

Europe – peace in our time? Reconciliation as mission

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Colin Ride reflects on the future for Europe and Europe's churches, in light of the present and the past.

The war

2005 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War. We might say that since then Europe has been at peace but has not been without conflict. Fighting may have stopped but we are not reconciled. Conflict has had a nasty habit of breaking out like a sore place on the skin, like a boil needing to be lanced but which has been allowed to fester and erupt. Peace may be interpreted as the absence of war, but for peace to mean reconciliation, harmony, unity there is still a long, long way to go. Let's not delude ourselves that there has been sixty years of peace.

Whilst the Second World War was fought in many countries across the world, Europe provided both the cause and main focus of war. When National Socialism and Hitler's dictatorship gained power in Germany, it did so with its appeal to nationalism built on the back of a sense of humiliation

coming out of the Treaty of Versailles.¹ The Nazi call to Germanic identity and unity, together with the development of the idea of a strong leader, all resonated with many. The population all too easily absorbed the propaganda which encouraged hatred to minorities, particularly the Jews but others as well, like gypsies, Slavs and people with disabilities. The few who had insight into these shameful developments and who voiced opposition were imprisoned. The German Christians, supporters of Hitler and who gained control of much of the Church were able to marginalise the Confessing Christians, signatories of the Barmen Declaration,² many of whom were imprisoned, deported or killed.

The Nazis claimed territorial domination (a Greater Germany) and wanted total power over all other races, in particular those who were alleged to be inferior and barely human like Slavs

and Russians. It took six years of bitter conflict, with millions of military and civilian deaths, in battle and in the torture, deprivation, hunger and death of concentration camps, before the tide was turned.

...and since

The war ended with much of Europe in a state of near collapse with high unemployment, fatigue, and poverty. The Marshall Plan,³ from 1947 onwards, helped with post-war economic reconstruction and redevelopment. Nations of western Europe, particularly with the development of NATO,⁴ hoped that peace and the growth of democracy and its associated values of respect for individuals, freedom of thought and religious belief, would lead to a brighter future, a better tomorrow.

The outcome, though, was the Cold War. As one conflict ended, another form was just around the corner. The Cold War epitomised a clash of ideologies between the Western powers who were promoters of capitalism and democracy, and the USSR and its satellite states – some more willing to comply than others – working for the spread of Communism. This was powerfully symbolised in 1961 with the building of the Berlin Wall, lasting until 1989 when Communism began its

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spectacular European collapse. This period was just another form of war, a never-ending conflict of ideas, of power struggles, of threats, of new ways of trying to capture people's hearts and minds. The two economic and political systems fought out a new form of domination. It is argued that a third world war was prevented by the threat of the nuclear weapons held by each side. Yet during this time regional conflicts, unconnected with these macro relationships, developed – in Northern Ireland between the terrorist organisations of both Protestant and Roman Catholic communities⁵ (between which were no natural boundaries), in Spain where ETA⁶ was fighting for a separate Basque state. Spain and Portugal also experienced their own dictators and accompanying suffering.

At the end of Communism, and two years after the official ending of the 'Cold War', in 1991-92, came the break up of Yugoslavia and further war in the Balkans.⁷ There was intense hatred of 'the other', with folk memory providing the motivation, and the development

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of extreme nationalism based on religious and cultural identity, all with very complex histories going back hundreds of years. ‘Ethnic cleansing’ became a household phrase. Hatred, bitterness, division were the hallmarks of this conflict with deliberate and systematic attempts to annihilate one another’s community or ethnic group. Only military intervention in the region brought an ending to the fighting – but not the ending of bitter division. There is still a real potential for further conflict in Kosovo.

Within this context the European Union⁸ has been developing. With it have come hopes of peace and prosperity, a community of shared values and human rights, and the acceptance of democratic forms of government as the way for countries to be governed and to behave towards each other, and to be reconciled with each other. The EU, of course, has its critics, particularly in Britain. But despite the many political, economic and social problems its members face, it does offer a serious model of governance, even the governance of

conflict. Within its boundaries, there is still considerable prejudice, for instance against Roma people, but generally the rule of law holds sway and countries relate to each other across a table rather than on a battlefield. Jaw-jaw is better than war-war. Also, across the whole of Europe and Eurasia countries meet together in the much lesser known and less structured Council of Europe. Yet in spite of all these developments Europe now faces what is referred to as the ‘War on Terror’!

Called to witness

This is the changing context into which the churches of Europe are called to witness to the reconciling love of God, and to serve despite declining in size, when viewed numerically in terms of worshipping congregations, and influence, particularly in the Protestant countries of western and northern Europe. The cultural influences of Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy are still strong but the number of regular worshippers is generally much lower than in past decades.

