of the alterity of the others*. Christians are certainly called to live out their own identity, but they must always remember that this identity is rooted in the identity of the Triune God reconciling the world to himself in divine embrace. To construct the Christian identity as the identity of a closed group - in opposition to other groups - should not be possible.

A "theology of reconciliation", built on the biblical narrative of reconciliation and intending to construct Christian identity without excluding the other - rather affirming the integrity and

otherness of the other - may be illustrated in closing through a little meditation on the *metapher of "embrace"* which Miroslaf Volf has introduced in his theological reflection on the biblical narrative of reconciliation. The movement of embrace, he suggests, has four elements: The open arms, the moment of waiting, the closing of one's arms and the opening of arms again.

Open arms are a gesture of the body reaching for the other. Open arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other. Open arms are also a gesture of invitation. Like a door left opened for an expected friend, they are a call to come in. They are also something like a soft knock - really a *soft* knock - on the other's door. The desire to enter the space of the other has been signaled by the very same act by which the self has opened itself up for the other to come in.

The second act in the movement of embrace is waiting. The open arms reach out but stop before touching the other. They wait. The initiated movement of embrace is not "an act of invasion". One desires fellowship and embrace with the other, but one waits for the sake of the integrity of the other - the other, who may not want to be embraced but left alone. Waiting is a sign that, although embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin (the self makes the initial movement toward the other), it can never reach its goal without reciprocity (the other makes a movement toward the self).

The third act, the closing of arms, is the goal of embrace, which is unthinkable without reciprocity; each is both holding and being held by the other, both active and passive. There is a soft touch in that process necessary, but at no point in the process may the self deny either the other or itself. In an embrace the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity of the other is both affirmed as alterity, as difference, and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self. An embrace must not necessarily lead to the understanding of the other; it does in no way extinguish the alterity, but it does open possibilities to see the own self and the other in a new light.

Embrace does not make two bodies one by extinguishing the boundary between bodies. In the movement of embrace there is a fourth act necessary: The opening of arms again. If it would not happen, embrace would signal the final "disappearance" of the I into the we that is characteristic not only of totalitarian regimes but of many cultural movements (including the missionary movement) and family relations. The opening of arms underlines that, though the other may be inscribed into the self, the alterity of the other may not be neutralized by merging both into an undifferentiated "we". The other must be let go so that his/her alterity may be preserved; and the self must take itself back into itself so that its own identity, enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left, may be preserved. The end of an embrace is, in a sense, already the beginning of an embrace, even if that other embrace will take place only after both selves have gone about their own business for a while.

I think the symbolism of the movement of embrace does tell a lot about a Christian attitude toward reconciliation. Though one would have to reflect more closely what it actually means for a Christian community in a multicultural and multireligious situation charged with violence, it nevertheless helps us to grasp the vision of the biblical narrative of God reconciling the world to himself in Christ; it speaks of opening the own self up, giving space to the other in myself - and ourselves as a community -; it envisions and hopes for the transformation of identities, and yet it lets freedom to the other and does not destroy identities - neither my own nor the one of the other. One can not foresee what outcome an embrace will have. There is a risk of embrace. I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, the stranger, the other, and I do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a victim or a savior - possibly both, like Christ Jesus himself. This, however, is the mission of the church!

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