

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION

Miklós Tomka

Professor Dr. Miklós Tomka, a sociologist, is Director of the Hungarian Center of Religious Research, and author of the book Church, State and Society in Eastern Europe. He has been one of the editors of Continuum for many years. The following was presented as the opening lecture at a plenary assembly of the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS), held in Balatonfüred, Hungary, August 2009.

The title for this reflection implies four presuppositions which are not at all self-evident. Identity, whether personal or social, seems to be taken as an unquestioned entity, to which we need to give some second thoughts. Secondly, the use of the term religious identity suggests the belief, that there is a general religious identity, which would be at least partially valid for all religions. Third, the verbally established association between religious identity and reconciliation entails trust in such a relationship. Fourth, the theme of this congress¹ seems to suggest the conviction that religious identities may contribute to reconciliation. All these hidden presuppositions need verification especially because of changes resulting from modernity. Beyond theoretical considerations we will use data from Eastern European surveys for purposes of demonstration, keeping in mind the extraordinary speed of modernization in this region, and for specifying our topic for this region.

Sociology defines modernity with three key notions. The first one refers to the rather technical and formal process of rationalization, specialization and subsequent social segmentation. The second one relates to the changing character of the social system, especially to the declining ordering role of tradition and social control. The third concept is individualization. It refers to individual consequences of both previous processes, by emphasizing the growing freedom and loneliness of individuals, as well as the threatening uncertainty with respect to goals and values. The effect of the above processes for individuals is the dissolution of previous forms of self-understanding and the urgent search for new ways of identity-construction.

The cumulative effect of purposive rationality (Weber) initiates specialization into distinct autonomous spheres of life. Instead of the previous organism-like, unified pattern of social organization which people experienced as natural and self-evident, the universe of society and culture crumbles into a loosely knit mosaic, the parts of which are strange, often alienated from each other, and independent of human control. Politics, work, entertainment, science, communication, etc. develop their own goals, principles, organizational forms and also expectations for the behavior of persons under their jurisdiction and/or power. Politics and business, religion and technology are similarly eager to exclude interferences of other sub-systems into their respective concerns. All these are autonomous micro-cosmoses, personified in social groups of colleagues, neighbors, partners, allies etc. the relations to whom are shaped by the respective sub-world.

Under pre-modern conditions human relations extended to the totality of human existence. In modernity borderlines of specific spheres determine the character and the limits of personal relations, that have grown up and been defined within a particular context. Collegial relations differ from political alliances or from fellowships in sport-clubs. The participation in these relations is partial, related to but one specific aspect of life. Individuals try to preserve their relative independence and inner wholeness by creating and defending their own sub-world in home and family.

The second process is the devaluation of tradition and of all kind of social regulations as having an overall validity. Past conceptions of life and behavior lose their relevance and at best preserve a limited utility and capacity for directing in modernity.

Pre-modern humankind experienced a homogeneous world-view and a centrally and

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hierarchically outlined socio-cultural order. The process of modernization replaced this arrangement with a multitude of social sub-worlds, each of which with a specific pattern as derived exclusively from its specific goals and functions. Family life has coordinates different from those of work life, politics different from recreation. This differentiation functions in more specific fields too. One specific workplace, like a bank office, is usually organized totally differently from other ones, like schools, mines, farms, the navy, or another enterprise. Differences extend to the understanding of loyalty and morality and to institutional requirements from the workforce. Socially transmitted regulations and patterns govern life and behavior only in concrete circumstances and occasions, and in specific respects. The plurality and discordance of precepts and regulations suspend the feeling of an absolute, cosmic order, and of a natural or an eternal divine law.

As a consequence of the splintering of the social organizations that individuals participate in, they have to adapt to differing subsystems and the respective different social groups. Changes from one to another life-situation require frequent alterations of adaptation to new conditions and switches in the coordinates of the evaluation of a situation and the appropriate behavior. The increased need for adaptability is in itself a burden. The real challenge is, however, the contradiction between demands coming from different subsystems but which are related to the same decision. Religious and political morality clash again and again. The loyalty to workplace and the honesty toward customers may collide, as business-related and family-oriented requirements quite often do. Modern individuals received the freedom to choose between contradicting expectations, between life-styles, between work-places and careers, between this or that kind of friend. It is the necessity of making decisions that they cannot avoid. Yet the decisions are temporal, conditional, and transitory. The continuous changes in circumstances require continuous repetitions and possibly revisions of previous decisions.

