

Reconstructing the Doctrine of Reconciliation within Politics

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Theoretical Presuppositions

Theological discussion on the continent of Europe about the relation between theology and politics has been conducted mainly in terms of ethical theories such as Luther's doctrine of the "two realms" or "two-fold reign of God."¹ This doctrine came under particular criticism when supporters of the Nazis misused it during the Third Reich. In reaction Karl Barth and others confronted the Lutheran doctrine with a different one, namely that of the *Königsherrschaft Christi* (the kingship or royal sovereignty of Christ). This doctrine, on the basis of a more Reformed reading of the New Testament, asserted the kingship of Christ over both the church *and the world*.

While this essay cannot go into the complex and diverse discussion of these influential ethical theories,² it seems necessary to highlight a central difference between them. Whereas Luther's political

1. Cf. Martin Luther, *Secular Authority. To What Extent It Ought to Be Obeyed*, 1523, WA, vol. II, pp. 249ff. (WA = *Weimarer Ausgabe*, the standard edition of Luther's works, Weimar 1883-.)

2. I have discussed the issue in greater detail in my (unpublished) Habilitation-thesis, *Die politische Dimension der Versöhnung — Eine Systematisch-theologische Studie zum Umgang mit Schuld nach den Systemwechseln in Südafrika und Deutschland* (*The Political Dimension of Reconciliation: A Systematic Theological Study on Dealing with Guilt in South Africa and Germany*).

ethic grants to the state a degree of autonomy in making decisions in the area of politics,³ Barth's approach stresses that it is both possible *and necessary* to draw analogies between personal Christian ethics and political ethics.⁴ Both theories, however, see danger in a too simple and direct equation of ethics in the private sphere and ethics in the political sphere.

Such a direct equation could be made in two ways: either by claiming for political insight the right to be determinative in the theological field or on the other hand by claiming for theological or religious insight the right to determine decisions in the area of politics.

Examples of both of these ways of making such an equation and their dangers are patent. During the Third Reich many Christians in Germany allowed their theology to be steered by a political agenda. The so-called *Deutsche Christen* are the most obvious example of this. On the other hand in our own time radical Islam poses the question whether its theocratic approach is not an example of steering politics according to a religious agenda.⁵

Although both theories avoid certain pitfalls, both also suffer from apparent shortcomings. In particular, both appear to suffer from shortcomings that inhibit a constructive theological discussion of current political events:

1. Both ethical theories make use of terms and metaphors – like the concept of a *Reich* (empire or kingdom) in which God reigns, or the concept of the *Königsherrschaft* of Christ – that clearly derive

3. The key points in Luther's position are the following: (a) God is the Lord of both kingdoms, but rules each by different means (the law and the gospel) for different ends (peace and piety). (b) All Christians live in both kingdoms simultaneously – in the kingdom of God in that they are righteous, and in the kingdom of the world in that they are sinful. (c) The two kingdoms are to be sharply distinguished from one another, in such a way that the realms of law and gospel are to be neither separated (as in secularism) nor equated (as in ecclesiocracy).

4. Cf. especially Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in W. Herberg, ed., *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 149-89, a translation of *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1946).

5. Consider, e.g., the authoritarian religious rule of the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

from a pre-democratic tradition and so are alien to modern democratic thought.

2. Both theories are *ethical* theories, reflecting the question “to what extent a secular authority ought to be obeyed.”⁶ They do not reflect the (in a way more specifically *theological*) question of how Christian ideas may themselves already impact on or affect political decision-making. Thus they fail to reflect or to provide clues to the key questions that need to be posed in the interdisciplinary discourse that is necessary to achieve greater theological insight (*Erkenntnisgewinn*) in this area. We noted that both theories avoid directly equating political and theological ethics. But the question is how far they help in the search for *indirect* links or common shared religious and political language and thus enable a genuine dialogue between theology and politics.

