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**Not Only about “Agents”!...
Old and new decisions without theological vision?
Aspects related to exploring the past, remembrance and reconciliation
in the Reformed Church of Hungary**

Abstract.

Approximately twenty-five years after the social and political changes of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, the question remains for the Hungarian Reformed Church: what are the possible consequences of not attaching sufficient importance to the problems of responsibility for history and political/moral sin? Obviously, the question cannot be simplified to cover only the agent issue, i.e. judging the open or undercover collaboration between ministers, church leaders and other clerical staff and the oppressive political power. On the one hand, this study underlines why such a collaboration with the totalitarian regime can be considered theologically absurd, i.e. a sin, even if some psychological or political arguments might serve as an explanation. On the other hand, it argues that sin and moral conflict of the self cannot only take place in situations where people driven by fear or suppressed by or giving in to blackmailing or driven by selfish interests collaborated with the regime, or were silent when they should have protested, or where they rejected solidarity with those persecuted, or failed to criticise the political system or the political compromises of the church. We also have to talk about historical sins, where the church relinquished a critical analysis of the historical and political reality of society and failed to have or obscured any clear theological vision. This lack of theological information and the narrow perception of social reality ultimately left only two alternatives for the church: it was either enthusiastic about the laudable, “great objectives” of the given political regime, or made moral/theological and political “allowances”, supposedly to avoid presumably worse solutions. Well, the failure to interpret reality from a spiritual/theological perspective, the striking of seemingly harmless compromises as well as the lack of solidarity with the members of the strong community and the church led people to become tangled up in the jungle of the conspiracy sins of collaboration. This does not lessen the weight of individual responsibility, but such a systemic approach to the problem and the social/theological analysis of past sins could explore the theological/ethical interpretative framework that helps to judge individual choices. Thereafter, the study wishes to offer some examples of how the encounter with the past can unfold “in the

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space of the church”. The ethical dimensions of exploring the past, establishing a culture of sympathy, making remembrance and penitence possible without constraints and driven by free will, furthermore dealing with the process of conciliation in its complexity, taking legal, political and religious/moral aspects into account, could promote the co-habitation of generations, and be determined by a joint search for the historical truth as well as demand for a reconciled community rather than harming others and causing further injuries.

Keywords: coping with the past, reconciliation, collective responsibility, church and society.

1. Introduction

Not long after the political and economic transition, the researcher presented a report from 1962 to a retired minister. He was the subject of the report from his years in service. The content of the report was addressed to the national security service, its brief summary is as follows: the young man is “*more incompetent than his father was*”, “*pathetically weak*”, he has to be prevented by all means from replacing his father in the congregation, “*such reactionary persons have to be weeded out of the church, if they were not advised to leave theology during their studies*”. Ironically enough, for some decades the informer and the subject of his reports were members of the same working community of retired ministers. The victim, after suddenly receiving the report, put a copy on the table of the informer the next time they met, without saying a word. They never met again. The former agent stayed away from the meetings of the community, and passed away one year later. The former target talks about the situation today as follows: I also accuse myself, I should not have stopped halfway “*it remains forever the secret of my fellow minister why he did not want to talk to me after this anymore, but my mistake is that I left this question unsettled between us, to be resolved by the last judgement.*”²

The second example is an excerpt from correspondence, but not between ministers: “*Dear János, if you still allow me to address you like this, the news is true and the reason why I chose to give an “explanation” in writing is that I would not be able to talk to you face-to-face. The human voice is alive, letters are a form of abstraction with no soul. First, I was fit for being blackmailed \[...], in the beginning they told me to give a summary of two-three encounters only \[...], later this became the other subject of the blackmailing. The fact I had already done it. Maybe I should have died at that time with some heroic gesture, but my shame*

² PÉTER ZÁSZKALICZKY: Csináljunk rendet magunknak, különben más csinál, in: Fabiny Tibor (szerk.): *Hálóba kerítve. Konferencia az evangélikus lelkészek és az állambiztonság kapcsolatáról*, Budapest, Luther Kiadó – Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, 2011, 97–103.

would have survived me even then, ... I could tell you a lot of things about this horror, which made me a depressed alcoholic, my world in me is completely disorganised ... What should be my last word? I don't think any words suit here. Sooner or later everything will leave me, what remains is only disgust and hatred.

The response: “Dear Sanyi, do not talk about our friendship in the past tense... You are still my friend. The victim is you... The sinner was the political system which turned a human being, you, into a cleaning rag, and the perpetrator is the national security service \[...] but I can remain a human person only if I stand by you, assuring you of my sympathy and friendship. Sanyi, I am not a prison guard blindly obeying other's moral commands, but I also reject obedience, if people around me want to simplify the world and divide people into the dirty and the clean.” He goes on: “the tendency to morally judge people without moral content had started, but you and I must do something to “restore the moral integrity of civil society”. (The excerpt is from the correspondence between Sándor Tar, writer, and János Kenedi, historian and art critic, then later, from 2007, head of the committee processing and evaluating the legality of documents collected by the national security service – this open correspondence generated public debate).³

These two quotations provide an opportunity to weigh up two factors. *Firstly*, three simple but fundamental questions of remembrance and the attitude towards the past cannot be left unanswered even now, 25 years after the fall of the dictatorial political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. *Timothy Garton Ash*, a British historian, raises these three questions: (1) is it *necessary* at all to process this history? (2) if so, *when* should it be done, i.e. when do we have the necessary historical distance, perspective and knowledge that are prerequisites for a culture of remembrance and reaching conclusions on the past but which do not divide society any further; finally (3) *how* should the past and the recent past be explored? European nations and Christian churches over past decades followed various routes and various methodologies with varying degrees of success. Screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, compensation, fact-finding work and the establishing of fora for historical reconciliation indicate or demonstrate the impossibility of avoiding the difficult historical heritage or the recognised moral obligation. At the same time, the repeated outbreak of socio-political debate concerning the interpretation of the culture of remembrance reminds us that this process is far from over, and exerts a greater influence on contemporary societal life than we thought 25 years ago. However, over recent years we have been enriched with the experience that the mass publication, revelation and “marketing” of human sin and moral discord – obviously Europe-wide – is not automatically accompanied by more truth, the creation of a reconciled community as well as therapeutic and curative remembrance.