Most relevant decisions have consequences for social relations. Political preferences, church membership, sports and entertainment, the place of living and the work-place determine social networks in which one participates. A special quality of modernity consists in the diversity of social milieus maintained by the same person. One participates differently in different settings. The individual decides about the subjective relevance of different group-relations. Because of the diversity of social relations and because of the ceaseless possibility to change their subjective relevance, these relations restrict only slightly the freedom of individual decisions. The social rejection of a decision in one milieu can be countered every time by support in another group.

The third concept refers to individualization, which expresses a personal maturation to conditions of modernity. The modern person is independent from tradition and social constraints. He/she is free in his/her decisions. He/she has to take them individually. He or she has to grow up and acquire the ability to orient him or herself in the world of steadily changing alternatives.

This freedom is simultaneously a blessing and a curse. It poses the problem of how to justify decisions. The final instance is invariably the individual. But the individual itself needs a self-definition. Social-psychology speaks about multiple identities referring to the multitude of social scenes where a person is actively present. The multi-dimensionality of identity doesn't eliminate however the need for a center which establishes the relative relevance and regulates the mutual relations of different levels or expressions of identity. Where can this center come from, if neither history nor society is a sufficiently reliable point of reference? The creation, definition and maintenance of identity are most urgent questions in modernity. They include the tension between the experiences of past generations and the not yet discovered future prospects. Identity defines social relations as well; consequently it contains the tension between individual autonomy and the submission inherent in any belonging. The definition of identity is positioning one's self between past and future history and within the social context.

Modernity represents the loss of determinative social constraints. It is a big challenge worldwide. It produced an exceptionally strong shock in Eastern and Central Europe. Prior to communism a hierarchical class structure, feudal conditions and a social order structured organically into a single organized social order ruled most countries of Eastern and Central Europe.

Communism promoted economic and technical modernization. Totalitarianism and the planned economy hindered, however, the progression of social modernization. The party-state deprived individuals of the possibility of alternatives, of initiatives, of independent decisions, of progression in individualization. The official state ideology stressed a single truth and a single vision of human and social fulfillment under the leadership of a single party. Communism was the anti-thesis of human and social modernization. On the other hand the resistance against communist centralism united people into one opposition. This oppositional stance severely restricted available alternatives of behavior and froze social dynamics. The opposition too was captured by the totalitarian system. The final effect was that communism polarized society into those who adapted and those in opposition, blocking by this polarization the autonomous social development and differentiation.

The breakdown of communism confronted 300 million people with the necessity of rapid social differentiation and the appropriation of abilities which are indispensable for survival in modernity. Only a small part of the population was able to meet these requirements. These people, quite often members of the previous communist leadership, became the "winners" of the political and socio-economical transformation. The big majority is aware of the new demands, but unable to meet them. Tensions between wishes and abilities, between efforts and results, between Western and Eastern economic success and quality of life, as well as overdone performances for the sake of economic adjustment to Western standards contributed to the increase of heart disease, circulatory and stress-diseases and to the shortening of life expectations. Central and Eastern Europeans live 5 to 16 years less than do people in Western countries (Tomka 1991).

Communism discredited previous social identities, obstructed and hindered community relations and transformed individuals into solitary dependent servants of the political machine, the ideology of which proclaimed the liberation and redemption of previously oppressed classes, yet not those of individual persons. The collapse of the communist dream buried those identities which were artificially fabricated by Marxist ideology and communist political practice. Only small and decreasing minorities draw their identities from the socialist or communist past. Even less often people define themselves in pre-communist categories. After forty and more years of communism there is no way back to the earlier past. The jump into modernity and the construction of corresponding impermanent identities cannot be avoided, although most people are not prepared to act adequately. The process of individualization, which is instrumental to the emergence of modern identities, is in its beginnings. Old empires and federal states disintegrated. New countries and nations emerged. National minorities call for self-determination. Previous denominational structures shifted (Tomka 2006a).

