

WOLFGANG HUBER

TRUTH - GUILT - RECONCILIATION:

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A VIOLENT WORLD

Second Annual Capps Lecture in Christian Theology,
University of Virginia, October 8th, 2002

Introductory Remarks

It is really a privilege for me to be invited for the Second Annual Capps Lecture at the University of Virginia. When I first visited Charlottesville in 1989, I left the place with the firm conviction that I had seen one of the most beautiful university campuses anywhere. Today I have the honor to speak to you in this Rotunda, which is called one of the ten most beautiful architectural structures in the United States. It seems rather inappropriate to address the embarrassing problems of our time in these harmonious surroundings. Perhaps it helps to quote the genius of this place, Thomas Jefferson, who said: "Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppression of body and mind will vanish like spirits in the dawn of day."

Possibly not this kind of optimism, but in any case an unshakable hope is needed when we approach today's topic. I start with some preparatory clarifications. Five examples will be at the center of today's lecture. A reflection on our Christian and ecclesial responsibility will bring us to a close.

I. Reflections on Truth, Guilt, and Reconciliation

No one can live without truth. A person dies if he or she can no longer be entrusted with truth, be confronted by it, or communicate truth. Human beings are relational, thus they live in communication with one another, and they live by truth. Can we apply this experience to society? Is truth a political category? To be sure, a politician has to be careful about saying something false. If found guilty of deliberate deception, a person could be removed from office. The interest in holding on to political power rather than an interest in truth, will possibly determine this person's behavior. Or might there be a deeper connection between truth and politics?

It is similar to guilt. No human being can live without acknowledging his own guilt, because he who denies his own guilt will eventually be suffocated by it. Guilt, however, is by nature personal. I only have myself to blame for my own guilt. I am not in the same sense responsible for other people's guilt. Being the perpetrator, I am the one found legally guilty. I must come to grips with my own moral guilt. No one but me can confess my guilt before God. The notion of collective guilt, which was commonly used after World War II, is under this perspective a contradiction in itself. There is no such thing as collective guilt; there is only personal guilt. Yet some will speak of national guilt. I can only speak of my guilt in the singular, yet there are good reasons to speak, for example, of German guilt. Still in the year 2002 we use this kind of speech when looking at crimes committed between 1933 and 1945,

even though, if you look at their year of birth, only a maximum of 15 percent of the Germans living today could have participated in the crimes of those times, either as perpetrators, as willing spectators, or as bystanders. Although guilt is something personal, it does nonetheless have social, societal and political dimensions.

And then there is reconciliation. Reconciliation has to take place in me personally. The theological concept, which refers to a sinful human being becoming reconciled with God in Jesus Christ, is therefore inextricably connected to the individual. There is, however, a social dimension. For the people of Israel it is fundamental that reconciliation with God can only happen if a person has been reconciled with his or her neighbor. Jesus presupposes this correlation when he tells the one who wants to go to the temple to offer sacrifices to first be reconciled with his brother. Reconciliation with God can only happen in me because Jesus intercedes on my behalf before God, and because other people take on the “ministry of reconciliation” for me - in prayer and in proclamation of the Gospel. So we are ambassadors for Christ and pray: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5.20).

II. Five Case Studies

Truth - guilt - reconciliation: these three categories deal with the personal life of the individual. In Christian faith these three categories are linked with each other in a unique way. They cannot be limited to the personal area. Inevitably, they also have a political dimension. Every generation experiences this in her own way. In our generation, we see this with a specific urgency. I would like to illustrate that with five examples.

1. South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Apartheid in South Africa ended when President Nelson Mandela assumed office on May 8, 1994. A new era had begun. But how could the transition from the old to the new era be managed? Through Nelson Mandela’s personal initiative, this transition was imprinted with the spirit of reconciliation. The same Christian certainty, which had shaped him as a young man in the mission schools, led him to this conviction. During his time of struggle against Apartheid and in prison on Robben Island, his clear faith gave Mandela an awareness of freedom, of walking uprightly, of uncompromising resistance. When his time of triumph came late in life, his Christian convictions prepared him for reconciliation.