Such indirect links can be established in two ways:

1. On the one hand there is the possibility, which needs to be investigated, of “baptizing” political language, so that political terms can be used in the theological arena to express the insights of the new reality that Christ brings about (2 Cor. 5).
2. On the other hand there is the reciprocal need to investigate two possibilities:
 - whether theological ideas have already been transposed into political language, so that they can be recognized in the political arena, and
 - whether theological language can be reconstructed, so that it can be used in the political arena.

In order to explore such indirect links we have to examine very sensitively what goes on in the political field. It is just here that the problem lies. For no method has been developed to determine how political events can be examined in theological terms. Thus neither political theory deals with the fundamental question of the possibility of reconstructing theological ideas in the context of politics.⁷

6. See above the subtitle of Martin Luther’s pamphlet.

7. The reason for this is easy to find: for both theories this was not a question

Let us consider the above weaknesses of the two ethical theories in the light of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethical paper on "The Ultimate and Penultimate Things."⁸

1. The distinction between "ultimate and penultimate things" is clearly a more adequate terminology for the interdisciplinary discourse of theology with political science than the distinction between "two kingdoms" or "two realms." For Bonhoeffer the "ultimate things" are the last things, temporarily and in reality. In temporal terms justification by faith is clearly both the turning-point and the end-point of a process in which every Christian constantly finds him/herself (in that he/she is *simul iustus et peccator*). The assumption is that a real time span precedes any act of justification. In terms of reality, justification by faith is an ultimate or last thing because nothing can be regarded with greater seriousness than this event.⁹

The advantage of Bonhoeffer's distinction lies in its dynamic. "Ultimate things" and "penultimate things" for him do not describe certain spheres, empires, or kingdoms. Instead they are categories that describe events both theologically and in terms of political reality. This makes possible a clear distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate. (Here Bonhoeffer allows for what is valid in Luther's approach.) On the other hand Bonhoeffer avoids separating ultimate things from penultimate things. (Here he allows for what is valid in Karl Barth's approach.) The "world can continue being the world," but (as a penultimate thing) is at the same time related to what is "ultimate" (analogously to the

in their time. The problem of reconstruction was not a problem for Luther; nor was it a real question for Barth during the Church Struggle in the Third Reich. At that time the urgent issue was the proclamation of a *status confessionis*.

8. Cf. "Die letzten und die vorletzten Dinge," Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 6 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1986-), pp. 137-62. This is the standard critical edition of Bonhoeffer's works. An English translation of the DBW is in progress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996-).

9. This reminds one of Anselm of Canterbury: God is "a being than which none greater can be thought" (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*). See *Proslogion*, I, 93, 20f., ET E. R. Fairweather, ed., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockam*, LCC, vol. 10 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 73.

way in which the law and the gospel are distinct and yet related). Penultimate things have to be delivered from the temptation to understand themselves as “ultimate” or “last” things, because it is only from the “ultimate,” from the justifying and reconciling Word of God, that light falls on the penultimate, on the dimensions of this world – particularly on the political.

2. As far as the second weakness that we noted in the two ethical approaches is concerned, Bonhoeffer comes to our aid by clearly assuming a “connection” between what is “ultimate” and what is “penultimate,” even though he leaves it to posterity actually to explore and work out this connection, i.e., to discover with the help of theology what is ultimate in what is penultimate, including in political reality.

Theological Exploration

Following the path outlined by Bonhoeffer, we will now seek to find the “connections” between “ultimate things and penultimate things” by searching for indirect links between political and theological language. In order to do so we need to focus on a specific issue in theology. An obvious issue is the doctrine of reconciliation. Let us then explore the possibility of reconstructing the doctrine of reconciliation within the political realm.

We shall deal with the problem in two steps: first spell out the need to define what is meant by reconciliation in the theological context and then explore the political dimensions of the same term.

