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## **“The Churches overtook politics”. The contribution of religious factors and faith-based initiatives to Polish-German reconciliation**

### **Introduction: from mutual non-recognition to the “miracle of reconciliation”**

More than half-century long process of reconciliation between Poland and Germany can be recognized as one of the most exceptional contemporary examples of the rebuilding of relations both socially and politically. The fact that the reconciliation process between “eternal enemies”, Poland and Germany, succeeded is considered in metaphysical categories a “miracle of reconciliation” (Żurek, 2015a: 24). While in the case of French-German reconciliation the idea of overcoming a difficult history of conflict was strongly supported by domestic and foreign political elites and transferred to the wider context of European integration, Polish-German reconciliation was greatly hindered by the political situation of the first decades following the World War II, in which new political contacts were practically impossible. Any signs of good will that may have occurred in that period of political and social stalemate were usually connected to the religious views and motivations of different religious and faith-based actors. Despite the fact that the memory of war trauma remained very much alive for Poles, and Germans long felt and remembered the loss of the “small fatherland”, “pioneers of change”, mostly motivated by religious convictions, slowly created a space for mutual dialogue many years before Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. The essence of this process was well summarized in 2015 in the Common Statement of the President of Poland Andrzej Duda and the President of Germany Joachim Gauck in the words “the Churches overtook politics” (Duda, Gauck, 2015).

This article aims to outline the contribution of the religious element as a significant factor in the process of Polish-German reconciliation, during which non-state actors were crucial players at its earliest stage, namely till the mid-1960s. The author proposes that in the case of the Polish-German reconciliation process the role played by civil society to a great extent was motivated by the religious convictions and faith-based engagement of the pioneers, who became bridge-builders in Polish-German relations not only independently or without the support of but usually against contemporary politi-

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cal elites. In this particular case, reconciliation, religiously rooted, was both deliberated and practically utilized with reference to its theological understanding.

### **Reconciliation and forgiveness: between religion and politics**

Reconciliation is undoubtedly a notion carrying moral connotations and it is hard to refer to it in a neutral, objective way. It is a complex multi-faceted concept characterized by its very individual, intimate nature (Andrieu, 2013). Perceived from the minimal perspective, reconciliation is defined as peaceful coexistence or the absence of war (Gardner Feldman, 2012b). In this case, the essence of reconciliation is rebuilding, or building from the very foundations, the minimal conditions for a political community while resigning from such far-reaching goals as achieving forgiveness or social solidarity (Verdeja, 2014). According to a more ambitious, maximal understanding reconciliation means the process of long-term peacebuilding between former enemies through the creation of bilateral institutions both at the governmental and societal level. The necessary elements for such reconciliation are friendship, trust, empathy and magnanimity, although not always forgiveness (Gardner Feldman, 2012b). Other typologies propose weak and strong (Hermann, 2004: 44), thin and thick (Crocker, 2000: 6), or functional and regenerative (Clark, 2012: 239-256) reconciliation. All of them describe a fundamental difference that can be summarized as “coexisting” versus “living together”.

Though many different social practices leading to the rebuilding of relations have been known and used for centuries, reconciliation itself was not an object of interest in the area of philosophy and political theory. While absent in philosophical, political and legal discourse since antiquity and not much focused on by such thinkers as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill or John Rawls, reconciliation has been present in the ancient religions starting with Judaism (Philpott, 2012: 5-7). As such, reconciliation has been of fundamental importance for religion-based ethics, and especially later for Christian ethics, shaping the Christian perspective both with reference to God-to-human relations as well as human-to-human relations.

The concept of reconciliation has been increasingly debated since the end of the World War II, with a significant rise in discussion since the 1990s. While rooted in theology, reconciliation has become one of the most important notions in discourse on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in domestic and international contexts, and also as concerning the problem of inclusion in democratic societies (Kymlicka, Bashir, 2008: 2). As reconciliation gains a wider collective context, it no longer concerns simply God-to-human and human-to-human relations but also community-to-community and nation-to-nation relations and is increasingly recognized in the public sphere. Linked to such notions as forgiveness, repentance and apology, reconciliation has extended outside a theological understanding, becoming an interdisciplinary concept and entering the sphere of politics.

While many aspects of reconciliation raise questions and disputes, one of the most controversial dimensions of reconciliation is the concept of forgiveness. The definition of forgiveness is equally difficult to agree upon. Most basically forgiveness can be described as foregoing as one's right to retributive justice in some way or to some degree (Wolterstorff, 2006: 90).

In considering the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness, the first question that arises is what conditions what. For the majority of authors, forgiveness is a condition leading to reconciliation, however the reverse relationship is also possible. Robert Roberts remarks: "[...] Even if reconciliation is neither necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness, we can still recognize that reconciliation is [...] the teleology of forgiveness" (Roberts, 1995: 290). All things being equal, reconciliation is the goal to which forgiveness points.