Reconciliation should take political forms. One of its most important political forms was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the late nineties. Its task was to reappraise the massive violations of human rights of the times between the massacre in Sharpeville in 1960 and the beginning of Mandela presidency. Perpetrators and victims were to speak with each other. The social background of the Apartheid crimes had to be brought to life. The perpetrators were to be helped to confess their guilt, and the victims were to be given new hope. If the result were to be unconditional confession of wrongdoing, amnesty could be granted, making steps toward reconciliation possible.

With these goals in mind, Desmond Tutu’s Commission based its work on a fourfold concept of truth. It distinguished between factual, legal truth, true personal stories told, social and dialogical truth, and ultimate truth, which heals and restores.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was accused of not giving the necessary attention to the investigation of factual, legal truth. They were also accused of not having used all possible means available by law. On the other hand, the Commission was accused of not reaching true reconciliation. In the end, when one looks objectively at the Commission's work, the choice had to be made between truth without reconciliation or reconciliation without truth.

Perhaps the great merit of Desmond Tutu's Commission is that it bridged this unmerciful gap. It shed light on the dimensions of truth, which normally do not play a role in legal proceedings or in political debates. Priority was given to personal, experienced and expressed truth, which could authenticate the truth. Truth only discloses itself when different perceptions of the same event enter into dialogue. In the case of massive violations of human rights, it is clear that the perspective of victims takes precedence over the perspective of perpetrators. But truth can only be revealed if the perpetrator can face the truth and look the victim, hopefully still alive, in the eye. Truth, when it discovers the facts about past crimes and guilt, inevitably takes on the characteristics of a dialogue. Only a person who is liberated by truth can accept it. Such a person no longer needs to evade it out of self-protection, or for some other reasons. One who is ready to face the truth needs to have experienced reconciliation. To be reconciled means to be liberated from the fear of truth.

In 1998, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission submitted a final report of its nearly four years' work. The report of its Amnesty Committee followed in 2001. However, its work remained unfinished. In South Africa, the process of reconciliation must continue. Many of the perpetrators still have to experience the liberation from the fear of truth. Many of the victims have yet to experience the healing effect of truth. But the significance of Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission goes far beyond what could be achieved in such a short time, because it provides a new model of how truth, guilt and reconciliation can interact in the political field.

2. German Reunification

As a German, I am concerned with the way in which my country has dealt with truth, guilt and reconciliation over the past twelve years. When I consider those twelve years - from the reunification of Germany on October 3, 1990 up until today - I hesitate. Twelve years is also the same length of time as Hitler's dictatorship, the most atrocious and awful period of German history. We have now enjoyed freedom and peace for the same amount of time, twelve years. And now, for the same length of time, we have been allowed to enjoy the greatest gift which our history has had for us since the end of the Hitler tyranny in 1945, namely, the restoration of German unity as we are united in freedom.

Of course, during these twelve years, the critical aspects of the period after 1945 had to be dealt with. Some criticize the fact that this evaluation primarily concentrated on the Eastern part of Germany. To this point, little has been said about the faults of West Germans, or about the mistakes of West German politics. Hardly ever mentioned is the extent to which West German politics hardened and cemented the German division. Which kind of reforms the old Federal Republic of Germany avoided does not matter any longer, but the second totalitarian state on German soil has become *the* issue. It is true: the two systems were incomparable, yes economically, but first of all politically. The regime of the SED¹ did not respect personal

¹ SED stands for the *Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, the ruling political party in the German Democratic Republic.

freedom politically. However, even those who struggled for political freedom in the years before 1989 see in the developments and discussions after 1989 a kind of injustice which embitters them. The merger of the two German states has, in reality, been the joining of the East to the West, and the redevelopment of the East meant that the economic system of former East Germany was brought into line with the social market economy. This has primarily meant an adaptation of the East to the Western system. But the adaptation to the Western system has not succeeded yet. The gap between the standard of living in East and West has yet to be closed. This accounts for the fact that eighty percent of the East German people still feel like second-class citizens in the Federal Republic of Germany. Even more surprising, yet understandable, is the statement increasingly heard that not everything was bad in socialism. I remain firm: the unification of Germany was a great historic gift. But I must add that even after twelve years, we have not yet overcome the crisis brought on by our unification. That is true in spite of the fact that the PDS² (the heirs of the SED) was not successful in our recent national elections.