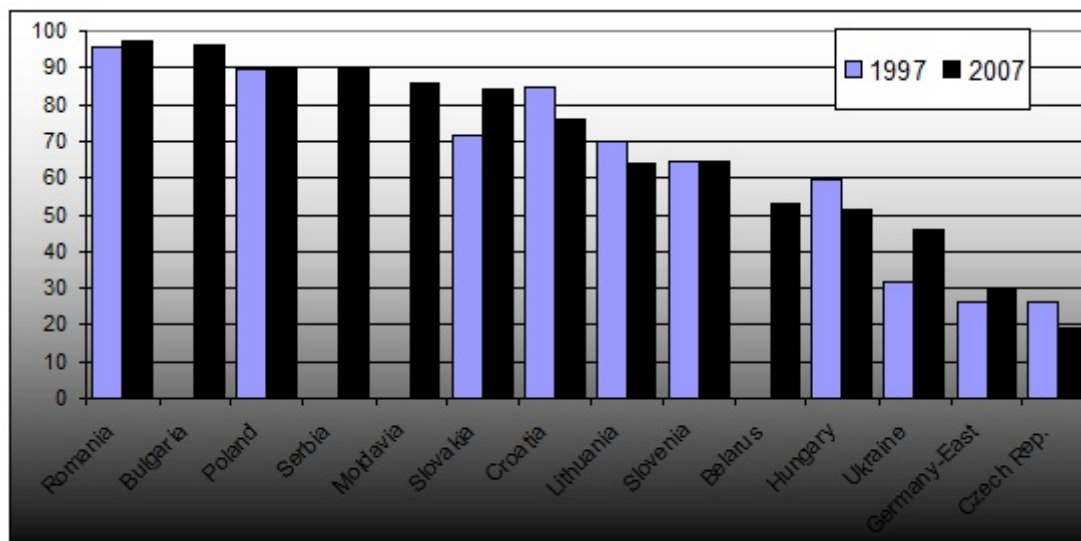
Globalization, the influence of Western capital, Western political dominance and new religious communities coming from the West complicate the situation and challenge and make the people feel insecure. Most new social and political units and structures don't have strong enough integrating ideas. Individuals are undecided with whom and with what should they associate and identify themselves. The post-communist world is in fundamental identity crisis individually, and socially. The establishment of social identities, as well as the finding of strategies for the definition of individual identities is a matter of survival in post-communist Europe. The question is which means can help to accomplish this work. In performing these tasks two uneven vehicles seem to be successfully instrumental: the national idea and religion. It is the second one on which we will concentrate our interest.

Critics of the secularization thesis bring a new aspect into the discussion. They agree that the unity and organic coherence of society was dispersed. They acknowledge the multi-centric nature and the multitude of sub-system regulations in plural society. They concede that the all-integrating societal role of religion disappeared. Yet they draw exactly the opposite conclusion than do the modernity theorists. The disintegration of the previous unified system is a challenge for the individuals, who are now confronted with the need to establish their own meaningfully configured and subjectively unified personal worlds. Modern persons participate in a multitude of life-spheres each of which with its logic, prescriptions and expectations. They have to elaborate

a practice which fits best to their individual values and goals, and minimalizes the conflicts between clashing requirements from the sub-systems noted above. In this enterprise they need a coherent set of stable values. Consequently, there is more need for religion than in any previous age (Davie 2007, Hervieu-Léger 1999, Luhmann 1977). And the reference to God provides a firm center for identity which is strong enough to integrate the multitude of partial identities as shaped in different spheres of life. Be that as it may, religion is strong in Eastern and Central Europe. Its attraction is growing in most countries of the region. Churches are important contributors to the emergence of civil society as the biggest voluntary organizations (Fig. 1.) in insufficiently structured societies.

Figure 1.

The ratio of people who declare their adherence to a religion or/and a church in 14 countries of Eastern and Central Europe, in 1997 and 2007. (In per cent. Source: Aufbruch 1997, 2007)



There is yet another problem which has to be mentioned. Post-enlightenment thinking supposed the existence of a general concept of religion. Doubts about the global usefulness of this unifying concept increased parallel with the termination of the colonial era. Differences between Protestant and Catholic ways of thinking and cultures are central issues of sociology since Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic' study (Weber 1993). Beyond historical evidences a large amount of contemporary social scientific data documents the divergent behavioral and social consequences of religiosity in both branches of Western Christianity. The end of the cold-war division of Europe, the attempts of the European unification process, and the search for European identity intensified debates about the specificity and social and cultural contents of Orthodoxy (Flere 2008, Titarenko 2008, Tomka 2006b). Maybe Europe is breathing with two lungs. At any rate, a thousand years of separation of both parts of Europe, and disparate cultural developments in the regions of Eastern and Western Christianity discriminate between the two models. The compartment in totalitarian systems and the varying success in survival are interesting manifestations of the differing social results of Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. The scale of relevant variations does not end within Christianity. September 11, 2001 and recent debates about EU-enlargement raised the question of the compatibility of Christianity-based and Islamic culture.