Forgiveness, similarly to reconciliation, is one of the "non-political" notions transferred from religious language to secular language. Two often quoted references in this regard are Hannah Arendt's claims that Jesus discovered "the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs" and that this discovery made by Jesus in a religious context and articulated in religious language "is not reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense" (Arendt, 1958: 238). Arendt's essential contribution to the discussion on the role of forgiveness in politics should be supplemented with a consideration about the contribution of other religions, particularly Judaism. The concept is present in the Scriptures before Jesus, i.e., in the Hebrew Bible. However, Jesus undoubtedly assigned "[...] a far more important place to forgiveness [...] than anyone before him and that his doing so was decisive in giving to forgiveness the prominent place in human thought that it has occupied ever since" (Wolterstorff, 2006: 88).

Both reconciliation and forgiveness target a transformation of relations at the individual and group level. In the Christian context, this transformability is one element in the religious sequence of confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation (Hermann, 2004: 45). Forgiveness, though present in Judaism and Islam, does not have the same significance it does in Christianity. Thus, as Tamar Hermann remarks, it would be unreasonable to expect that forgiveness would become an integral or necessary element of reconciliation in those cultural contexts. Therefore, with regard to those cultures there "[...] is also the case where both sides feel victimized and hence expect the other to repent, while not feeling obligated to do so themselves because of the harms inflicted on them" (Hermann, 2004: 45).

Forgiveness is considered to be intertwined with reconciliation primarily in the most "advanced" models of reconciliation, such as the one developed by Desmond Tutu. According to this approach, reconciliation means the rebuilding of social and personal relations based on repentance on the one hand and forgiveness on the other hand. This view most essentially refers to religious ethics and calls for limiting retributive justice in favour of restorative justice which focuses on the rebuilding of relations between vic-

tims and perpetrators as well as on the moral transformation of citizens rather than just on punishing the perpetrator (Verdeja, 2014).

Many authors state that although forgiveness is the perceived goal of reconciliation, it is only rarely achievable and also cannot be expected from the victims. According to critics, the main weaknesses of the theological understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness are the hotly debated problem of impunity (Van Antwerpen, 2008: 37), the illiberal character of both reconciliation and forgiveness (Philpott, 2012: 74-93) and most importantly, the pragmatism of this approach. When writing about the “defect” in Christian theology for studying reconciliation in politics Lily Gardner Feldman points to the limited utility of theologically based literature, which views the motives of reconciliation in essentially moral terms (Gardner Feldman, 2012: 3).

Whether such criticism is justifiable is a matter for discussion. While the moral basis is the natural point of reference for reconciliation, the theologically oriented perspective can be also viewed from a pragmatic point of view. Tutu discussing reconciliation clearly refers to both the moral and pragmatic motives of the process when speaking about the self-interest of those who consider the “reconciliation option” possible and view it as securing their living conditions and well-being in a “reconciled environment” (Vil-la-Vincencio, Tutu, 2009: ix). It seems, thus, that reconciliation is not possible if either the moral or pragmatic perspective is excluded.

The two dimensions of reconciliation are interests and empathy. Common, contemporary interests are an expression of the pragmatic approach, while the second dimension requires a development of sympathy and empathy that shared interests alone cannot generate (Phillips, 2000: 52). It is crucial that the history of victimhood is addressed so that the necessary process of moving from victimhood to healing of relations can occur (Montville, 1993: 112). Integral to this process is addressing painful questions concerning the past openly and honestly in order to provide a foundation for renewed relationships (Phillips, 2000: 52).

Yinan He, differentiating between shallow and deep reconciliation, argues that the key to realizing deep reconciliation is the harmonization of national memories between the parties involved. The memory divergence resulting from national mythmaking tends to harm the long-term prospects of reconciliation (He, 2009: 1). In contrast to a standard realist explanation of international relations concerned primarily with power, deep reconciliation “[...] has to be cemented not only by short-run security needs but also by sustainable mutual understanding and trust. Because the enduring memory of past trauma can fuel mutual grievances and mistrust, nations cannot avoid addressing historical memory when searching for a path to reconciliation” (He, 2009: 2). “Harmonious mutual feeling” is key to achieving this stage at a people-to-people level because it indicates that both nations, former enemies, harbour feelings of mutual closeness or even affection, but at the least of mutual empathy (He, 2009: 17-20).

The theological basis of reconciliation and forgiveness and its "non-political" nature, a point of criticism for some authors, signifies for others the valuable contribution of the religious approach, especially Christian ethics, in constructing the most efficient models of conflict resolution and transitional justice. However, cultural context which can be more or less suitable for successful reconciliation and forgiveness is very important. Another issue is Christianity's influence in shaping political orders. As Nicolas Wolterstorff states "[...] one of the long-term influences of Christianity in our politics has been the tempering of demands of retributive justice with forgiveness [...]" (Wolterstorff, 2006: 109). Though in Christianity the two views – of introducing mercy and forgiveness into politics and its opposite of leaving justice to the state – have always competed, according to this author the first standpoint has been more influential since "[...] over and over Christians in positions of political power or authority have yielded to their Christian impulse to forgive" (Wolterstorff, 2006: 109).

The exceptionality of the crimes committed in the 20th century requires an extraordinary political and moral reaction, one expressed in the language of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. Politicians reach for such language rooted in the religious spirit and take responsibility for the guilt of their nations (Śpiewak, 2011). Thus, as Karolina Wigura points out, in the postwar period declarations of political forgiveness and rhetoric connected with guilt became inherent elements of European politics – forgiveness became the strategy for conducting politics (Wigura, 2011: 15).