For a long time, there was the false impression that the role of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was carried out in Germany by an office which dealt with the documents of the state security service of the former German Democratic Republic. Joachim Gauck had been the head of this office for more than ten years and, therefore, it is called the “Gauck-Office”. Marianne Birthler now heads up this office. Certainly one should not underestimate the importance of the “Gauck-Office” which, incidentally, has about ten times as many employees as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ever had. However, too high a status is ascribed to this office with regard to evaluating memories. It only deals with the establishment of the formal, legal truth. It is not its task to create space where truth could be told, or where one could engage in dialogue, or where the social conditions could be understood. Looking at this office, it would be simply presumptuous to speak of a healing truth.

In Germany we did not succeed in creating a secular institution to deal with the relationship between truth, guilt and reconciliation. The so-called “Gauck Office” is an administrative office, far from being such an institution. In the early 1990’s, some considered doing this with “tribunals”. However, the idea itself was still too much based on a legal model, thus it could not become an alternative to the legal process. It was instead the criminal process, which, in Germany, tried to do what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission undertook in South Africa. The soldiers who fired deadly shots at the Berlin wall and those who carried military and political responsibility for these actions were the ones the most affected. The law ruled out a general amnesty, which would exempt people from criminal prosecution. At the same time, the ban of retrospective prosecution – which is based on the principle: *nulla poena sine lege* – states that only actions which were illegal according to the legal requirements of the German Democratic Republic’s Criminal Code, are to be punished. For that purpose a legal requirement of the Criminal Code of the German Democratic Republic was quoted which states that no one can refer to “law, order or instruction, who disregards basic and human rights; he is responsible according to criminal law.” It was evident that people who fired a deadly shot at the so-called “republic fugitives” contravened human rights. The guards at the Berlin wall, who had fired the fatal shots, referred to the orders, which they had received and which made the illegal nature of their actions unknown to them. Eventually, the German courts ruled with regard to the fatal shots at the Berlin wall, that “it is without question and clear, even for an indoctrinated person, that the shootings were in violation of the fundamental ban on killing.”

² PDS stands for the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, the Party of Democratic Socialism.

Such legal statements certainly do not open the way to understanding the truth, to a confession of guilt, or to reconciliation. Above all, abuses remained free from prosecution, which were not immediately connected with fatalities, but rather, in various ways were abuses against human integrity. Those wounds were not healed.

In this regard, proceedings in Germany were the same as the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which also had the obligation to only deal with severe cases of human rights violations. The more subtle injuries are from people who survived, but who still suffer from lingering traumas. They were not dealt with. In both cases, the range of human suffering is immense and is not being dealt with in the process of examining past events.

The German experience shows: There are no places or rituals in the secular society which allow people to publicly express their laments. Nor have churches offered enough space and rituals for an examination of the past. Many people were left alone to deal with their experiences of violence.

3. The Nazi Era and German Guilt

No German can talk about historic guilt without thinking of the time of the Nazi Regime. How we reappraise the Shoah as part of our own history is and remains a German issue. The suggestion that it is time to finally close this part of our history is misleading. Most of the people who think that such final closure is necessary are those who still fall victim to the concept of collective guilt. The purpose of remembering would not be to cast guilt upon Germans living today, a guilt for which they cannot be held responsible. Nonetheless, remembering is necessary so that we comprehend and pass down the events as God's warning to all people. As Christians, we need not repress what happened just because we fear being denounced as descendants of those who have acted inhumanely. We can and must express the shame we feel about what has happened. But remembering is primarily a warning. The warning does not stop at the borders of one's own nation. We must all listen to the warning and apply it to our actions.

The years between 1933 and 1945 were twelve years of incomparable horror initiated by Germany. What happened in those days still affects us in various ways today. Recently we have become aware of the fate of forced laborers, who, during the war years from 1939 to 1945, had worked in Germany under humiliating conditions.