Even knowing the dangers of generalizations one has to remark, that contemporary evidence proves a stronger communal and small-group-capacity in Catholicism, in contrast to a stronger motivation to individualism in the Protestant milieu. Catholicism provided more spiritual and institutional support in the opposition to totalitarian systems. Protestantism seems to be more instrumental in initiating social change and in contributing to the emergence of accommodating individualities. Catholic identity seems to be more strictly God- and Church-related. Protestant identity can more easily accept non-belief within its confines, at least in Eastern and Central

Europe. In Eastern and Central Europe Catholic culture refers more strongly to tradition and nation; the Protestant position is, curiously, because of the looser ties to nation and tradition, more universalistic.

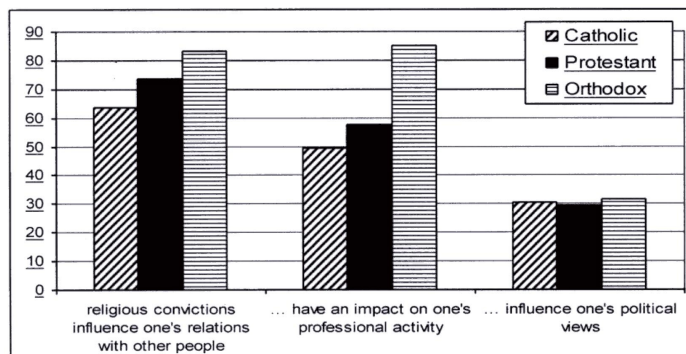
In contrast to scrupulously institutionalized, organized and formalized Western Christianity, Orthodox culture nurtured popular piety and spirituality. Western Christianity separated the state and the church declaring an independent yet politically active role for the church in Catholicism and a politically uninvolved, rather submissive one in Protestantism. Orthodoxy preserved the state-church-tradition as well as the full adaptation of the church to the ruler and the state in the concept of 'symphonia'. Western Christianity developed a religiously based social ethics and a wide network of institutions of social care. Orthodoxy remained passive in this respect both in theory and in practice up the end of 20th century. Western Christianity quite often contributed to the birth of nations and even to nationalism but preserved a critical capacity of the individual and of the church vis-à-vis the political community. The unity of religion and culture in Orthodoxy makes this religion the natural and exclusive bearer of social and national identity and willing instruments of nationalist ideologies and politics without leaving much space for critical distance.

Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue implicitly or explicitly supposes the existence of a common denominator of all religions which is stronger than socially and historically grown differences of actual believers and Churches. Further on, this kind of reasoning assumes that the common basis of all religions is something which may lay the foundations of a peaceful coexistence of humankind overcoming not only differences in convictions, but the inherently differentiated character of modern society as well. That same way of thinking seems to presume, that this imagined common kernel in religious identities offers values which are not present yet in non-religious identities. These hidden or explicit presuppositions are theoretically problematic. They may represent serious practical obstacles in social understanding as well as in reconciliation .

Notwithstanding conceptual difficulties religion is a major force in shaping individual and social life, although functioning somewhat differently in various denominational cultures. Data from Eastern and Central Europe² show that the majority of religious people declare that their religiosity influences their personal relations and their professional life. About one third asserts that their religiosity influences their political views as well (Fig. 2.). These ratios are substantially higher than in most Western European countries.

Figure 2.

The ratio of people saying that their religiosity is influencing their behavior - among regular church-goers in different denominations in the populations of Germany-East, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, in 2007 (In per cent. Source: Aufbruch 2007)