True, long-term reconciliation cannot be achieved on a political level if a transformation of whole societies does not occur. In this process civil society initiatives, building a true social and moral capital between adversaries plays an even more important role than inter-governmental diplomacy (Rotfeld, 2014: 7). In the case of Polish-German reconciliation, such transformation was practically unachievable after the World War II. The two narratives of victimhood faced against each another making any dialogue impossible.

### **Offender versus victim or victim versus victim: the perception of guilt in Polish-German relations after the World War II**

Poland, victim of both Hitler but also Stalin, was also one of the most terribly devastated countries of the World War II. The population was decreased by 1/5, and 38% of the nation's property was destroyed. Many Polish cities were more than 50% ruined, some, like Warsaw, almost completely (He, 2009: 47-48).

In the first years after the war, the religious actors who would play the role of bridge-builders in the decades to come were not yet ready to face a rebuilding of relations in the Christian spirit of forgiveness. In Poland, the Catholic Church, traditionally a major influence in the history of Polish society, often the guarantor of national survival and the institution to which most Poles belonged, faced an extremely difficult situation. Several

thousand clergy had died, hundreds of historical sacred objects were destroyed, and the new government directed by Moscow, though initially neutral towards the Church's activities, soon showed its true attitude. By September 1945, the Concordat of 1925 with the Holy See was broken (Kucharski, 2015).

Priests sent into the so-called Recovered Territories, i.e., lands previously belonging to Germany east of the Oder-Neisse line, during the almost complete exchange of populations decided by the Potsdam Agreement, faced a particularly problematic situation. Catholicism became the main element linking the new Polish settlers. By August 1945, five apostolic administrators for these lands had been appointed by Cardinal August Hlond. The fact that the church administration for these territories could only be temporary was a pretext for continuous attacks by the communist government on the Polish episcopate<sup>1</sup>.

The issue of the new administrative structure of the Catholic Church in the Oder-Neisse lands was also an object of criticism by the German Catholic Church. The Catholic Church in Germany "[...] considered the atrocities in Poland during the World War II the deed of an isolated group of National Socialists who had also victimized the German Catholics as group" (Frieberg, 2008: 45). and rarely discussed the problem of German responsibility in these territories. The German Catholic Church condemned the expulsion of Germans, perceived this as a great injustice, and also criticized the decision of Cardinal Hlond to institute temporary administrators in the Oder-Neisse areas, citing it an abuse of his office and an unethical decision. As Annike Frieberg points out "[...] in the Catholic realm the will to reconciliation was very limited" (Frieberg, 2008: 45).

In early 1945, Polish Catholic intellectuals found their voice in the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* and later also in the monthly *Znak*. Although these publications would significantly contribute to the reconciliation process with Germany in the coming decades, in the early postwar years many articles were very critical of Germany, reflecting both the attitudes of Poles and the rhetoric of the new communist government. They had no doubt that Germany should accept the new eastern border because this brought a "historical justice" to lands formerly inhabited by Slavic tribes and later "stolen" by the Germans. Immediately after the end of the war and before the Potsdam Conference, the *Znak* Community<sup>2</sup> expressed the idea that the Recovered Territories belonged to Poland historically (Miłek, 2012).

Rev. Jan Piwowarczyk, one of the founders and a crucial figure in the *Znak* Community after the World War II, had no doubt that all Germans without exception, should face the burden of responsibility for the atrocities committed during the war. Nation is

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<sup>1</sup> A new Polish Catholic administration in these disputed lands could not be formalized by Pope Pius XII due to the lack of finalized borders between Poland and Germany, so the agreements between Germany and Holy See from before 1939 remained in force.

<sup>2</sup> The *Znak* Community was a movement of Catholic intellectuals allowed to stand a representation in the Seym by the Communist government in 1957. *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Znak* are still published and represent the progressive wing of Polish Catholicism.

above all a moral unit because "[...] it works as a unit and all its actions are attributed to all its members as individuals" (Miłek, 2012). Referring to the sin of omission in the wide context of German attitudes and behaviours, he called for collective penance. In his opinion the cure for the collective German conscience and a recipe for peace would be Christian education. If Christianity could not educate a "new German" then nothing could (Miłek, 2012).

The issue of guilt was a key problem in Polish-German relations. There was a fundamental difference between Polish and German attitudes towards collective guilt. Poland expected a collective *mea culpa* from the Germans. The developing attitude that Hitler's crimes were separate from German crimes, while totally unacceptable and even unimaginable for Poles, was completely accepted by Germans with very few exceptions, among them some Christian voices<sup>3</sup>. This German "historical amnesia" was primarily fostered by the Adenauer government through the myth of "good Germans versus bad Germans". According to this view, the vast majority of Germans were the innocent victims of a small number of Nazi leaders (He, 2009: 57-59). In the early postwar period, many Germans forced to leave their homes in the now Polish territories perceived their situation as a crime committed on them by Poles. They saw themselves as victims and often compared their suffering to that experienced during the war by Poles, who, in their understanding, were no lesser offenders than Germans (Żurek, 2015b: 42).

