

## Reconsidering the Roads to Reconciliation: Looking Back at 'die Wende' with Theologians From the Former DDR

By Kjetil Hafstad\*

### Thinking about Reconciliation

One of the advantages of doing theology is that we can raise the great questions of life without people being much surprised – that is our job anyway. In the academic world, the great questions are often substituted by a lot of very small ones, because small questions are possible to handle in a more secured scientific way. I will now try, not only to raise a huge question on reconciliation, but also allow for a critical examination of the deep structures of reconciliation between individuals and people. I will humbly ask whether our thinking on this field is dominated by established habits and heavy traditions, and perhaps in this way is kept at a certain distance from everyday experiences. Is it possible, at least in some cases, to simplify the very way we think about reconciliation?

I am well aware of that only raising this question will call for a host of objections, well established in moral discourse and church preaching and praxis. I will not be able to discuss the objections in this chapter. I want to discuss limited parts of the field. As a start I will only present an argument in favour of trying and experiencing some ways to reconciliation, much simpler than the traditional theological understanding of penitence, through confession, repentance, judgement, sacrifice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

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## Questioning the Master Stories

The Bible represents an age old insight: Stories create and construct identity. By telling important stories, you can unite people - witness the growth of the early church. By coming together and listening and taking part in preaching and liturgy, the church was created - and changed the lives of ever more people. Today, we may describe these changes as construction through formulation and reformulation of the master stories that we build our community and society upon. I want to question one of the dominant master stories that have had an immense impact on our construction of church and society.

Let me illuminate what I have in mind by telling a short story I experienced some years ago. By our committee of ecumenical questions in the Norwegian Lutheran Church I was elected member of the national Lutheran-Catholic dialogue group. We worked together for eight years and diligently produced a couple of documents, one of which was actually mentioned with appreciative regard by Pope John Paul II, as he visited Norway in 1989. We had many good and very educating meetings in the commission. Our work ended in a positive, very limited recommendation of mutual exchange in preaching and praying between the churches. Yet we also found that for the further development of ecumenical dialogue, this group would do better if it by then ended its work. We were in fact not solving questions; we were recreating them!

We had tried to understand the problems in communication between our churches by going back to where all of our problems were defined, the time of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. As we retold in our group the arguments raised by the Reformers and Counter-Reformers, I remember what excellent arguments I judged the first protestants to have made. I hadn't until then really gone deeply into the conflicts between our churches. But as I did, I found them very

important. And I was not quite convinced that the Catholic church had changed sufficiently through, for instance, the Second Vatican Council. After living through and studying fairly intensely the Second Vatican Council, I had earlier been much more appreciative. After studying the master stories of my church however, I was uneasy with the prospect that we could accept that our sister church could now assess justification by faith alone to a satisfactory extent for the Lutheran part. And of course, our dialogue partner, in all cordiality, found that the divisions in the understanding of ministry in the church were still insurmountable. They were unsure whether the Lutheran church could be said to have any ministry at all in the proper sense. What I now observe in looking back, is that by retelling and reintegrating ourselves in the stories of division, we gave ourselves good reasons for still being divided. When we reformulate the divisive problems, we also recreate these problems.

In a very similar way, we are taught by tradition to solve problems by going into their central core. The master story we are working with is that only when we have shed sufficient light on the real core of our problems, are we able to solve them. My point is rather that by doing so, we of course obtain more insight in our problems. And by retelling the way things are, we deeply immerse ourselves in those problems. But do we then automatically find ways to solutions? Does the deep understanding of why we are together in this mess help us out? The master story of repentance says that only here, in the critical centre of conflict, in the acceptance of the right distribution of guilt and blame, we may find the possibilities to a real solution. Freud made a secular alternative to this process: only by enlightenment without restriction, clear light on the deep causes of our neurotic reactions, are we able to be freed from them. Illumination is in his thinking the 'gospel' that changes attitudes and learnt constrictions. Illumination is seen as liberating in itself – just as the gospel only 'works' when meeting a contrite and confessing heart.

## Remembering the DDR

For many years, this way of thinking has been self-evident for me. In recent years however, I have become more doubtful. One of the contributing factors to this doubt has been a number of discussions I have had with colleagues from the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik, the former Eastern Germany. Through the eighties, I happened to stay in frequent contact with theological teachers at the theological faculties in Rostock and Greifswald, because we participated in an exchange network with the other Nordic theological faculties. Every second year we had a theological conference either in DDR, changing between Rostock and Greifswald, or in one of the Nordic countries. This was one of the few ways East German scholars were allowed to visit universities abroad, and an opportunity for us up north to understand more of how theology and church survived under a Communist regime – and how these regimes worked, seen from the inside. In addition, I was cooperating with some of the staff in the church-owned seminary in Berlin: Theologisches Sprachenkonvikt. We shared an interest in the study of the theology of Karl Barth. By chance, then, I was able to share some parts of the common memory of how life was in the DDR, for theologians working in Communist universities and theologians working outside the official structure and in certain conflict with the regime.

