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THE THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION AS A CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEOLOGY: THE PRESENT STATE OF THE BALKAN REGION AND ITS POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

The article aims not only to give an insight into the theological premises of the problem of reconciliation, but it also suggests the practical implementation of this theology within the body of the public policies of the countries of the West Balkans. I have tried to clarify elementary terms inherent in both post-conflict and contemporary theology, especially prominent within the theology of reconciliation which revolves around searching for possible solutions for a lasting and a viable peace. The theology of reconciliation should not remain within the scope of academic speculation, but it should be implemented by religious organizations as a means for conveying their ethical and religious norms in the contemporary world.

Key words: post-conflict theology, political theology, theology of reconciliation, West Balkans, Churches and religious societies, public policies

Introduction

The analysis of Balkans history shows that the 20th century was a period of tremendous losses for all of the nations of Southeastern Europe. The area that was to become the Republic of Yugoslavia had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries; it was also devastated by the Balkan wars, and shaken by the two World Wars. After the turmoil, the Communists Party took

power in the region and imposed restrictions on political and religious expression. Under the guise of policy of equality and social justice, the party paved the way for the ideological society where it ruled by oppression and imprisonment of political opponents. The ideology had also been gradually introduced by the educational reform which was meant to promote the ideas of socialism. Politicization of media that was used by the communists continues to be a tool even nowadays.

Social disintegration occurred in the last decade of the 20th century. Successor states that have rebuilt themselves on the ashes of ideologies embraced nationalism and religious extremism, both Christian and Muslim, with the alleged aim of turning to the traditional values and bringing about social awareness. In this social vacuum, the sparks of demythologization of the historical narratives of the successor states emerged, and were followed by public advocacy of the radical political views. Tragically, the war in the West Balkans ensued as a consequence of these tensions. Moderate civic peace initiatives were not acceptable for the political elite, and the individuals who publicly declared their anti-war views were stigmatized as non-patriots.

The beginning of a new millennium marked a new phase, with the cessation of direct conflicts between the nations of the West Balkans states, although there emerged a problem of the ethnocentric views which influenced the institutions of democracy and the official political strategies. In addition to this, within the traditional religious groups (the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Muslim), the idealized sense of identity based primarily on ethnicity remained prominent. This was contrasted with the theological paradigms inherent in Abrahamic religions. The states that emerged in the region of the ex-Yugoslavia, as well as their main religious denominations (the Serbian Orthodox church in Serbia, the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia and the Islamic community in Bosnia), have accepted a special type of coexistence characterized

by a synergy of political and religious policies/institutions. The influence of peace and civic initiatives for liberalization and the democratization of society have shown only minor results.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed the traces of extremism and nationalism together with anti-civil rights movements within the European Union as well. This has resulted in the ghettoization of the politics and economy, which undoubtedly lead towards hostility and animosity between the nations that live in Europe. The term “Balkanization of Europe” has become popular in the media. It stands for a surge in radical political views with the pursuit for the real or imaginative enemies, for the disintegration of cultural space, warmongering tendencies or even military conflicts, accompanied by a decline in the living standard.

Having in mind these tendencies towards totalitarian political systems and frozen conflicts, with political, economic, and ecological destabilization, I find it important to review the contemporary theological viewpoint and the alternatives it might offer. Both post conflict and political theology, which is known as the theology of reconciliation, are branches of theology that may help address these complex problems in a creative and moderating way.