In this period, any discussion concerning a resignation from the former German lands was seen in Germany as a betrayal of the fatherland (Abromeit, 2015: 23). This perception of victimhood was present among Germans for many years and to a certain degree was sustained by both political elites and churches themselves. Even in 1965, when the most important religious contributions initiated serious discussions in both Poland and Germany, the majority of Germans saw themselves as victims and perceived the loss of the eastern territories as absolutely wrong (Meckel, 2015: 103)<sup>4</sup>. The Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall further complicated this situation. The unregulated Polish-German border became a symbolic border between the two worlds that emerged after the World War II<sup>5</sup>.

### Message of Reconciliation in the era of Non-Reconciliation

Reconciliation between Poland and Germany had to mean a reconciling between two asymmetric neighbours burdened by an existential contradiction of interests (Borodziej, 2015: 57). Unlike the Franco-German reconciliation, it also had to mean a rebuilding of relations in the victim-victim perceived configuration of two opponents unable to build

<sup>3</sup> One such exception was the 1945 Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.

<sup>4</sup> Markus Meckel suggests that Richard von Weizsäcker played a crucial role in changing German perception about the problem of victimhood.

<sup>5</sup> Even though the border treaty was signed between Poland and East Germany in 1950, it was hoped both in the East and West that the divided Germany would someday be united again. For this reason, the border with Poland had special significance.

any platform of communication. After the World War II, the pioneers on both sides used “creative fantasy” and “determined courage” to find new ways to rebuild bridges (Żurek, 2015b: 24). The majority of them, both Protestant and Catholic religious activists, paid a personal cost for their efforts: “[...] They were often lonely, accused of betraying their country and ostracized by their compatriots. Not unusually they had to overcome resistance even in their Christian communities, too much soaked with resentments and too little with Gospel” (Żurek, 2015b: 24). The reconciliation process between Poland and Germany, especially at its earliest stage, would not have been possible without these deeply engaged actors, who did not cease in their attempts to create a space for dialogue between Germans and Poles despite their own personal suffering. Those bridge-builders, highly motivated personalities whose spiritual conviction stemmed from personal experiences and who made a collective effort at reconciliation, undertook a most difficult and risky task of the “harmonization of mutual feelings” (Baum, 1997: 139).

In contrast, Polish political discourse harnessed hatred towards Germany to persuade Poles that close links with Moscow were indispensable to protect Poland from the German threat. The Polish government cultivated all-encompassing fears, referencing German claims to the “eastern territories” as well as the role of Germany in the loss of Polish sovereignty at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany, the anti-Communist Adenauer government encouraged similar fears, calling Poland a satellite of the Soviet Union and referring to Germany’s borders from 1937 and the territories lost by Germany after the war as territories “under Polish administration”. At the same time, the need to integrate some seven to eight million displaced Germans was a major social objective for the postwar German government and competition for their political support significantly shaped the activities of all German political parties (Gardner Feldman, 2012a: 203).

The absence of political relations did not mean a lack of all relations (Gardner Feldman, 2012a: 203). According to Willy Brandt, a signatory of the border treaty between Poland and West Germany in 1970 and the father of Polish-German political reconciliation, social relations between the religious actors, predating any official political initiatives by at least a decade, were most important (Brandt, 1976: 182). While the majority of key events that fundamentally changed the direction of discourse on both sides occurred in the 1960s, some signs of peace, unknown to the wider public, happened much earlier, mainly on the German side. A tenuous dialogue was beginning, if only weakly.

As early as 1945, Polish Primate August Hlond declared a will to overcome mutual hostility: “We have forgiven much, very much. And once again we forgive everything. We renounce hatred. We do not look for revenge” (Żurek, 2015b: 46). That same year in October, the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt was issued by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland; EKD), where the “community of pain” and “solidarity of guilt” are mentioned although the concept of collective guilt is not explicitly stated (Hintz, Lukas, 2015: 6). The leaders of the EKD stated that Germans were responsible for the war and its accompanying events. The guilt of the Church

was discussed; it was stressed that the Church did not oppose National Socialism and Hitler's dictatorship. This view was not accepted by German public opinion. In 1950, when the Charter of the German Expellees was published German guilt and its consequent loss of the "German East" were not mentioned<sup>6</sup>.

In 1947, a group of young German Catholics, who had left Gdańsk after the borders changed, addressed their Polish peers with a message of reconciliation known as the Gemen Message: "Our faith in God's justice gives us hope that the day is approaching on which Poles and Germans [...] will meet in peace and friendship at the shore of the Baltic Sea. In this hope we greet You as brothers and sisters in the Lord" (Żurek 2015b: 49). That same year, two German Catholic journalists, Walter Dirks and Eugen Kogon, soon to be pioneers of Polish-German reconciliation, expressed the opinion that the thousand-year-history of German presence in the East was not a "closed chapter" and that Poland should receive territorial compassion in the West at the expense of Germany (Żurek, 2015b: 49-50).