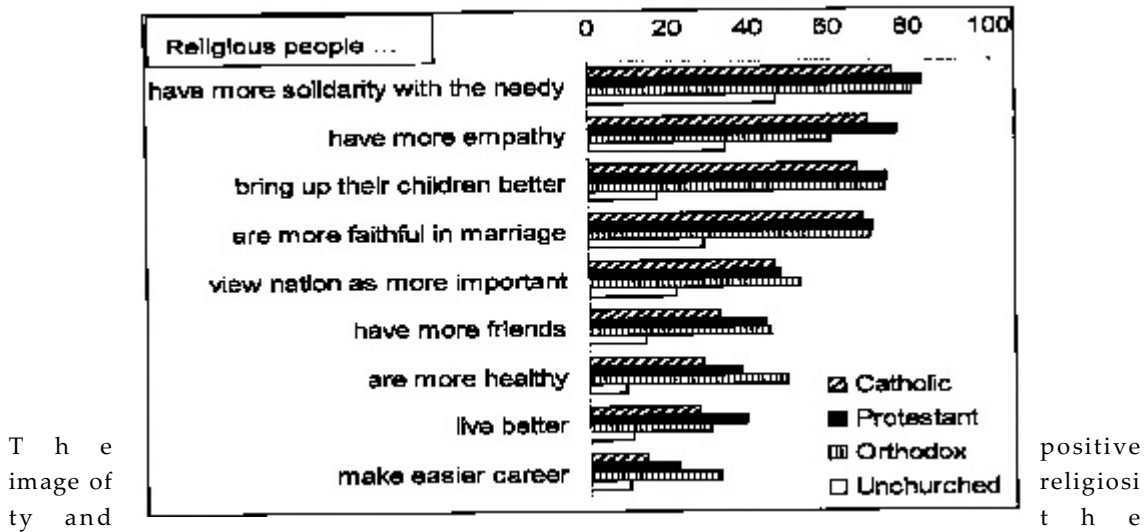


² The data referred to is taken from the study "Aufbruch/New Departures" organized and processed by Paul M. Zulehner, Vienna University and the present author. The first wave of the study (1977) was extensively communicated (Tomka, Zulehner 1999, 2000 and in the German series „God after Communism“). The analysis of the 2007 survey is not yet completed, but some initial findings have been published (Zulehner, Tomka 2008, Zulehner, Tomka, Naletova 2008) The results of „Aufbruch/New Departures“ are congruent with other international comparative studies like the European Values Study – World Values Study (Halman, et al. 2008.) and the International Social Survey (ISSP).

Correspondingly with this finding a substantial part of public opinion supposes that religious people behave differently from their non-religious fellow citizens. To this question we refer once again to data from the post-communist region. About every second person does not expect any difference in the behavior of religious and non-religious individuals. The other half of the population does. This second part has a predominantly sympathetic idea about religious people. Only tiny minorities believe that non-religious rather than religious people would represent certain positions of pro-social or simply advantageous behavior. Members of different denominations and unchurched people vary in their views; nevertheless in comparing religious and nonreligious, a majority of the people in all ideological groups attribute to religious people more favorable qualities and conduct (Fig.3.).

Figure 3.

The ratio of people saying that religious people are in specific ways different from the not religious ones - in different denominations in Germany-East, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, in 2007 (In per cent. Source: Aufbruch 2007)



The image of the Church correlates in Eastern and Central Europe with convictions and expectations, according to which the Church can and has to help in relevant individual and social issues. Public opinion generally confirms the ability of churches and religious communities in helping in personal affairs. Somewhat weaker is the belief in its capacity to solve social problems. In comparing of denominational cultures, the Orthodox Church enjoys the most general trust, followed by the Catholic and Protestant Churches and the Islamic community (Tab. 1.).

Table 1.

The percentage of the population who believe that the big churches of the country do or can respond to substantial issues. (In populations of 14 countries of Eastern and Central Europe. In per cent. Source: Aufbruch 2007)

Church or Religious Community evaluated	Countries where the respective Church represents a substantial ratio, and where questions about this church were asked	The... questions about meaning of life	Church can moral problems and needs of individuals	respond to problems of family life	actual social problems of our country
Catholic	14 countries of CEE	63.7	56.0	54.1	40.1
Protestant	Germany-East, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania	57.6	53.0	53.0	40.7
Orthodox	Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania, Moldavia, Serbia, Bulgaria	74.5	70.6	67.9	54.4
Islam	Serbia, Bulgaria	45.0	44.8	40.6	28.8

It is a remarkable fact that big majorities within all denominations have an opinion about what churches have to do. Even unchurched people have their ideas about topics the churches should deal with. Spiritual and faith-issues range first, immediately followed by the requirement of education of the people to mutual respect among demands concerning activities and performances of the churches. Among 11 possible functions, reconciliation of people takes the middle position, – after strictly religious and moral concerns and prior to community-oriented and