Any attempt to lay down the principles of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation naturally tends to focus more on the various relations to which the doctrine applies rather than on actual definition of the concept. A Christian understanding of reconciliation proceeds from a number of assumptions and has a specific range of meanings:

- The Christian doctrine of reconciliation assumes that our communion with God has been destroyed by human sin.
- Reconciliation then means the restoring of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- Reconciliation in Christ makes communion with God possible

again in that Christ atones for the guilt that comprises the barrier between God and humankind. God thus makes a new beginning with the world “in Christ.”

- Reconciliation is between God and the sinner, not with sin. On sin the judgment is final.
- God’s reconciliation means that Christ has made human beings able to live in community with God and with each other again.
- In reconciling the world with himself God has left “fingerprints”¹⁰ or traces of this in his creation and leaves it to us to discover these.

Reconciliation has, in summary, to do with “change.” “Change” is the original meaning of the Greek word (καταλλαγή) that Paul introduced in the well-known passage in 2 Corinthians: “God . . . 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” (5:18-19).

It is interesting to note that καταλλαγή was originally used in the Greek world for rather banal dealings like “changing money.” Later it played a key role in complex diplomatic processes, e.g., when hostile cities made peace with each other again.¹¹ Paul himself takes over the word “reconciliation” (καταλλαγή) from such political language in order to convey a theological meaning, namely to express what happens between God and humankind in Jesus Christ and what the new relationship that results means. Thus whereas it formerly referred to a diplomatic process between human beings, it now takes on a radical meaning in the changed ontological setting of the new being in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The political meaning of reconciliation has, so to speak,

10. Note the suggestive title of the recent book by Robert Farrar Capon: *The Fingerprints of God* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000).

11. See Cilliers Breytenbach: *Versöhnung. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989). Breytenbach argues with some force that when Paul transferred the concept of reconciliation to the theological field in order to express the relationship between God and human beings, it had lost its social and political dimension. On the other hand Breytenbach seems to fail to see the rich possibilities that his exegetical results open up for reconstructing the theological dimension of reconciliation in politics.

been “baptized” by Paul. What is now meant by the term is the fundamental change from being a sinner to becoming a righteous person before God, from being God’s enemy to becoming reintegrated into loving community with God. (It is important to note that the active subject in this act of reconciliation is God!)

Let us return to Bonhoeffer and assume that there is a connection between “the ultimate and the penultimate things,” between eschatological reconciliation and political reconciliation. The key question is: How do we uncover the “connection” between theological and political reconciliation so as to reconstruct the eschatological meaning of reconciliation, reconciliation in the “new creation” of which Paul spoke, in the political processes of reconciliation?

The attempt to answer this question in methodological terms brings us to a critical point. How can we explore what political reconciliation means? What method is adequate for this undertaking? As we noted above, no such method has been proposed for theological research. We therefore have to undertake empirical field studies in order to explore the political dimensions of reconciliation.

The political sciences provide methodological assistance in this venture;¹² they also point toward empirical fields that are of particular relevance and interest for us. Political reconciliation has played an important role in instances of political transition to democracy after authoritarian rule. Research on political transformation (*Transformationsforschung*) has examined well-known examples of political transition in countries such as Chile after the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship, South Africa after the end of apartheid, Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall, and East-bloc countries after the collapse of Communism. In all these countries the question has posed itself: How should we deal with guilt for the crimes committed under the preceding authoritarian rule? And to what extent and under which conditions can the way of reconciliation overcome the divisions of the past?

12. I have made use of political methods for exploring the process of political transition in a different article. See “Reconciliation with a ‘New’ Lustre: The South African Example as a Historical and Political Challenge for Dealing with the German Democratic Republic’s Past,” *Journal for Theology of Southern Africa* 113 (July 2002). The interdisciplinary dialogue between the study of jurisprudence and political science in particular provides a catalogue of key categories that make it possible to reflect on political reality from a theological point of view.