The Protestant process of rethinking Germany's relationship with Poland and the border question is widely accepted to have begun with the 1954 Leipzig Church Council, during which Klaus von Bismarck, himself being an expellee from the Oder-Neisse territories, recognized the origins of the expulsion of Germans from former German territories as rooted in Germany's wartime activities (Gardner Feldman, 2012a: 203). Soon other dialogue initiatives followed, starting with the invitation by the Catholic Church in Germany to Polish bishops to attend the German Catholic Church Council of 1956 in Cologne and in 1958 in Berlin<sup>7</sup>. In the mid-1950s, with the Franco-German reconciliation well advanced, the German section of the Pax Christi movement became one of the actors engaged in Polish-German reconciliation. In 1954, activist Klara Faßbinder published an article in which she called for a passing on of that forgiveness granted to the Germans by the French further to the East, especially to Poland (Żurek, 2015b: 64). At this time, the Catholic organization Kirche im Not had started to assist Poland, particularly for the persecuted Church and its faithful, both morally and materially (Żurek, 2015b: 73-74).

The beginning of the reconciliation process on the Polish side dates from Gomułka's Thaw in October 1956, when the period of the Stalinization of Poland ended after Nikita Khrushchev's speech during the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There is no doubt that the role of bridge-builders belonged to journalists and intellectuals, especially those rooted in the lay Protestant and Catholic circles on both sides. The "reconciliation narrative" (Frieberg, 2008: 5) owed its development to such figures as Marion Countess Dönhoff, Hansjakob Stehle, Stanisław Stomma, Władysław

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<sup>6</sup> The document noted an exception to this belief, namely the attitude of the Confessing Church led by Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Polish bishops could not attend the councils, representatives of the Znak Community did visit Germany at the end of the 1950s for the first time.

Bartoszewski, Mieczysław Pszon, Carlo Schmidt as well as, later, members of the Bensberger Circle. Stanisław Stomma, representing Polish Catholic intellectuals gathered around the Znak Community and one of the architects of Polish-German reconciliation, was the first Pole to visit West Germany in 1957 (Stomma, 2003).

The activities of the media and religious activists often overlapped since the bridge-builders were often both journalists and engaged Christians and, as Annika Frieberg points out, used media strategies and publicity to accomplish their conciliatory goals. West German journalists and Polish Catholic intellectuals were among the first to address the existing problems between the two countries at a time when the states were unwilling or unable to do so (Frieberg, 2008: 14-20).

In 1958, the synod of the EKD established Aktion Zühnezeichen founded as a peace initiative specifically developed to confront the issue of German guilt and with the official goal of Polish-German reconciliation (Kerski, Kycia, Żurek, 2006: 230). Two years later, in 1960 Bishop Julius Döpfner addressed the issue of German responsibility for the war and the need for repentance. As the first German Catholic bishop he called for reconciliation between Poles and Germans and asked whether the peaceful coexistence of both nations is not more important than the border issue (Kucharski, 2009: 19).

### **Memoranda Era begins**

In the early 1960s, when the reconciliation process between Germany and France was largely established, Polish-German reconciliation was not yet a political issue. “While West Germany had sought and achieved a formal reconciliation with France, its western neighbor, reconciliation with Poland became a taboo subject in Germany. The government did not dare to touch it” (Baum, 1997: 130). At the same time, socio-cultural changes in Germany slowly increased the possibility for a more open policy towards Eastern Europe.

The cultural conflict of generations developing in the 1960s Germany, which also had a political dimension, became the context for wider change. Slowly a new civil identity emerged, one that critically estimated its settlement with the Nazi past. As a result, the issue of concrete guilt versus unclear, metaphysical guilt was raised in public debate. The German public increasingly confronted its Nazi heritage, fueled by a series of III Reich documents revealed in 1960, reviews from Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials between 1963 and 1965 (Lepp, 2015: 29). In this changing political climate, expellee politics encountered increasing, if still weak, criticism as “outdated”. As Claudia Lepp points out “[...] the 1960s were equally characterized by a growing denationalization and reviving nationalism. Federal constitutional patriotism emerged slowly along with national-conservative visions of identity” (Lepp, 2015: 31).

In this transforming cultural and social environment, “the era of memoranda”, referring especially to the efforts of the EKD to shape public opinion in an increasing-

ly democratic and pluralistic society, started. The Tübingen Memorandum, written in 1961 by leading German Protestant activists, should be seen as a precursor of the famous document issued by the EKD four years later, namely the Eastern Memorandum. The authors of the Tübingen Memorandum were eight respected representatives of the EKD<sup>8</sup>, many of them connected with the Protestant think-tank (Lepp, 2015: 33) Research Centre of the Scientific Evangelical Community (Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft; FEST) in Heidelberg, called for a shift in German thinking about the Polish-German border. They pointed out that the subject should no longer be a taboo and that the Oder-Neisse border should – after German reunification – become the eastern border of Germany. As explanation for formulating the memorandum they stated that “[...] both Christian and political communities do not exist as timeless but were entrusted to us and in the entire worldly entanglement and confusion they mean only as much as believers and citizens invest their time in them and take responsibility for them, as much as they invest their concern and commitment” (Greschat, 2010: 30).