The extent to which Germany used forced labor is certainly nothing new. Nevertheless, we have repressed our political responsibility for this labor for a long time. Only occasional contact had been arranged with forced laborers who survived. The possibility of tracking down their own pasts was only opened up to a few who had spent a major part of their lives in Germany under degrading circumstances. The task of at least symbolic restitution was finally set in 2000 with the establishment of compensation funds of 10 billion German Marks, or about 5 billion U.S. dollars.

What one knows in general takes on a different face, however, when it is someone's personal experience. I therefore found it extremely moving when I held a document in my hand with the names of 47 people, the so-called "workers from the East". They belonged to the group of about one hundred forced laborers who lived in a labor camp run by the church in Berlin, this camp was located on church cemetery grounds. All together, 26 Protestant and 2 Roman

Catholic congregations were involved with the camp. Between 1943 and 1945, the workers for their cemeteries lived in this camp, and they dug the graves, which increased nightly as the bombing increased.

On my own accord, I had already asked the diaconal services of our church to try to find out to what extent they, too, had used forced laborers. They found a series of individual cases. But the church's cemeteries did not come to my mind in the first place. And yet it is the obvious thing. The men were at the front, the women called to do work "important for the war". Digging of graves did not belong to this kind of work, although it was the war that gave rise to the growing number of dead. So it had to be the so-called "workers from the East" who had to dig the graves for the victims of the bombing. One can understand why so many congregations participated. They were responsible for their cemeteries. But they cannot be excused. By so doing, they participated in the terror system that the Hitler Regime had created. Even in the cemeteries, the war left its cruel marks.

Our church confesses to being part of this guilt. We closely follow these proceedings of events. To the extent that we know of our involvement, we publicly acknowledge it. Independent of those proceedings, we in the Protestant church support the foundation that provides compensation for the forced laborers. By so doing, we want to underscore that society as a whole, including our church, bears responsibility for the consequences of past guilt.

"Remembrance, responsibility and future" - this is the name of the foundation, which was established for the sole purpose of doing these three things. "Remembrance, responsibility and future" is a good name for such a foundation. It underscores its purpose. But in addition to the activities of the foundation, we as a church want to turn to the surviving victims and support them with at least a small contribution for the years that lie before them. And we want to help prevent anything like that system of war, which leaves its traces even on cemeteries and embroils us all, including churches, in guilt, from ever happening again. For that reason, the open, public confession of faith should never again be separated from the willingness to become politically involved. Therefore, on September 1, 2002 we installed and inaugurated a memorial at the cemetery in Berlin in which those forced laborers had to live under inhumane circumstances.

For us in Germany, the time of the Holocaust and forced labor continually admonishes us to learn when it is time to move from confession to resistance. In that regard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an excellent example for us. "Failure to move from confession to resistance leads to a toleration of crimes; our confession is reduced to token words; in view of the injustice done, an unrelenting accusation is turned against the confessor." Thus ends an essay of Eberhard Bethge, the friend and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, true also for us today. There remains a distinction between confession as a public affair and resistance with its stages of concealment, there also remains a distinction between confession of a clear commitment to Jesus Christ and resistance with its political machinations and its rational considerations of success. But they should not be taken apart from each other.

It was Willem Visser't Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, who, in 1945, wrote about the resistance group which included Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi: "The nihilists of the Third Reich encountered in the Bonhoeffer family great minds steeped in the best German traditions, minds which neither could nor wanted to make a pact with the devil." What would happen if we were to proudly follow the tradition of these minds instead of letting them be denounced uncontested as "conservative", as "elitist" or even

as “anti-democratic”, as we hear from time to time? It is my conviction that even today democracy can only succeed if there are people who lead courageously spiritual lives, as described by Visser’t Hooft. Democracy cannot succeed without people whose spiritual life and whose political responsibility is rooted in their faith. For me, this is the decisive teaching drawn from the years of the Hitler tyranny.