Post-conflict and New Political Theology— the Common Thread Between the Two

Post conflict theology is often understood as a group of ideas meant to clarify the role of theology in post conflict societies. However, its practical implications have become more real and important over time. This practical side can be applied to almost all of the social aspects: “In the post conflict societies, theology should not represent the mere spiritual ground, which has been inherent in it already, but it should also influence the way people think and behave in their everyday situations, it should influence the everyday communication.”¹ The role of the post-

¹ Srđan Sremac and Sergej Beuk, *Svet i Sveto*, [The World and the Holy]. (Belgrade: Otačnik, 2013), 52.

conflict theology could be especially prominent when it comes to the societies which tend to go through the stage of a fragile peace after military conflicts. This is often a short term peace period which is followed by the new phase of the reconstruction of national, religious, ethical, social norms and attitudes, which are caused by the demythologization of national history or by the demystification of political relations. However, this post conflict period carries the risks of developing deformities which are often sparked by the political and religious elite, which tend to make an ideological interpretation of history and to rewrite it in a way that does not correlate with the facts. Having in mind these complex social and ideological situations in the post war countries, such as in the Balkan region, we search for solutions that might stem from the field of the post-conflict theology.

Since the publication of Karl Shmit`s influential work *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*,² the discussion on topics of the relation of the (political) society to religious awareness has ensued, with the conclusion that the political society always reflects a certain cluster of religious norms and views, regardless of the degree of its secularization. In that sense, Johannes Baptist Metz proclaimed the new theological position, which included the shift of the emphasis from an individual to the political societies and its institutions,³ while Jürgen Moltman highlighted the importance of social engagement through the Christian understanding and solidarity. Moltman maintained that this could be the alternative to the world which is moving in a direction from the utopian to the catastrophic scenario.⁴ All of these three authors, especially Metz, called for rendering the social dimension of the Gospel message: “The primal

² See Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* [Political Theology: Four Chapters toward the Teaching about Sovereignty], (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015).

³ See Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1969).

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

goal of the political theology is deprivatisation,⁵ which is the shift of the theological implications from the private to the public sphere, from the intimate and non-political to the general and political.

At this point, the question arises: what is the role of the Church as an institution today, and how to understand its social and historical responsibility? According to Metz and others, if the eschatological ideal of salvation is viewed from the perspective of ecclesiology, the Church is inevitably confronted with the task of constructive criticism of the contemporary political and social patterns. At the same time, there is a necessity for a non-ideological approach of the same Church, which should be embodied in practical politics, through love. This implies that the Church may be active and responsible only if it holds a transformative role, both towards itself and towards the outer world, but it should always be aware of its historical and temporal dimension. In other words, the place of political theology is visible within the relation of an individual/society--the Church—the kingdom of God, with the prominent role of faith as a cohesive ingredient. However, how can we determine the type of religious faith that is needed for reaching this goal? This should be the faith that corresponds with the theology and ethics of both the Old and the New Testament, the one which finds the continuity between these two, the faith that resonates with the message of love for the Creator and for our neighbors (Lev.19:18; Mt. 22:37-39). This is the ethics that comes from the basics of the political theology, as well as the theology of reconciliation.

⁵ Mihaela Herijan, "Johann Baptist Metz: Politička teologija," *Spectrum*, No.1-4, May 2010, (Zagreb: Katolički bogoslovni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2010), 87.

Contemporary Theology as the Theology of Reconciliation—Turning Towards the Other

The goals of the theology of reconciliation may lie in applying the notions of peace, truth, justice and forgiveness to the context of ethical behavior that is essential in the aftermath of certain religious, political, or military confrontations.⁶ Although the term *reconciliation* belongs to the group of key notions in Christianity, we have to restrain from the traditional interpretation of the term. The reconciling sacrifice of Jesus Christ echoes beyond the context of ecclesiology and soteriology and it can be applied to the particular fields, such as social institutions, political ideologies, various economies of interest and to the interpretation of cultural history. In this respect we evaluate the post-conflict area of the West Balkans, and we apply the patterns, ways and aspects of reconciliation from the perspective of the theology of reconciliation to the area. This includes the tasks of:

- 1) Emphasizing the necessity of reconciliation between God and people which includes the whole cultural and social background
- 2) Rebuilding peace through the interaction between the individuals and groups which were involved in the conflict
- 3) Connecting the local communities on the basis of similar needs and values
- 4) Creating civic initiatives to reconcile the aims of the political and religious elites
- 5) De-ideologization and humanization of the political and media space
- 6) Making the process of reconciliation of various ethnic groups more dynamic on the grounds of forgiveness, accepting differences, and prompting dialogue.