The serious need for Europe to be reconciled with its past as well as the present gives the churches clear opportunities for mission. In order to do so churches need to be bold and passionate and have a vision of God's kingdom of justice and God's rule of peace and unity for all humankind. They need to face outward and not inward. Their focus needs to be on the development of partnerships with any who wish to work for peace and reconciliation. Churches must be willing to cross the boundaries of race and ethnic origin, culture and faith if Europe is to become a more harmonious place, a continent more at peace with itself. There is no one great macro project that will achieve this. It is not a task that has a single beginning, middle and an end, but there are numerous opportunities both pan-European and within local communities that can help bring reconciliation about.

A number of organisations have been quietly but effectively working on this theme for years, like the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights in Osijek, Croatia; the Corrymeela Community in Ireland; the Cross of Nails Centres;⁹ and more recently the Abraham Programme in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. These are four examples where, in areas of deep-seated local conflicts, effective

peace and reconciliation programmes have been developed not only to challenge prejudice, bitterness and hatred that so engulfs their communities, but also to create opportunities for reconciliation. They offer alternative models and visions of life. They have demonstrated what is possible when people of goodwill join together for the common good, people who have a vision of peace and reconciliation and are willing to put themselves on the line to bring it about. They have all had to cross ethnic and religious divides. For Corrymeela, comprising Christians of all denominations, it has required challenging sectarianism and working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland as well as worldwide, for the Abraham Programme people have been called to relate across the divide of faith of people who hold Abraham as their common ancestor – Christian, Muslim and Jew. As Europe increasingly becomes a multi-faith community, the inter faith dialogue is of mounting significance. Understanding and respect are key values in reconciling activity. In Osijek, the priority is the building of civil society based on a culture of peace.

There is a need for churches to work in both macro and micro organisations, some that traverse the continent and



Remembering the evil of Auschwitz.

others that work solely in their locality. Yet they need to be connected. Churches need to work in both. The Conference of European Churches brings together 125 churches from Protestant and Orthodox traditions. Whilst both are Christian they arrive at this interface from extremely different perspectives – from the post-enlightenment and post-modern (even post-Christian) West across to post-communist and non-enlightenment Orthodox East. This is a far too simplistic and stereotypical a description of these diverse faith traditions but it serves to illustrate the huge differences in perspectives even across the churches of Europe.

CEC tries to help bridge this divide by offering churches opportunities for dialogue with each other and with others, both Christian (e.g. Roman Catholic) and non-Christian (e.g. Muslim). The development and acceptance of the *Charta Oecumenica*¹⁰ is helping with this process of inter-church dialogue. These are more than theological niceties but practical

developments that challenge churches to overcome their ancient prejudices and history.

The healing of memories and the struggle for justice: reconciling practice

The development of the projects within the South-East Europe Ecumenical Partnership are further examples of the commitment to peace and reconciliation that a pan-European organisation like the Conference of European Churches can help bring about. In 2003 CEC was able to re-start the 'hub' on 'Peace and Reconciliation' in collaboration with the principal players in the Balkans. Working with the Abraham Programme, the project *A place for others in our faith and life* has begun.¹¹ The first part, theological

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work, is complete. The second part gathers together concrete examples of ‘co-habitation’ among religious communities. The second project, the development of training in non-violence is happening in Bulgaria, Bosnia, Serbia and Albania. Now it is due to begin in Macedonia.

Europe is a place of long memories. These memories provide the substance of much of the conflict and hatred that is endemic in some parts. Memories need to be healed if progress is to be made. Some memories stretch back hundreds of years and have fed the prejudices of one generation to the next without ever being challenged. They need to be reformed to see neighbours as friends and not as strangers and aliens, a threat to their existence. From the more recent history in the Balkans we know it does not take too long for determined and vicious people to break largely harmonious and multi-ethnic communities and turn them into places of hate and bloodshed where nationalism and ethnic cleansing become the predominant values.

As well as being 60 years since the ending of the Second World War, it is 60 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. The murder of six million Jews in the many Nazi death camps should never be forgotten. It has left a massive scar on Europe’s face. The constant work of listening to each other, of sharing extremely painful experience, of accepting that one’s tradition or race might have contributed to the pain, needs serious facilitation. This has been brought into focus in the recent Churches Commission on Inter Faith Relations initiative to enable a small group of British Christians to engage and converse with Jewish people in Poland. A shared programme of discovery and experience, including a visit to Auschwitz, provided the context for this Christian-Jewish engagement.¹²

Community development and capacity building is critical in peace and reconciliation work. Through the Adelheid Project, the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women has developed an exchange and

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training programme for women of eastern and southern Europe. Women are enabled to develop a range of skills in leadership, faith and ecumenical development, computer and new technology, project management, interpersonal and relationship skills. The programme is also concerned with training trainers so the women can pass on what they have learnt to others in their communities. The European Contact Group,¹³ another ecumenical organisation with members in twenty-six countries, enables its members to engage with working life questions in both urban and rural communities. These capacity-building activities help develop confidence and contribute to reconciliation work as mutual trust evolves through personal relationships and open, honest debate.