After the memorandum was published, the authors were often victims of very harsh attacks and deep hatred from their opponents, but at the same time they were cheered by the fact that local pastors, acting in the spirit of the Tübingen Memorandum, tried to convince their parishioners, among them expellees, of the necessity of recognizing the Polish-German border (Greschat, 2010: 33). Karl Barth, a leading Protestant theologian, considered the Tübingen Memorandum one of the best texts “[...] presenting both the collective and individual views of Evangelicals in Germany concerning the situation in the world since 1945” (Greschat, 2010: 34). For the first time this difficult issue, brought up by a group of engaged intellectuals motivated by their religious views, made Polish-German relations a topic of wide public discussion and opened a space for the slow process of building mutual understanding.

While in the early 1960s Catholic Churches in Germany and Poland were not yet openly engaged in the Polish-German dialogue, some new initiatives could be perceived as signs of a slow transformation in mutual relations. In 1963, the Polish and German bishops, whose personal relations developed during the Second Vatican Council, made a joint appeal to Pope Paul VI concerning the beatification of the Franciscan, Father Maximilian Kolbe, martyred in the Auschwitz concentration camp (Schick, 2016). This appeal became the first common initiative not only in the postwar period but in the history of relations between the Polish and German Catholic Churches. Meanwhile the call for reconciliation between Poland and Germany was discussed in the German section of Pax Christi, where already in 1960, the idea of visiting Poland was proposed. While at first this was not envisioned as a trip of penance, after the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials the plan radically changed (Kerski, Kycia, Żurek, 2006: 15). In 1964, Pax Christi Germany organized a pilgrimage of penance to Auschwitz, the first organized visit of

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<sup>8</sup> This document is also known as the letter of eight professors.

a German Catholic group to Poland after 1939. In 1965, after difficulties with receiving permission to cross the Polish border one year earlier, Aktion Sühnezeichen organized bicycle pilgrimages to Auschwitz and Majdanek, the first ecumenical initiatives in the process of Polish-German reconciliation.

The next, historic contribution of the EKD to Polish-German reconciliation was the Eastern Memorandum published in 1965, described as a “prophecy” (Greschat, 2010: 29) and considered the most important and the best-known memorandum of the German Evangelical Church. By autumn 1965, this document was more widely discussed than the Tübingen Memorandum and consequently it contributed to a much greater extent to a change in the spiritual and political climate in West Germany as concerned relations with Poland and the issue of the Oder-Neisse line (Greschat, 2010: 35). The Memorandum addressed an issue previously taboo due to the fate of German expellees, drawing a distinction that was hard for German society to accept. It dared to mention that without a doubt Germans were the authors of the war and thus they themselves initiated the later development of events, but on the other side the rights of the civilians in East Prussia, Silesia and Pomerania were violated. This was effective because on the one hand it approached the issue of German fate with realism, and on the other hand with a biblically spiritual approach. Never again would the position of the Evangelical Church so significantly influence public opinion in Germany (Abromeit, 2015: 23-24).

Chapter five of the Eastern Memorandum, which deals with the future, stresses the crucial importance of the ethical dimension and the duty of Christians in the reconciliation process. According to this document, a constituting requirement of the process is the recognition of guilt by both sides, by Poles and Germans, from which relations between the two nations can then be organized in a new way. As a result, the concept of reconciliation and reconciliation itself would become inevitable elements of political action. Although the Eastern Memorandum did not formulate direct political recommendations, even with regard to the border issues, the EKD considered as its duty leading Germans, and especially Christians, to be willing to dialogue with neighbours in the East at the new level (Greschat, 2010: 37).

The discussion initiated by the Eastern Memorandum lasted for many months and was not limited only to the EKD. Again, as in the case of the Tübingen Memorandum, reactions varied from joyful approval to passionate contestation. The authors were even threatened with death. About one third of the voices were those of critics and about two thirds were of supporters – the party of supporters was growing both in political and Church circles. The ideas expressed in the Memorandum were discussed in parishes, Protestant educational institutions and universities, and by politicians. The younger generation of German Catholics, interested in the socio-political aspects of Christian faith, contributed significantly to this discussion. At the political level, the Eastern Memorandum and the discourse it spurred were supported by some SPD politicians, including Gerhard Schröder and Willy Brandt, and some CDU/CSU politicians, such

as Richard von Weizsäcker, and criticized by Konrad Adenauer, among others (Greschat, 2010: 37-38).

### **1965: We forgive and ask for forgiveness**

In 1965, Poles were not only ready to say „we forgive” but, first of all, to ask for forgiveness. The Message of the Polish Bishops to their German Brothers in Christ’s Pastoral Office<sup>9</sup>, drafted by the historical bridge-builder in Polish-German relations, “Polish Schuman”, Bishop Bolesław Kominek<sup>10</sup>, and sent on November 18, 1965, became the avant-garde and one of the milestones of reconciliation between Poland and Germany<sup>11</sup>. This message ending with the famous declaration “We forgive and ask for forgiveness” paved the way for political and social transformation on both sides of the border, as had earlier faith-based initiatives (Żurek 2015b).