Let us assume for a moment that there is a political field in which both concepts, namely guilt and reconciliation, play a key role. Let us also allow that political reconciliation can be related to guilt, i.e., that reconciliation in politics provides one way of dealing with moral guilt. Both considerations imply that it is possible to equate a moral understanding of guilt with the theological understanding of sin. But can it be taken for granted that both mean the same thing? In what we have stated above we have assumed that political reconciliation and theological reconciliation are different things. Likewise the merely ethical sense and the theological sense of guilt need to be distinguished. The notion of sin implies more than an offense against moral values or ethical guilt: it involves a person's whole relation with God. Moreover, a person does not become a sinner when he or she behaves in an unethical way. Their sinful behavior is both the result and the manifestation of being sinners and as such members of sinful humankind.

On the other hand, if we assume that there is a connection between political and theological reconciliation and likewise between guilt before human beings and sin before God, how shall we pursue Bonhoeffer's question about the connection between the ultimate and the penultimate things?

Broadly speaking, there seem to be two conditions:

1. The "condition for the possibility" (to use Kant's language) of guilt in people's relation to one another is sin (i.e., their being sinners) before God.
2. The condition for the possibility of reconciliation between human beings as a political reality in the penultimate is a reconciled relationship between them and God in Jesus Christ in the realm of ultimate things.

Both of these conditions assume a relation between ethical guilt and sin on the one hand and between political reconciliation and reconciliation as an eschatological reality on the other. In a broad sense they provide a framework for dealing on a theological basis with guilt and reconciliation in the political sphere.

Let us now explore, in a more detailed way, the possibility of reconstructing the Christian doctrine of reconciliation within the political sphere, using South Africa as an example. As is well known, the

guilt incurred during the apartheid era was dealt with in the framework of a truth commission. Victims could tell their stories of oppression before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and perpetrators of human rights violations were required to tell the truth in order to get amnesty. I am going to argue that a Christian agenda underlay the political and juridical process in the TRC and that one can show from its proceedings how political and theological language are transferable.

Let us examine the amnesty procedure more closely. According to the TRC law,¹³ applicants for amnesty had to make “full disclosure of all relevant facts” that led to a human rights violation. The law did not (and could not) require “repentance” in the theological sense (*passiva contritio*) as a condition for reconciliation in analogy with the dialectic of law and gospel. If a perpetrator made a full disclosure without showing any regret, he qualified for amnesty, so long as certain other requirements in the TRC law were met.

There were a number of such cases of full disclosure, and most of them ended with amnesty. Many of them, of course, were viewed critically in South Africa, especially by the victims. They asked, How can we forgive the perpetrator if he does not regret what he did? I have dealt elsewhere with this issue and the important questions it raises from a theological perspective.¹⁴

In what follows I will concentrate on one example that yields answers to the question of the possibility of transferring political language into the theological sphere. Let us focus on the political and juridical understanding of truth-telling on the one hand and a theological understanding of truth in relation to remorse on the other by following a dialogue at a TRC hearing.

Jeff Benzien, a highly decorated police officer in the apartheid era, applied for amnesty in July 1997. During the TRC hearing, held in Cape Town, three of his former victims were present. According to the amnesty law, the victims were allowed to put questions to the applicant. One of the torture victims, for instance, asked Benzien to demon-

13. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34 (1995).

14. See my article, “Philosophische und theologische Grundprobleme beim Verstehen des südafrikanischen Versöhnungsprozesses,” in *Religion and Theology: A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse* 7, no. 2 (2000): 169-91.

strate a special torture technique that he had used on victims during interrogation.

Like many other hearings, the Benzien hearing also developed its own genuine dynamic once it began. Juridical matters, moral values, and theological implications seemed to take turns in being central. Clearly, Benzien's main purpose for testifying before the TRC was to get amnesty. The TRC's main function in turn was to prove whether Benzien met the (juridical) criteria for amnesty. But once the discussion began with the victim, the process of truth-finding involved more than just trying to find out the facts:¹⁵

Mr. Jacobs (victim): I was your first survivor of this torture method of yours, you would concede that, you say?

Mr. Benzien: Yes.

