
Geneviève, J 2000 – Beyond Impunity: An Ecumenical Approach to Truth, Justice and Reconciliation

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It is a daring undertaking to present “An Ecumenical Approach to Truth, Justice and Reconciliation”, and all this on 60 pages (not counting the prefaces by Konrad Raiser and Dwaïn Epps)! This is what the Director of the WCC’s Cluster on Relations, *Geneviève Jacques*, promises to be doing in her booklet *Beyond Impunity* (World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva, 2000). At least, that is the promise of the subtitle. And this undertaking is a stark failure.

The book has four chapters. The first deals with the question: “What is impunity?”, the second looks at “Truth and Memory” (15ff), the third glances at “Justice and Forgiveness” (34ff), and the fourth says a few things about “The Prospect of Reconciliation” (53ff).

To begin with the disastrous legacy of impunity makes much sense; for this is the way in which those in power have tried to get away with their murders and abductions, torture and similarly heinous crimes. Although “impunidad” became something of a “culture” in Latin America, the phenomenon is a global and “age-old problem” (p 5). As Jacques very rightly sums up: “... the conscience of humankind on the threshold of the third millennium remains haunted by mass and systemic crimes which have escaped judgment ...” (p 6). Jacques goes on to say that, due to the advocacy work of international agencies, including the World Council of Churches, humankind is slowly moving towards the “elaboration of enforceable international instruments to eradicate the most extreme forms of impunity” (p 7), as evidenced in the Statute of Rome for an International Court.

It goes without saying that a great deal of work needs to be done in order to deepen world-wide awareness, and that the churches are called to become active agents in this work.

The “cultures of impunity” are disastrous because they destroy the people’s need for truth which is the basis for trust and trustworthy relationships. That is the basic argument in Jacques’s second chapter. Wherever massive violations of human rights cannot be exposed, whenever the memories of persons, families and peoples remain poisoned by the tormenting question: “¿Dónde están?” (“Where are they?”), wherever the healing processes of grieving are suspended because the whereabouts of the loved ones continue to be unknown – in all these cases the past is a source of sadness, anger, revolt and meaninglessness. And such a contaminated past bodes ill for the future.

Jacques refers to the truth commissions which have worked, with very varying success, in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Haiti, Chad, Ethiopia, the former German Democratic Republic, Hungary, the Philippines, Uganda, South Africa, El Salvador and Guatemala (cf p 22). But she rightly states that “except for South Africa and Guatemala, such official reports have left in their wake increased bitterness and frustration. Facts have been revealed only in part; crimes and victims are named, but not the criminals...” (p 23). South Africa and Guatemala offer “two positive lessons for posterity” (p 23) because they also

speak about the perpetrators and thus offer more inclusive ways to restore memories and to promote a more integrative and constructive way ahead.

In this context Jacques mentions that the churches have the responsibility to contribute towards truth and memory at the levels of theological and catechetical teaching, of pastoral activity and of public witness (cf p 30). No self-critical word is said, however, about the churches' need to look into their own traumatized and divided past and to work for the healing of their own memories.

The third chapters attempts to deal with the difficult questions related to justice, reconciliation, forgiveness and repentance. The argument moves far too freely and, therefore, superficially from legal and political observations to theological and philosophical references. The main flaw in my opinion is that Jacques starts from the narrow concept of justice as punitive justice. This perpetrator-orientation makes it difficult for her to develop more fully what she calls "restorative justice". She does not even attempt to spell out the various problems related to the need for reparations (cf p 44). Consequently, the theological argument about the nature of reconciliation and forgiveness remains shallow. On the one hand Jacques insists that "Forgiveness is not a legal category" (p 45); on the other she emphasizes that "forgiveness is part of the struggle for justice" (p 47), but how this is to be understood remains unclear. It is thus not surprising that her reflections on "the churches as agents of reconciliation" (p 49ff) are for too general, imprecise and, therefore, disappointing.

In her fourth and final chapter Jacques notes that the churches' commitment to reconciliation ministries requires a "vision of a reconciled human community" (p 54). This vision encompasses four elements: "love (in its dimensions of mercy and forgiveness), truth, righteousness (justice) and peace" (p 54). But how these themes are related to each other, how they have to be applied to the political, legal and social levels and what they have to say about the churches' own task of reconciling their divisions and distortions – all this remains fuzzy.

Jacques tries to address herself to far too many issues and, therefore, jumps from one observation to the next. It is not surprising that important aspects remain unmentioned. To cite but a few examples: No reference is made to the work of Brian Frost, beginning with his *The Politics of Peace* (1991), although he was the first to start the recent forgiveness research. The groundbreaking book of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996) does not appear anywhere. The studies of Joseph Montville, Mark Gopin and others on the importance of memories for peace-building are left out entirely. The attempts in Germany to come to terms with the legacy of the Stasi activities in the former German Democratic Republic receive inadequate attention. This is also true for the exemplary work of the Truth and Reconciliation work of the Roman Catholic Church in Guatemala.

On the last page Jacques states: "The whole of the ecumenical community is called to engage in fresh theological thinking and courageous and innovative action to respond to the needs of our time." (p 60.) In this she is right, but her own contribution to this task is sadly inappropriate.