The Message, which sounds ground-breaking even from the contemporary perspective (Kucharski, 2009: 24), was signed by 34 bishops and was one of 54 invitations to the celebration of the millennium of Poland’s Christianity sent to different episcopates at the end of the Second Vatican Council. However, the invitation addressed to the German bishops differed fundamentally from the rest. It was a deeply considered invitation to reconciliation, and very risky from a political point of view. The Polish bishops presented 1000 years of Christianity in Poland against a background of Polish-German relations, proposing a version of those relations totally different to the official communist image portrayed in history textbooks. The focus was not limited to conflict and the most tragic moments in those relations, such as the role of the Teutonic Order, the partition of Poland and the World War II. Rather, it emphasized the formative influence of German missionaries, artists, intellectuals and everyone that contributed to Polish culture and to the inclusion of Poland into European Christianitas. The Polish bishops also differed from the Communist government in their attitude to the Polish-German border issue, explaining the Polish point of view but also recognizing the suffering of German expellees forced to leave their homes. The Message enabled a common Polish-German reading of history (Krzemiński, 2017: 22), but expressed clearly two things as the minimum for initiating dialogue: recognition of the new, postwar Polish-German borders and expiation by the Germans for the atrocities of the war (Mutor, 2009: 15-16).

Kominek, a visionary and a realist at the same time, perceived the process of Polish-German reconciliation from three different perspectives that included Polish national interest, European universalism and the Gospel message (Mutor, 2015b: 311). He was

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<sup>9</sup> More on the meaning and the role of the Message and Bishop Kominek: (Kulska, 2017: 61-78).

<sup>10</sup> Bolesław Kominek was one of the most important figures in Polish history in the postwar period. The man of three cultures, Polish, German and Silesian, was able to transcend one-sided vision of Polish-German relations and recognize different perceptions of both sides of the conflict.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly while Polish historiography refers to the Message of Polish Bishops to German Bishops, in German historiography it is called the Exchange of Letters.

convinced that in order for reconciliation to be possible it was necessary to win the societies on both sides to an idea of reconciliation based on two basic elements: truth and expiation. Kominek understood that the process of Polish-German reconciliation would be long and difficult, but he was convinced that it was crucial to the interests of Poland to build Polish-German relations rather than Polish-Soviet relations. According to this concept, only together with Germany would Poland be able to become truly free and secure (Mutor, 2015a: 16). The Message was an important element of his long-term plan to weaken Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe and to push Poland closer to the West. He was convinced that Polish hated Russians more than Germans and that it was necessary to reduce the Communist government campaign aimed at increasing fear of Germans. To advance this aim, he believed that convincing German society to strive for the confirmation of the eastern border would be a geopolitical alternative to securing the border through a Soviet military guarantee (Mutor, 2015b: 315).

The Message is considered to be the first independent initiative in the area of foreign policy in the postwar period after formation of the Soviet bloc that introduced new patterns in the Polish political culture (Kerski, Kycia, Żurek, 2006: 8). The reaction to this initiative in the initial weeks and months after its issue placed the Polish Catholic Church and Kominek himself in a very difficult situation. The price that had to be paid for the reconciliation efforts was very high. The argument that the bishops wanted to lead Poland out of the Soviet bloc and showed their anti-national face by turning towards German revisionists were the foundation of a propaganda campaign initiated in early December 1966, the biggest in the history of Communist Poland. The Communist government hoped to discredit the Catholic hierarchs and win in their confrontation with the Church especially on the eve of the Millennium of Christianity (Kucharski, 2009: 30).

In answer to this propaganda campaign, the bishops undertook a six-month educational campaign to explain the initiative undertaken by the Church. The whole structure and authority of the Catholic Church in Poland was mobilized in this *de facto* confrontation over the Church's role in society versus the Communist government. Ultimately the Communist propaganda proved to be counterproductive. Polish society declared itself on the side of the Church and reconciliation. On May 3, 1966, when during the Millennium Mass in the spiritual capital of Poland, Częstochowa, Cardinal Stanisław Wyszyński asked: "Do we forgive?", the gathered crowds answered: "Yes, we forgive" (Kucharski, 2009: 30).

While appreciative of the Polish initiative, the German bishops did not confirm the Oder-Neisse border (Żurek, 2015a: 121-122). The close association of the Catholic Church in Germany with Adenauer's government did not leave much space for discussion (Meckel, 2015: 102). As a result, in March 1968, the historic Bensberger Memorandum, signed by 160 German intellectuals, among them Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, was issued. The Bensberger Memorandum criticized the distanced attitude of the German Catholic Church to the Message of the Polish Bishops of 1965

and aimed at a broad acceptance of the Polish gesture. The document also precisely explained the role of religious motivations of those engaged in the process of reconciliation and the purpose of their engagement: "Christians are called not to last patiently among historical processes but to interfere with those processes. To introduce peace the creative fantasy and determined courage of many (people) is needed: Christians in the first row" (Żurek, 2015b: 23).

Even though the atmosphere of mutual relation has improved significantly<sup>12</sup> and the reconciliation process was to be transferred into political level in the very near future, the initiators of the Bensberger Memorandum still had to pay price for their efforts. The opposition towards their initiative expressed in the form of the aggressive campaign centered around the organizations of the expelled ones. The signatories of the Memorandum were called "leftists", "leftists-theologians", "traitors" and "communist pigs" (Lipscher, Pięciak, 2015). But in general, the reactions to the Memorandum were positive. The new political reality was coming.

Two years later, after much heated discussion, the new German government, headed by Chancellor Willy Brandt, followed the path paved by the religious and faith-based bridge-builders. In 1970, the Polish-German border treaty was signed and later ratified in Germany in 1972.