Without intervention the cycle of bitterness and violence will not be broken. Estrangement will deepen. There is a story from Kosovo, the sentiment of which is sadly repeated in many places. During the Balkan war in the former Yugoslavia, a television

reporter asked a Serbian soldier ‘Why are you fighting this war?’ He answered, ‘Because of what they did to us in Kosovo.’ He was referring to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389!¹⁴ Present conflict is fuelled by memory of the past. Reconciliation means entering the place of pain, finding ways of understanding the past, and beginning to repair broken relationships. To find creative ways of helping warring groups to talk to each other so they hear each others’ stories of pain and suffering requires huge physical, emotional and spiritual commitment. Sometimes safe places need to be created where bridge-building can happen. Groups will need help in looking for ways of breaking free from the past and then to look forward in hope.

There are many initiatives that need to be encouraged. The more contact people have with each other the more likely it will be that unity develops and helps form a bulwark against enduring prejudice. Important tools are international youth exchange programmes through which young people can learn tolerance, respect and

solidarity and can also discover the beauty of difference and diversity in both life and faith. The young are encouraged to move out of their safety zones to encounter and have fun with young people from other cultures and language groups. These developments are significantly supported through the European Youth Programme,¹⁵ in recognition of the role young people can play in the development of a peaceful and harmonious European society. Church youth groups and church leadership teams should be giving central attention to the development of such contacts and partnerships rather than simply see them as peripheral and only to be taken up if there is time and extra finance available. Opportunities for the sharing of personal experience, of the growth in faith and worship, of new understandings of God, and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ need to be pursued. Even more if this can be shared across the faith traditions, in dialogical exchange. All this adds to the work of reconciliation and needs to be a key mission priority for churches.

Reconciliation through personal encounter

In 1974, a former British soldier shared in a service of Holy Communion at a Methodist Church in South Wales. The

celebrants were Welsh and German. This was the culmination of a Welsh-German youth exchange programme organised between the Methodist Churches in Dinas Powis, Glamorgan and West Berlin which I had been privileged to organise. After the worship he said to me that this was the first time he had met and spoken to a German since the end of the Second World War. He said that for him this was an act of reconciliation for which he was extremely grateful. Personal encounter is essential if reconciliation is to have a chance. Through encounter we all need to bring our confession, not so much 'Father forgive them' but 'Father forgive us.'¹⁶ We are all guilty of hurting others and of spoiling God's image in humankind.

Reconciliation as a goal of mission is of critical importance in Europe. Sixty years after the ending of the Second World War and the liberation of Auschwitz would be a good time to make a new commitment.

The ministry of reconciliation calls churches to work in partnership with other faith communities and civil society as well as with each other. To join this struggle will be a witness to the belief in the power of the gospel to unite and create harmony among the very diverse cultures of Europe. This is the vision that the Churches need, and if it can be grasped it may provide the

motivation and energy for a renewed commitment to make Europe a place

where people live in peace and at one with their neighbours.

Notes:

¹Treaty of Versailles (1919), Readers' Digest Library of Modern Knowledge, London, Readers' Digest Association Ltd 1978, p.627.

²Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, London, Collins 1977, p.297-8.

³Philip Thody, *Europe Since 1945*, London, Routledge 2000, p10, p19 and p30.

⁴North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, *ibid* p10.

⁵Irish Republican Army *et al*, Ulster Volunteer Force *et al*.

⁶ETA, group fighting for Basque independence from both Spain and France.

⁷Mark Mazower *The Balkans*, London, Phoenix Press 2000, p.128ff.

⁸Philip Thody, *op. cit.* p.161.

⁹The Community of the Cross of Nails is part of the International Centre for Reconciliation, a ministry of Coventry Cathedral. Across the world, crosses of nails are presented to churches, institutions, and individuals working for peace, reconciliation and the end of hatred.

¹⁰*Charta Oecumenica – Guidelines for Growing Co-operation among the Churches in Europe*. It was signed in April 2001 by the Presidents of the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conference (Roman Catholic).

¹¹www.abraham.ba/mission

¹²Poland 2004, An ecumenical study visit of British Christians to Jewish sites in Poland, 5th – 15th July 2004, led by the Most Reverend Dr Barry Morgan, Anglican Archbishop of Wales.

¹³European Contact Group, *Annual Report 2003*, p.2 and 3.

¹⁴International Ministry, *Methodology – the Triad of Reconciliation*, www.coventrycathedral.org/international

¹⁵European Youth Programme, a programme of the European Union.

¹⁶Words scrawled by Provost Richard Howard, Coventry Cathedral, on the smoke-blackened wall of the sanctuary of the ruined Cathedral following the bombing by the German Luftwaffe on 14th November, 1940. See www.coventrycathedral.org/international