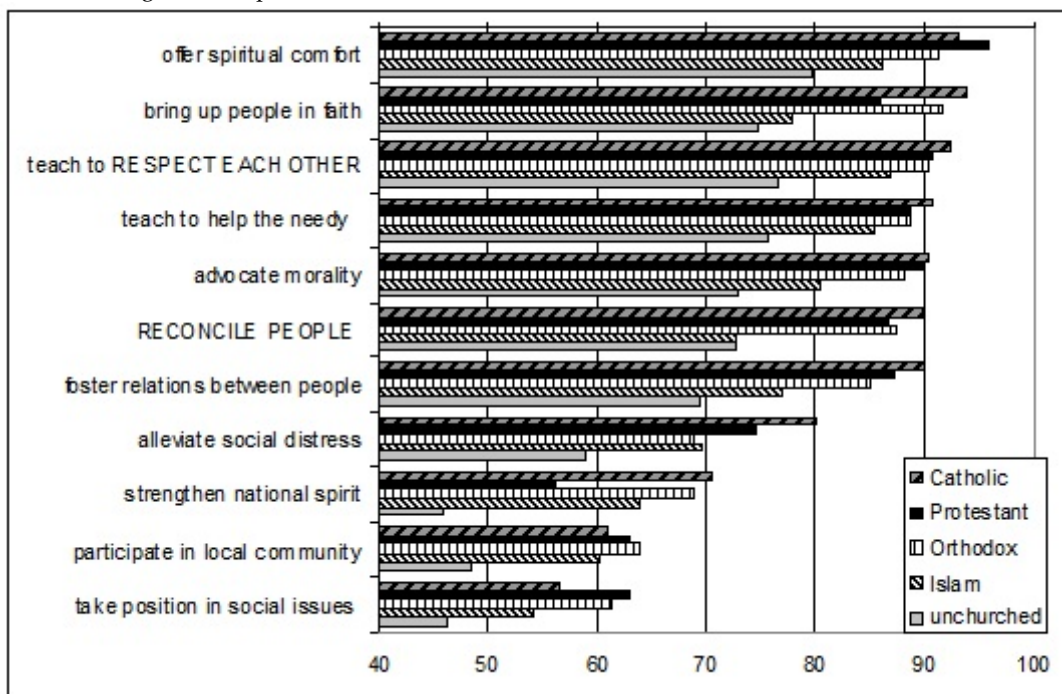
societal roles. The ratio of people expecting certain performances of the churches differ by denominations, but the general tendencies are similar. It is worth underscoring that three quarters and more of even unchurched people express the view that churches exist in order to teach people to respect each other and to reconcile people (Fig. 4.)

Reconciliation meets serious obstacles. Forgiveness can be one-sided. Reconciliation requires at least two willing partners. As long as there is no inclination to repentance and reparation among those who injured the rights of other people, as long as a group asserts its oppressive position self-righteously, reconciliation is almost impossible. In ideologically polarized societies like in Eastern and Central Europe and in milieus, where a certain denomination is a harassed minority it may be extremely difficult to foster reconciliation with ruling and oppressing majorities.

Figure 4.

The ratio of people in varying ideological groups who expect from churches and religious communities the fulfillment of different tasks (In the populations of 14 countries of ECC. In per cent. Source: Aufbruch 2007)

Religious People...



The Christian religion emphasizes the value of community. Jesus spent more time in strengthening and teaching His small community of disciples than in teaching big masses. Stressing the value of the person and personal relations Christianity prefers face-to-face relations to impersonal social relations notwithstanding the Christian demand to love one's neighbor and the existence of a Christian social ethics. Religion may have a strong impact in conflicting situations, if one's personal identity or the identity of one's community is endangered. It may be instrumental in helping to develop and maintain an identity without hostility against out-groups. Preferential options for the poor, for groups of oppressed people, for persecuted religious groups, for ethnic minorities deprived of their right to their own identity etc. may make it impossible to promote reconciliation with the rich, the persecutors, the oppressors.

An additional problem arises from the fact, that social and political divisions and oppositions often coincide with religious and/or denominational differences. Northern Ireland and Yugoslavia are recent examples.

Public opinion expects from religion to cure individual and social maladies. The genuine vocation of religion is to strengthen human values, to help to stabilize personal identity, to diminish social conflict, to promote reconciliation and human understanding (by leading and

relating them to God). These objectives quite often clash with each other. It is almost impossible to improve human relations and to advance reconciliation as long as people have shattered, disintegrated and uncertain identities. The first step to reconciliation is the healing of wounded identities.

There is, however, one aspect of religious identity which can lay the foundation for reconciliation. Religions insist on human sinfulness. They call for self-examination in looking for one's part in contributing to evil in the world and to one's chances to reduce it. The decision to start with one's own failures and the trust in God's forgiveness and help in overcoming one's wickedness puts reconciliation in a new dimension. The realization of one's own selfishness opens the way for the understanding of different interests and motivations of adversaries. This is not yet reconciliation but the disposition and willingness for it. And that is no small thing.

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