Mr. Jacobs: Yet you appeared very effective at what you were doing (. . .)

Mr. Benzien: I can't answer that – how effective it was.

Mr. Jacobs: Are you a natural talent at this, I mean, do you think? (. . .)

Mr. Benzien: I wouldn't know if I have got a natural talent for it; it is not a very nice talent to have.

Mr. Jacobs: Okay. (. . .) If it is not a very nice talent to have, you went on, if [as?] you say, from nine o'clock till two o'clock, which is quite a few hours; you went on for long with something you are not very comfortable with. How do you explain that?

Mr. Benzien: Mr. Jacobs, the method employed by me is something that I have to live with, and no matter how I try to interpret what I did, I still find it deplorable. I find it exceptionally difficult, sitting here in front of the news to everybody. I concede that no matter how bad I feel about it, what was done to you and your colleagues must have been worse. Believe me, I am not gloating or trying to prove that I am somebody who I am not.

Mr. Yengeni (victim): What kind of man uses a method like this

15. The punctuation of the original record is slightly amended in its reproduction below.

(. . .) to other human beings (. . .), listening to those moans (. . .) and taking each of those people near to their deaths — what kind of man are you (. . .), what happens to you as a human being?

Mr. Benzien: Mr. Yengeni, not only you have asked me that question. I, Jeff Benzien, have asked myself that question to such an extent that I voluntarily approached psychiatrists. (. . .) If you ask me what type of person is it that can do that, I ask myself the same question.

Passages in the dialogue such as those in which Benzien states, “. . . it is not a nice talent to have” and “I find it exceptionally difficult, sitting here in front of the news to everybody” are already noteworthy from a theological point of view. Whereas the former statement indicates a turn-about in that it gives the deed a new moral interpretation, the latter statement on the face of it expresses shame. “Shame” expresses something more: the “inner person” (*innerer Mensch*), to use a term from Reformation theology, is involved. Shame expresses renunciation not only of the deed but also of the kind of person one is. It not only expresses renunciation of the deed in its moral aspect *coram hominibus*; with shame the person becomes aware of standing *coram deo*. It affects the person himself. A change in the inner person becomes evident. “The conscience becomes fearful.”¹⁶

In the last statement in the dialogue above *Benzién* places himself as a person in question: “I ask myself the same question,” he declares. It becomes clear that repentance (*passiva contritio* in Lutheran terminology) is concerned not only with individual moral offenses: it flows from a remorse (*Zerknirschung*) that the law (in the moral-theological sense) brings about by revealing that everything in a human being is under the curse of sin. *Benzién* “wakes up” from the apartheid dream, the nightmare of apartheid that theologians have categorized as a sin

16. Article 12 of the Augsburg Confession (CA) of the Lutheran Church. “Repentance” consists according to CA XII, 4-5 of two parts: “*altera est contritio seu terrores incussi conscientiae agnito peccato, altera est fides, quae concipitur ex evangelio seu absolutione et credit propter Christum remitti peccata et consolatur conscientiam et ex terroribus liberat.*” It is interesting that “liberation” marks the endpoint of the argument! Quoted from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), p. 65.

against God.¹⁷ To that extent it is a waking up from sin, i.e., from hostility against God. Repentance or conversion is a “waking up” (*Erweckung*) that Karl Barth expounds in a way pertinent also to this context: “The sleep from which a person is awakened, according to Scripture, is a going along a wrong path, a going in which one is oneself turned the wrong way and stuck in being turned the wrong way.”¹⁸

Benzién’s awakening occurred not from fear, constraint, or intimidation but voluntarily, even though the announcement of conditions for the granting of amnesty (on the juridical level) initiated the process that led to it. “Truth” received another dimension, an accusing function, through personal confrontation with the victim (the moral level). The victim placed the person behind the deed “in question.” The perpetrator was shaken awake. This shaking awake parallels the spiritual function of a sermon calling to repentance (the theological level).