The individuals I got to know in these years ranged from teachers who had the confidence of the ruling party, to teachers on the fringe and also some in direct opposition to the authorities. I came upon the idea of interviewing some of them, some fifteen years after "die Wende". I selected two professors who had lost their jobs after "die Wende" because they were accused of cooperating with the secret police, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit. The other partners represented different sorts of cooperation and resistance. One was a professor during the DDR-time, and still is. One was only kept as academic teacher at a very low level, because of rumours of being antagonistic towards the regime, but after die Wende he was

instantly made professor because of his broad scholarly merits. One was a teacher without recognized qualifications at Theologisches Sprachenkonvikt, but he too was made professor instantly at the Humboldt University after die Wende, on the grounds of excellent scholarly merits. The last partner was a former teacher at another 'Kirchliche Hochschule', who had been one of those from the church who were responsible for closing the Ministerium für Staatsicherheit. Through this he had won confidence among the some former officials in Stasi. Thus he subsequently organised a discussion group for former officials of the regime and their victims. This group has presented much of their common findings in a publication called 'Zwiegespräch' (conversations of two) which was published from 1991-1995.

## **A Strange Reluctance to Reconciliation**

These conversations surprised me. Nobody wanted to go into reconciliation with the past. I would have imagined that some of them – mainly those who were regarded as culprits - would not be very interested in reconciliation with the past, this being too stressful to go into again. One of the most famous books on the theme of reconciliation with the past in Germany in the sixties was Alexander und Margarete Mitscherlich: *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern*, on the German people's inability to grieve their own experiences of the Second World War. The authors who worked in the psycho-analytic school of Freud, made the diagnosis, not on individuals but on the whole people: they have suppressed their frustrations and become insensitive, the authors claimed, and this attitude was transferred to the next generation as a trauma. Their suggestion for a better future for Germany was to allow for grief, confession of guilt, sacrifice, reconciliation. Germans were advised to go through the full process of repentance.

In line with this research I would have expected that my dialogue partners would present some misgivings on how the past was dealt with after the collapse of

former DDR. And yes, there were many misgivings. But no one expressed the need for any process of reconciliation, let alone for making anything like a German version of a commission for truth and reconciliation as in South Africa. This calls for scrutiny. Every one had reached peace of mind. They found no reason to go into the past again. Looking back, they all consented that they had a stressful time during the regime. And they were all quite open in talking about cooperation with authorities, experiences of betrayal, of cooperation with the secret police. But now they were not interested in reopening the issues. They did not see a need for either repentance or forgiveness. They were in fact coping rather well.

## **Limitations and the Difficult Access to Truth**

Let us not forget the limits of an investigation like this. It cannot be representative in any respect. My few selected conversation partners represent of course different attitudes towards the regime and different prototypical careers – all academic teachers, but some in line with the regime, some in opposition, and one in the middle. But these are singular life stories. In addition: I had in my conversation no intention of establishing the truth of what had happened. I was only interested in hearing what they were now thinking, as they looked back on the events before and after die Wende. I did not seek other sources of information about them or what they were for instance accused of having done, either by Stasi during the Communist era, or afterwards through the so-called "Ehrenkommissionen" – the 'honour commissions'. I think the whole process of reestablishing East German society illustrates how extremely difficult it is to establish the truth of what had happened. Even access to a vast data of documents from the secret police has not helped as much as was expected. They may, in fact, be more a hindrance than a help. There are so many sources, and they are so difficult to read in a correct context. After all, everyone had to talk with Stasi. Yet you could refuse to be a secret spy for them. But

it is not easy to distinguish between the different categories in praxis. Stasi could write down information from a person as if he or she were a secret spy, without the person's knowledge. These instances are rare, but raise caution in reading the files straightforwardly. The very different sorts of cooperation people were engaged in are difficult, and in some cases impossible, to clarify today. At the outset in 1990 most investigators thought this would be easy.

So I didn't seek the truth. And I didn't interrupt my partners in any memory lapse or lie, when I coincidentally knew about it. My interest was directed towards what reflections they had now, many years afterwards, on the possible need for or wish to go through a process of reconciliation. No one wanted to. And on the other hand, everybody told different stories of reconciliation, and of how they were able to cope. In rather similar ways, each one of them had found peace of mind.