4. The Israeli – Palestinian Conflict

Among all the places where people today suffer from violence, the Middle East is in the first row. Over the months we have been shaken by the daily news about suicide bombings, particularly by young Palestinians. Nothing can justify such assassinations where very often it is the innocent, uninvolved people pursuing their daily occupations, working or studying, eating or celebrating, who are the most affected. I personally experienced how deep the disorientation already is, when even a Muslim student of our own school, from the Berlin-organized Protestant School Talitha Kumi, committed a suicide attack. With each suicide bombing the spiral of violence escalates. When, on the other hand, military reactions of Israel strike uninvolved civilians, or - even worse - snatch children from this life, these reactions do not bring peace but rather fan the flames of hatred. And we are more and more at a loss when faced with the question: Why cannot people, who are dependent on a peaceful coexistence, find peace? Why is religion over and over again used to intensify hatred and animosity instead of becoming a source of peace and reconciliation? Some people take such events as a pretext for saying: once we have gotten religion out of the way, it will look much better for peace. Irreconcilable extremists “called” by God work into the hands of those who do not want to have to do anything with God.

This year in Berlin we had, on the one hand, demonstrations for the Palestinians, and on the other hand for Israel. Demonstrations for peace taking up both sides of the issue did not take place. Those who express themselves as balanced run the danger of operating with a double standard. For instance, there are those who declare their *solidarity* with the Palestinian side while uttering *understanding* for the defense of Israel. There are then others who only show *understanding* for the right of the Palestinian people to a separate state, but, at the same time, are *in solidarity* with the state of Israel as the (legitimate) home of Jews. How difficult it is to be in solidarity with both - both have a human face!

To build bridges becomes more and more difficult. Indeed, it seems utterly impossible. It depresses me that in Palestine, the land of the origin of our Christian faith, the number of Christians is decreasing. In particular, many Palestinian Christians suffer under the burden of insecurity and violence so much so that they are forced to flee or emigrate.

In January 2002, in Alexandria, Egypt, representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in a joint statement, declared their commitment “to support the end of the acts of violence and of the blood shed which deny the right to live in dignity.” The declaration of Alexandria urges a “religiously sanctioned armistice”. It calls for a halt to “rabble-rousing propaganda and to demonizing.”

This is probably as important as the establishing of peace plans, strategies for negotiations and considerations about international peacekeeping forces for the Middle East. To demonize the enemy using religion is the most wicked misuse of religion altogether. In the Old Testament, the Psalmist contradicts such misuse when he prays: “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts” (Psalm 85,8 - according to *New Revised Standard Version*, 1989).

Palestinian terror actions against civilians in Israel cannot be justified even if the reason given is the right of self-determination of Palestinians. That young Palestinians are driven to their deaths by executing suicide attacks puts an extra burden on those who are responsible. Yassir Arafat, the most politically responsible person, and one cannot see an alternative to him, holds the Nobel prize for peace, and that seems sinister to me. I strongly wish that our Christian brothers and sisters in Palestine will have the strength to clearly and unequivocally stand up against these suicide bombings.

But Israel is also involved in the escalation of the violence in a dreadful way. I experienced this myself directly in October 2001. A representative of the state of Israel meanwhile tried to explain to me why the sentence 'a wise man gives way' cannot be applied in the Middle East. One who acts this way is looked upon as being stupid. Nevertheless, it is evident that neither a continued escalation of violence nor a continued policy of occupation provides a solution.

However, each critical word about the politics of the state of Israel is difficult and weighs heavy. Statements that sounded anti-Semitic or were meant so have aggravated the discussion in Germany still more. But it goes too far if, in the present discussion, every criticism of the Israeli army occupation of Palestinian areas is called anti-Semitism. Yet a criticism of the humiliating settlement, occupation and control policies of Israel is necessary. Independent Israeli observers agree with this. We in Germany are particularly disturbed that the development in the Middle East renders many of us speechless in our relationship with our Jewish citizens. It is no small thing, that Jews live again in our midst, and this is something that we have to preserve and to cultivate.