### **Conclusions: Reconciliation as a constant challenge**

Polish-German reconciliation is one of the most extraordinary processes of transformation of relations in contemporary history. Two countries with a painful history of conflict and hatred, the most tragic stage being the German occupation of Poland during the World War II and Hitler's plan to exterminate the Polish nation, resulting in millions of victims as well as the later expulsion of millions of Germans from postwar Poland, had to cover a long and difficult road to "re-humanize" the enemy, overcome mutual hostility and transform relations into the present state of, while not easy and unproblematic, mutual recognition and appreciation. This process would not be possible if the "bridge builders", religious and religiously motivated actors, did not take on the burden of both individual and social transformation of the conflicted societies to build peace at all costs (Frieberg, 2019).

One of the most renowned Polish scholars in the area of Polish-German relations, Anna Wolff-Powęska, summarizes the role of religious and faith-based contribution to Polish-German reconciliation as follows: "[...] Where politics turned out to be helpless, the first steps towards reconciliation were initiated by ordinary people. They drew the motivation for their activities from the power of their Christian faith. [...] Without the foundation of understanding of a small group of people based on hope, there wouldn't

<sup>12</sup> While in 1964 only 20% of Germans were very ready to recognize postwar Polish-German border, in 1967 these were already over 50% of the respondents.

be Polish-German rapprochement in the political sense” (Wolff-Powęska, 2011: 497). The author also stresses the necessity for developing “smart memory” of the past as the element that is not imposed by any institutions or foreign policy, but which starts at the individual level with listening and understanding of the other side. In this regard, the function of memory is crucial: why do we remember? There is no good or bad memory. There are only good or bad reasons for bringing it back (Wolff-Powęska, 2011: 510).

Though the heritage of the process of Polish-German reconciliation is a living reality of the contemporary relations between both countries, the preservation of the achievements of this process constitutes a constant challenge. Reconciliation is never over and can experience crises and setbacks. This process of healing the past is also never totally irreversible. Since the past is “probably never an altogether closed” memory of the past, being a selective and fluctuating process (Rousoux, 2004: 160-165) can be easily instrumentalized.

This “danger of reversal” became the reason for the Catholic Church in Poland to raise the call on the issue of Polish-German relations to react this way to the new, “anti-reconciliation” narrative of Polish-German relations developed by the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PIS) government after 2015. On September 8, 2017, the Appeal of the Group for Contacts with the Conference of the Episcopate of Germany was published. Five leading Polish bishops clearly and decidedly expressed their opinion about the deteriorating atmosphere in relations between both countries pointing out that the reconciliation attained thanks to the enormous efforts on both sides of the border is the historical achievement that can be easily lost. They underlined the meaning of the groundbreaking “we forgive and ask for forgiveness” over 50 years ago and emphasized that Polish-German reconciliation has served as a pattern for many countries in the world and is a constant obligation.

The bishops stressed in their appeal that forgiveness, fundamental in Christian ethics and constituting the condition for reconciliation, “[...] is not an opportunistic decision dependent on conditions but an irreversible act of compassion, which does not deny justice but complements it” (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, 2017). They recalled that the “capital of good” in mutual relations that was collected thanks rather to the ordinary citizens than politicians cannot be wasted; it must be preserved through wise diplomacy and not spoiled by evoking negative social emotions on any side. The bishops also expressed hope that those responsible for Poland and international relations would consider the reconciliation already achieved and build upon its capital (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, 2017).

Over last few decades, reconciliation and forgiveness have become newly emergent, “radical” concepts that have been increasingly discussed in the sphere of global politics. Perceived as unsuitable and unacceptable to opponents as “soft”, religiously rooted concepts, at the same time they are regarded as the potentially effective alternative against the “unrealistic” realist approach (Bole, Christiansen, Hennemeyer, 2004: 2)

by their proponents. The Polish-German "miracle of reconciliation" proves that common future maybe built in the place of divided past. In this process, engaged citizens are needed though they themselves do not need much. What they need is a smart, collective-good-oriented approach on the side of politicians willing to bridge the divides rather than to create them.

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**Abstract:** More than half-century long process of reconciliation between Poland and Germany can be recognized as one the most exceptional contemporary examples of the rebuilding of relations both socially and politically. The fact that the reconciliation process between "eternal enemies", Poland and Germany, succeeded is considered in metaphysical categories a 'miracle of reconciliation'. The essence of this process was well summarized in 2015 in the Common Statement of the President of Poland Andrzej Duda and the President of Germany Joachim Gauck in the words "the Churches overtook politics".

This article aims to outline the contribution of the religious element as a significant factor in the process of Polish-German reconciliation, during which non-state actors were crucial players at its earliest stage, namely till the mid-1960s. The author proposes that in the case of the Polish-German

reconciliation process the role played by civil society to a great extent was motivated by the religious convictions and faith-based engagement of the pioneers, who became bridge-builders in Polish-German relations not only independently or without the support of, but usually against contemporary political elites. In this particular case, reconciliation, religiously rooted, was both deliberated and practically utilized with reference to its theological understanding.

**Keywords:** reconciliation, forgiveness, guilt, Polish-German relations, civil society

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