## **A 'Rage for Enlightenment'**

It started differently. Just after die Wende national and Western media were keen on making up for the past. "It was like a rage for enlightenment," says 'Peter' (all names are invented), who started at Theologisches Sprachenkonvikt and was installed as professor at Humboldt University after the change. "The authorities for the documents from the state security service (Stasi) did present material from the former secret archives. But they didn't understand well how to read them and to distinguish between what was reality and what was an invention of Stasi. So people were framed. In this situation you could not tell what was real. And that means that today there are no more possibilities for reconciliation."

In addition Peter mentions that no one by him or herself declared public that they had cooperated with the regime. Those who admitted doing so, had all been revealed through documents. "I don't know any case where we could say there was a

realized reconciliation,” he says. It was revealed that some of his colleagues had worked as spies for Stasi, and betrayed him. In a couple of cases, he had found an opportunity to talk about it and say that it was good to be able to talk about it. But there wasn't more to it than that. These former spies had to be exposed through documents. They did not admit to it by themselves. But in most cases, Peter says about any attempt to talk: “It all ended badly.”

Yet, in spite of the seeming failure of every single action for establishing justice, and the release with fairly light sentences of most of the culprits from the few prosecutions in court, Peter appreciates what happened. With democracy everyone who was accused, found ways of defence that offended the public feeling of justice – and they got away with it. “All the same”, Peter says, “we did have those trials.” In itself, that was new and a good thing. What he could have wished for in the different sorts of trials, were “possibilities to start learning better behaviour and not just looking through what had happened.” Punishment is not an end in itself. It is important to allow for a new start after open and honest sharing of what has been reality.

Looking back, Peter is not filled with regret. He is happy that the dictatorship is ended. But he misses some elements of their former way of life. He now describes this as a feeling of original solidarity between the subdued. He can still feel this climate when he is playing tennis with his friends from former time, a feeling of community in hardship – and being able to laugh through it. Not least, since under dictatorships jokes are created all the time. That was the only way to let loose the pressure from the immense power. After 1990 he has not heard any political jokes any more. He also feels that there is little need to say no to the way they lived through the communist age. “I cannot declare my whole life unimportant. One cannot do so, and should not do so.”

## Respect and Professional Work

'Otto' was a professor of broad scholarly merits and had quite good contact with colleagues in West Germany and Scandinavia. As he had been a director of the theological institution, he had to render accounts to Stasi as well. The honour commission found that this had incriminated him and the rector asked him to give up office. He was offered a pension and the right to call himself professor in retirement.

Otto felt this very unfair, but as he was just under a year from retirement age, and because a trial in court could strip him of all his income, he accepted and went into retirement before time. He admits he was very bitter at that time because he felt his case was not investigated properly and evaluated individually, only sentenced generally for having had conversations with Stasi – which was the case for every person in positions of responsibility.

Now he is not interested in going into the matter again. What for him made the difference, and helped him to reconcile himself with the situation, was that he just after his forced retirement was offered to step in for a colleague in West Germany for a term. This engagement was prolonged for further terms. He was also invited as guest teacher to Denmark, and was able to continue his own research. Being able to continue with his normal work and being respected as a professional made up for him for the injustice he felt had been done him.

'Erich' was one of the most productive scholars in the Theological Faculty where he served as assistant for 35 years. In spite of his merits, he was not promoted until after die Wende. Then he was made professor at once. He thinks he was regarded by the state, and therefore by the leadership in the university, as a 'black sheep' politically. Therefore he was not allowed to travel abroad. He was not among the 'Reisekader'. He had to develop methods of research that could work without any travel and a style of investigating sources and discussing with peers. Working in

Archeology and Art History, this was not easy. When he looks back, it is however without bitterness. He could of course not avoid the authorities, even though he was not a prominent member of the faculty. "Everyone had to fill a post and then everyone needed a political fig leaf. Certain things were done by assistants, civil defence and whatever they called it." He is not sure of whether he would have wanted to be a professor, because that would have involved decisions of a political nature, which he was not attracted to. Being a fully merited scientist in a very modest position had its comical sides – that his wife was always greeted after the professor's wives and things like that.

When I ask him whether he has reconciled himself with his history, he says: "Ah pfui, what shall I say? I have done scholarly work. And I have published more than all the other professors put together." He admits it might sound arrogant, but he wants to make clear that he is content with his life and does not see any need for reconciliation.