The insight which our church has won from historic experience is decisive for our relations with the Jewish people, and it has been formulated as follows: The Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg "acknowledges and remembers that God's promise to his People of Israel remains valid: God is not sorry nor does he regret his gifts and calling. Our church is committed to walk with the Jewish people. Hearing God's word and hoping for the fulfillment of God's reign, the church remains bound to the Jewish people."

5. September 11th and the War on Terrorism

September 11th has burnt anew into us the knowledge that we live in a violent world. The shock about the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington went around the world. A few hours after these terrible events, the Berlin Cathedral was filled beyond capacity. It was the same in many other places in Germany and in many other countries. The language of lament was the answer to the experience of violence. We answered the profound hatred we experienced with a cry for God's mercy. We put our helplessness under the cross to find the answer in Christ. In the cross of Christ both things come together: the shock about the violence where God becomes unrecognizable and is solely the hidden God among us, and the turning to God who has revealed Himself, the God of mercy and love. The death of the risen Christ negates a person from calling on God and at the same time using lethal violence. One who claims to use such violence in the name of God commits blasphemy. To submit oneself to the cross of Christ can mean suffering, but it can never mean that this belief empowers the use of violence causing others to suffer. One has to remember to exercise violence always means to become guilty, even if one does not see any other way than this "last means" in cases of self-defense or of assistance in emergency, in cases of defense or helping against exercised violence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has put it this way: "To take on the burden of guilt." To do nothing can also mean to become guilty.

Therefore, after the shock about the terrorist attacks of September 11, two feelings prevailed in many of us: the horror about the actions and the sympathy with the victims on the one hand, while on the other hand we felt a conviction that something had to be done to seize the culprits in order to bring them to justice and to prevent such things from happening again. In those days my words to the congregations of my church were: "As important as a firm intervention against any kind of terrorism is, it is equally as important not to make ill-considered acts of reprisal which could affect the civilian population and rush a country headlong into disaster. An action of profound hatred and vindictiveness should not be answered in the same spirit. Even in view of the violence, which we have witnessed, what Jesus said of the peacemakers in the Beatitudes remains valid. Here not only an attitude of personal renunciation of violence is described, but it implies actions, which put an end to violence under which others suffer. The Beatitudes call the peacemakers to defend peace and to put an end to violence where it is exercised. A spirit of retaliation is incompatible with Jesus' commandment not to repay evil with evil. Killing counter-violence does not bring back one single human life."

Even before the military actions against the Taliban started on October 7, 2001, I said: "Military emergency measures may be inevitable as a last resort. But one who uses them has to be convinced that the end justifies the means: peace, an end of violence, as well as an end of terrorism. One has to keep the proportions of means and the rules for the safety of civilians must be observed. One must know that violence cannot bring back a human life. Those reflections, though, should be preceded by the thought of non-violence. One has to acknowledge that non-violent means have precedence over means of violence. If one decides to take the utmost measures, those measures must be judged by the strictest yardstick: peace as the aim, the appropriateness of means and the safety of civilians."

These were the points of view that many of us considered, when looking at German participation in the military measures against terrorism; we did so with solidarity and with skepticism and doubt at the same time. The doubts grew when the necessary measures were mixed with the language of crusades or when the "just war" doctrine became a means of justification.

This doctrine is still claimed with astonishing naivety. In the beginning of 1991, I experienced myself how the Annual Conference of the Society for Christian Ethics in North America debated whether the immediately pending Gulf War would be a just war or not. By majority vote George Bush Senior got the go-ahead for "Desert Storm" from the gathered Christian ethicists. Now, eleven years later, the same thing is happening. This time it was not a convention of Christian ethicists, but a group of intellectuals stirring up once more the dogma of the "just war". Those who have joined in this declaration constitute a spectrum of 58 great minds. Nevertheless, this group also includes those who predict "an end of history" if there is no clear picture of the enemy any longer; or they proclaim a new "clash of civilizations", since the old war of ideologies belongs to the past. In a time of privatized violence, all of these minds availed themselves of a thought category from a time when the state, without question, had the monopoly on the use of force. It is necessary to protest against this pattern of resorting to "just war" theory; such protest does not aim at endeavoring to subject violence in wars to the rule of law, or to ask about the ethical measures which should also be valid in times of war. It is true: In times of conflict, we always fall back on decisive criteria of the tradition of "just war". But above all, there is an obligation to do everything possible to facilitate peace, to keep to the appropriateness of the means, and to spare the civilian population, and above all else, to nurture the conviction that war is the last resort. For there is

a danger that the use of the “just war” doctrine covers up political failure, which lies behind any lethal violence. Protest is necessary if the war terminology covers up the fact that police measures are more appropriately to be taken when individuals use violence illegally.