These theological observations describe an end-point. For we are dealing here with a development or process, one that advances from the juridical to a moral to a theological understanding. On the juridical level Benzién sought to meet the criteria for amnesty by revealing what he did to his victims. Truth on this level is factual truth. On a moral level the revelation of all relevant facts – in our case the detailed description of Benzién’s torture techniques – led to a moral judgment of what happened that contrasted with the attitude he had had during the apartheid era. This moral self-judgment was intensified by personal confrontation with the victims and their account of how they experienced what had happened. Truth took on a further function, namely that of a moral accusation (*Anklage*). The victims questioned the *person* behind the *torturer*. What person can do these things? The perpetrator was “aroused from sleep” through the distinction between person and deed.

In this process of being aroused from sleep one can rediscover the theological function of a “sermon calling to repentance” (*Bußpredigt*). Here we are no longer concerned with a moral paradigm, in the light of which the deed implies only an offense against moral values (= ethical guilt). Instead the law (in its theological sense, as *usus secundus legis*)

17. See as a predecessor of the *Kairos Document*, e.g., John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

18. *Kirchliche Dogmatik (Church Dogmatics)* IV/2 (my translation).

leads the person to the turning point where he despairingly but profoundly questions himself. The “old” person is placed under question. On a theological level we are here concerned with the appeal for repentance that precedes conversion in the biblical meaning of the word. In the naming of the injustice (*Benennung des Unrechts*) by both victims, Mr. Yengeni and Mr. Jacobs, we hear the “call to repentance” (*Bußruf*) of the gospel and the prophets.

The example of the Benzien hearing shows that reconciliation (together with repentance, which is a component of reconciliation) involves being confronted by the truth, that is, by the identification of injustice (*Benennung des Unrechts*). To that extent we can argue that truth (which functions in the same way as a sermon calling to repentance) “provides the way” (Bonhoeffer) for reconciliation. In *this* sense the political formula “no reconciliation without truth” can be transferred into theology.¹⁹

In conclusion, it is important to note that the movement we have observed from the juridical to the moral to the theological understanding of truth about reconciliation does not aim at introducing a new Aristotelian metaphysics. On the contrary, as we have shown, there is no straight path leading from political reconciliation to its theological meaning. There is instead an ontological breach at the point where we enter the theological understanding of the process. As we have stated, there is no direct link between political and theological language. But coming from the theological angle enables us to discover “connections” between the “ultimate” and the “penultimate things,” either by way of transferring political into theological language or by way of reconstructing a theological motif within political reality.

In our case we were able to reconstruct the theological depth of

19. The formula “reconciliation through truth” represents, from a theological point of view, a formula with three unknowns. What it means depends on

- a. the view of reconciliation,
- b. the understanding of the preposition, and
- c. the meaning of truth.

Because of this danger of ambiguity the formula “reconciliation through truth” is not on principle reciprocally transferable. For example, a theological reconstruction of the political formula is possible only where the preposition “through” is understood in the sense of Bonhoeffer’s “preparing of the way” (*Wegbereitung*) and not as a methodology.

repentance as a “sign of transcendence” (P. L. Berger) in the midst of political reality, at a hearing of the TRC. The quality of the “sign of transcendence” lies precisely in what repentance makes possible, according to the Bible, namely, freedom – in the sense that in reconciliation between God and humankind a change of perspective takes place. Thus “reconciliation through truth” does not mean theologically being stuck in moral accusations; what it does is highlight the overcoming of moral guilt. That truth is truth only when it sets free is clear from the Gospel of John (8:32). “The truth will make you free,” said Jesus. “Free for what?” asks Miroslav Volf, and provides the answer: “free to make journeys from the self to the other and back and to see our common history from their perspective as well as ours, rather than closing ourselves off . . . ; free to live a truthful life and hence be a self-effecting witness to truth rather than fabricating our own ‘truths’ and imposing them on others; free to embrace others in truth rather than engage in open or clandestine acts of deceitful violence against them.”²⁰

20. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 272f.