## Stories of Coping

I break off here. The interviews demonstrate many aspects of this, but point remarkably in the same direction. Everyone is reluctant to go into the past. Even those who were subjugated and were treated badly and were betrayed by friends and colleagues don't want widespread tribunals or trials treating the conflicts. They are not at all content with the rather feeble attempts to deal with the past that happened in the first years after die Wende. But what happened – limited as it was – was not bad. But they also communicate a deep feeling of community with those living behind the Berlin Wall. Erich mentions that the real history of the German Democratic Republic will not be heard today. And Peter – who has underlined with the help of Barth's theology the need for clarity and light shed on our lives – also says "We, like everyone who lived in East Germany, had no other option than to lie. I

did it too.” The difference is of course what you wanted to achieve by lying, he adds. Peter wants rather for the true story to come to the fore, with all its dubious shadows. And he feels compassion with all those who shared their lives behind the wall – and calls it a community of solidarity of the subdued.

Everyone consents that they are doing rather well now. They are not aware that they need to dig into the past, and have found very practical way of coping. They all tell that by doing their normal work, continuing to be professionals, they have worked themselves into lives they are content with. We could go into more detail with the different stories of coping. They are however of a similar kind. They cope through continuing to work, through seeking the company of friends or colleagues. Even the seemingly loneliest one among them mentions with affection a friend in America. Naturally, no one misses the dictatorship, but they are also eager to expand on and tell about the qualities of life which they experienced. One of them was rather proud to have come through the period without any glamour but with a fair amount of decency. Peter emphasises that he cannot and will not negate his own life.

## **Life as it Happens**

I ask myself whether hard conditions as in the former dictatorship of East Germany, following the dictatorship of Hitler from which some of them had childhood memories, have taught people to appreciate everyday life and grasp whatever opportunities that comes along. One of the students I conversed with during my interviews told me of a wonderful life in the isolated Kirchliche Sprachenkonvikt. There, students lived without the rights of normal students. But they also felt out of reach of the Stasi. They owned almost nothing, living very poorly with two sets of trousers and sweaters – but they were able to discuss profound texts of Augustine, Kant, Barth day and night. This does not, of course, foster the ability to

conquer the world, and to be versatile in the Western society, but perhaps to be able to appreciate present opportunities and fit into life as it is?

In talking with these different persons who all had stories of pressures to tell, I found striking similarities in a willing to find out the path ahead in unity with the life and opportunities which are present. They simply found their way, in work and communication. By human standards, there are no ways to establish the truth of what happened. No one gives us the option to do so. Peter thinks it is impossible to find the truth – and remarks that many of the things they experienced during the dictatorship are now so far away, that they seem like a dream, a driving cloud. Erich feels no need to do so, because he is content with life as it happened, including the unpleasant experiences. Otto has worked himself out of the frustration of being expelled and has no memory of doing harm to others. Thanks to support from colleagues, he was able to cope and still work after having been forced into retirement. I have heard similar stories from the others interviewed.

The persons I met shared their current story of what happened. This is of course not necessarily an account of what actually happened. But it is the account of how they now describe how they cope with their lives and live with their past. They belong to a generation that lived through the dictatorship from beginning to end. They do not say that they don't have any regrets. They all tell about lost opportunities and of frustrations and inhuman pressure. Neither do they say that they are proud of their way of coping. More humbly, they stick to their lives and acknowledge that they, in Neruda's words "admit to having been alive". They do not need or miss a thorough reconciliation, neither with their former enemies, nor with themselves.

## Reconsidering Roads to Reconciliation

I wonder whether this can be helpful in re-examining the very concept of reconciliation? Let me immediately limit the scope. The dictatorship of former East Germany was not as brutal as the Nazi regime, and is neither to be compared with the regime of terror in former South Africa. There were also very brutal incidents in East Germany, as some of the dissident artists can give testimony to. But admitting that there is such limited scope, I am still amazed that the need for retribution and reconciliation is so absent among my interviewees. I will tend to draw the conclusion that the way of coping which is communicated by these stories looks like reconciliation to me, but evidently without sacrifice.

The traditional story of reconciliation, which is coloured by the orders of the monastic movements who intentionally turned away from this world, prescribes a far more burdensome road to go. The story prescribes to return to the original point of failure, to investigate and reconstruct that failure, in order to sort things out. It may be that we are able to come sooner and better to reconciliation by finding moments of coping, and trying to find out how the person in fact managed to do so. Everyone can be surprised by him or herself being able to cope, because we do something that actually works. By reflecting upon what happened then, we are telling stories we live by. Thus we may be able to help ourselves and others to be better at coping. This may be one step in the direction of finding better and perhaps even simpler paths to reconciliation.