Moreover, the term “just war” is always in danger of becoming license for more far-reaching plans. At present, in Europe the question is asked if the multilateral alliance against terrorism, which was hammered out after September 11th, should give way to a unilateral action of reorganization of the political relations reaching from the sands of Arabia to the Korean peninsula. Zbigniew Brzezinski has explicitly said that it is not global cooperation, but rather “American Preponderance” which is the commandment of the day. One speaks about the struggle against the “axis of evil” in the same way one spoke two decades ago of an “empire of evil”. We were disturbed by the extent the civilian population in Afghanistan suffered under the fighting. And many in Europe doubt that a military overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi dictatorial regime should be attempted. According to our conviction, necessary measures should in any case be taken in the framework of the United Nations. As Miroslav Volf explained recently, a preemptive war against Saddam Hussein can never be called a “just war”. But I add: The concept of “just war” in itself should be overcome by a concept of “just peace”.

It is my conviction that it is time to remember the great tasks that the international politics should fulfill. The pursuit of one’s own interests and the respect for the dignity and self-esteem of others must be brought anew into balance. Structures of cooperation have to be created which facilitate peace. In international relations, the term justice should not be reduced to a word about which one laughs. The one who wants to acknowledge other’s right to life and hopes for justice has to try to understand them. Greater attention must be given to the cultural dimension of today’s struggles. Religions must contribute to this. In today’s world, peoples of different religions must learn about one another, come to respect one another, thus making a most important contribution to peace.

Strangely enough September 11 and a return to religion are bound together. Some regard this resurgence as the power of strife. That is, once we have outgrown religion there will be no more “warriors of God”. Others regard this resurgence as an irreplaceable source for peace, but for this to become effective, there has to be reconciliation between the religions first. Is this possible at all?

III. Reconciliation and Religious Dialogue

What is the significance of the message of reconciliation for the dialogue of the religions in a world of violence? How can the strength of religions help to overcome violence? I will finish my reflections with this question.

In the history of Christian churches in the 20th century, two experiences have come to the foreground. One of those experiences says: religious communities can only advocate reconciliation in a trustworthy manner if they confess their own guilt. The other experience says: their advocating reconciliation is only then trustworthy if these religious communities revoke their involvement in the history of violence and give precedence to non-violence over any means of violence. Today those insights have not only to be the focus of inter-Christian, but also of inter-religious dialogues.

First, some words about the confession of guilt by the church. Not masochism of the church, but a free confession of guilt by the church belongs to the legacy of the Reformation. The message of justification, which stands at the center of all Reformation theology, is also valid for the understanding of the church. In the light of the message of justification, it is said of human beings that they are more than they make of themselves, and so it is also right to say: the church is more than she makes of herself. She is not identical with her good deeds and - thank God - also not with her atrocious deeds. One cannot equate her with her achievements and therefore - thank God - also not with her failures. She has received the message of justification solely from grace not only to proclaim to the people, but she also should adopt it for herself.

When, on March 12, 2000, Pope John Paul II issued a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness, the reaction in the churches of the Reformation was grateful and marked by great respect. There were seven points to the plea. The frame was a general confession of guilt. The themes tied to those seven pleas were: offenses against the unity of Christianity, guilt in relation to Israel, claims to power over other peoples and religions, offenses against the dignity of women, and restrictions of basic rights. Shortly after, in a speech at Yad Vashem, the memorial for the Holocaust in Jerusalem, the Pope clarified and deepened his confession with regard to the guilt of the church against the people of Israel.