⁶ John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, (London: SCM Press, 2002).

All of the above must not be understood as a group of well-intended ideas, but as the act of emphasizing the meeting points between the nations that share the same geographical and historical background. It should present the initiative to bring about the awareness of the necessity of reconciliation of various ethnic groups in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia which are nations that will inevitably share the same future. We must remember that the Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Albanians, and all the other nations in the West Balkans have similar political and ecological challenges, and the particularization among them on various levels is impossible in the area of globalization.

What Can We Hope For

At the end of this short article, we must admit that we are aware of the limited impact of the theology of reconciliation if it remains just a theory. This theology must be moved from the scope of academic reflection into a sphere of public policy⁷ which includes making a connection between various social identities, various religious and cultural norms and making efforts toward political reconciliation,⁸ seen from the point of view of various social perspectives. If we perceive this issue as the central point of Christian theology, which is actually the Biblical revelation, we may conclude that: “Every page of the New Testament speaks of reconciliation. The words of Jesus, his actions, his cures--all betoken reconciliation. From the New Testament period onward, the Christian tradition has understood the message of Jesus as a message of reconciliation.”⁹ This implies that both the theology of reconciliation and political theology begin in Christ and develop towards the world/neighbours, in whom God`s personality is

⁷See Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney Petersen, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Public Policy & Conflict Transformation* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2001).

⁸See Joseph Liechty, *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁹Kenan Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

reflected, no matter to what extent the personality of another person might differ from ours. The differences in mentality in the region of West Balkans are small, so there is a lot of space for a dialogue. In spite of this, dialogue is scarce. Having in mind the similar cultural and historical background, how can we explain this?

In our view, there are several factors that might contribute to the absence of a dialogue, and these include: 1) Unwillingness of the political elite to rise above their particular interests; 2) Economical alienation of the major Churches and religious communities from their members, who often face financial and social obstacles; 3) Lack of trust in the processes of political democracy; 4) Inability to dismiss the burden of war conflicts from the 1990s; 5) Unreliability of political institutions; 6) Continual threats to peace, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo; 7) Emphasizing nationalistic ideas, particularly within religious communities; 8) Insufficient media coverage on peace initiatives and projects, 9) Growing evidence of various aspects of inequality which corresponds to the global trend.

The list of possible causes could be extended, but we hold that the responsibility for this inability for reconciliation, when seen from the point of view of theology, rests mainly with the churches and religious communities (Christian, Muslim and Judaic). Religious institutions are wielding infrastructure, material wealth, and a large body of institutions (educational, humanitarian, etc.), as well as human resources, and they have a huge potential to act in the social context; religious institutions hold a unique authority and capacity to manage conflicts among adherents of various religious groups, particularly in the sphere of prevention of conflict and maintaining peace.¹⁰ The example of the West Balkans history shows that religion has not

¹⁰ Sebastian C H Kim, Pauline Kollontai, and Greg Hoyland, *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2013).

exerted its influence to prevent a conflict, but rather served as a tool used for manipulation. However, this must not remain in the future. The theology of reconciliation offers the ultimate message of love, which results in peace: “A genuinely Christian reflection on social issues must be rooted in the self-giving love of the Divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ; all the central themes of such reflection will have to be thought through from the perspective of the self-giving love of God.”¹¹ Starting from the Cross of mercy and moving in the direction of the Other, we reveal ourselves through interaction, through reflection of ourselves in the eyes and in the beliefs of others. The belief systems of others are actually much more in line with our own beliefs than we are ready to admit. Reconciliation, equality, freedom, democracy, and coexistence in the region of the Balkans have been tested many times over the contemporary history, but we are turning towards the future that could become much brighter if we genuinely step out of ourselves both as individuals and as a society, and turn towards our neighbors who have similar needs, fears and dilemmas as we do.

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 16.