But has John Paul II really confessed the guilt of “the church”? The International Theological Commission, which counsels the Pope has explicitly stated: The church is “not sinner in the sense that she herself is the subject and the one who sinned.” She is guilty only “in that sense that she, in motherly solidarity, takes on the burdens of the sins of her members.” Forty years ago, the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said it more clearly. The shortcomings of her members, so he said, have repercussions for “everything the church does”. And he even said more drastically: “It would be indicative of idle overestimation and clerical arrogance, group self-interest, and the personality cult of a totalitarian system, which does not befit the church as the fellowship of Jesus, who is humble in heart and meek, if one wanted to deny or hush up or minimize or think that this burden only had been the burden of the church in former times and has been taken away from her now.”

Pope John Paul II could not express himself as clearly as Karl Rahner. However, the Pope has opened a door, which lets in a cleansing wind. This will benefit the whole of Christianity.

But will this step extend its effects beyond the borders of the Christian churches? When it comes to guilt and reconciliation, we come to one of the central topics for the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The open conflicting question between Christianity and Islam has to do with the question of salvation. Is there in Islam a place for any perception of “original sin”, of the “original guilt” of the human being, or does it hold the believer in principle capable of reaching fulfillment in this life without outside help? Some Muslim authors speak without inhibition of the “self-redemption” of the human being. A Muslim knows what Allah expects from him, namely to follow the “straight way” in the fear of God. A Muslim also knows that he can fulfill this demand by himself. In the discussions with Christianity, Islam does not only object to the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is God’s Son and therefore to the Trinitarian understanding of God, but also to the entire idea of Jesus Christ’s reconciliatory act on behalf of all humanity. The perception that one soul “carries the burden of another soul” (Sura 39:7) is alien to Islam. There is a great gap between justification by grace and self-redemption thanks to the guidance of Allah. Without putting this on the table, a dialogue between Christianity and Islam evades one of its central challenges. For there can be no reconciliation apart from truth. Acknowledging this difference

also belongs to the truth. Perhaps it is possible to learn from the difference. To address these challenges is an essential presupposition for real dialogue and for steps towards reconciliation and peace. At present we are far away from this.

The other insight painfully gained from the experiences of the 20th century is the conviction that nonviolence has to take precedence over all means of violence. In Berlin, on February 4, 2001, the World Council of Churches issued a call for a “Decade to Overcome Violence”. For one decade, the churches around the world should jointly give priority to this goal. But we know that reality remains far behind this goal. We experience painfully that military responses gain priority over the option for nonviolence. What we need is a joint endeavor to further a civilian and civic service for peace, because only effective acts of reconciliation can build a lasting peace. Military interventions, whenever they are seen as unavoidable, create at best prerequisites for reconciliation, but they do not bring it. Nevertheless, we often lack the needed imagination and courage to build a ‘space’ for nonviolence.

Again, we also have to ask how much priority is given to non-violence in inter-religious dialogue. In certain fields of Buddhism, we find a great receptiveness. But in the most influential quarters of Islam there still seems to be little understanding for it. The serious endeavor to obey Allah rather leads to a form of “holy war” (jihad), which is understood as an inner as well as an outer struggle. It can lead to violent fights, and it includes the readiness to martyrdom. Under certain circumstances, not only is it a right, but it is also an obligation to sacrifice one’s own life. The recent suicide bombings make us aware of the consequences of such obedience.

We cannot avoid this discussion any longer. Maybe a common understanding of basic human rights can be a bridge between different religions. Then the respect for the inviolable dignity of human beings also includes the respect for one’s own life. The willingness to risk one’s own life in self-defense or in emergency actions to help others does not justify committing planned suicide attacks. It still lies ahead of us to find a common language which acknowledges the preferential option for nonviolence.

It is my conviction that the 21st century will be shaped by a return of religion and a return to religion. This return can happen in the spirit of separation, of self-justification, and of irreconcilability. It is our responsibility as Christians to help see that this return is determined rather by the spirit of truth, the readiness to confess our guilt, and by the hope for reconciliation.