³ Levélváltás besúgó és besúgott közt. Tar Sándor és Kenedi János levele, in: *Élet és Irodalom* 43 (1999/45), URL: <http://www.es.hu/old/9945/publi.htm> (2014.10.10.)

Secondly, our church is also concerned in this process and the question arises of how a church can shape relations with the past? The *Synod of the Reformed Church of Hungary* took a decision in 2009 on exploring and learning about the period 1948–1990 in the Reformed Church⁴, with the purpose of making it possible for the community of the church “to learn about the internal workings of the suppressive regime, to establish in a neutral and objective manner the various levels of involvement of ministers and non-ministers in the national security service, to renew the moral life of our Church through the living practice of penitence/forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, and to be able to serve credibly in the 21st century.”⁵ This justification concurs with the position of one of the working parties of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe on behalf of its members: this past “is imprinted into the collective memory of the peoples in Central and Eastern Europe as the period of suppression, the period of desire for more justice and a better world, or as the history of pain felt over irreplaceable losses.”⁶ Because we can remember something when the pain does not go away. If this is so, then learning about the past and encountering the burdens of the past are unavoidable moral obligations for the church to be able to provide credible services in the 21st century. To this end, it is necessary to explore the historical truth, to learn about the working mechanisms of the suppressive regime, to establish the various levels of involvement,⁷ and at the same time to establish a culture of appeasement and reconciliation.⁸

After this, let us see what is considered sin in the church and what is the solution for this? To make the question more precise: is it certain that only various forms of collaboration with the suppressive forces of a totalitarian political regime qualify as sin, and if so, why? And what are the old and new sins that have burdened our communities in the past and present, and challenge the credibility of our services?

⁴ Zsinati határozat a Magyarországi Református Egyházban tervezett múltfeltárás céljáról (Zs-9/2009.03.11.), in: *A XIII. Zsinat 2009. november 19-20. ülésének határozatai*, URL: http://www.reformatus.hu/data/documents/2012/03/19/Zsinati_hat%C3%A1rozatM%C3%BAlt.doc (23 October, 2014)

⁵ Idem.

⁶ See *Erinnern um zu versöhnen*. Erfahrung im Umgang mit schmerzlichen Erfahrungen. Eine Erklärung der Regionalgruppe Süd-Ost-Europa der GEKE von 17. April 2008. www.leuenberg.net. (26 June, 2009)

⁷ Zsinati határozat (2009), op.cit.

⁸ See: FAZAKAS S.: Erinnerungskultur und die Frage nach der historischen Schuld, in: Gabriel, I.–Bystricky, C. (Hg.): *Kommunismus im Rückblick. Ökumenische Perspektiven aus Ost und West* (1989–2009), Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 2010, 231–254; FAZAKAS S.: Justification and Reconciliation: Considerations from the Churches in Eastern and Central Europe, in: J. P. Burgess–M. Weinrich (Ed.): *What Is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, 231–247.

2. Agent question! – Sin question?

Given that public life in the church is concerned primarily with the so-called “agent question” and the collaboration of former church leaders with the political power, let us take a closer look at this issue, though we have to say in advance that in the history of the church and churches, the interpretation of sin shows a degree of simplification from time to time; accordingly, for example, in the 1950s in the Roman Catholic Church’s struggle against the so-called “new morale” the focus switched to sexual sins and polemics;⁹ the paedophile scandals of recent decades all over the world again identified the sins of the church with only sexual sins; after the fall of totalitarian regimes it seemed a simple solution to identify sin, again in a simplified way, with the activity of undercover agents, collaborators. There is grain of truth in this, but as we will see, “sin in the church” or “sin of the church” refer to a much more complex reality).

How do we judge the fact that ministers and other clerical staff had permanent connections with the national security services and other organs of the single partisan-state led by the Communist Party? If we keep repeating moral sentences and want to judge one another, we are not only far from the biblical and theological interpretation of the nature of sin, but it also indicates that we have understood nothing of the logic of the regime, which squeezed the church for decades. The essence of the logic was that the physically and spiritually, morally and financially extremely vulnerable human being had to live in a regime, which in line with the nature of totalitarian regimes *wanted to prevail permanently, had promised a universal good, and wanted to dominate all areas of life*. Obviously, there were some people for whom this regime guaranteed promotion, social security and predictable living standards. So for these people, the changes that took place 25 years ago did not come with benefits, and those who did not suffer from the sanctions violating human rights and dignity are nostalgic about the good old times. But there were some, and not just a few, who lived the lives of intellectuals, thinking individuals – and let me include ministers in this group – who did not want to accept either the permanent nature or the reality of this social regime, who at the same time were forced to live with the absurdity of the system, deprived of all hope. Accepting the system would have been synonymous with strengthening it, and the idea of the system being able to be reformed or improved would also have meant the acceptance of the legitimacy of the regime and the approval of its sustained existence. The fact that many were forced to do this out of necessity or in the hope of individual benefits, indicates the paradoxical nature of the “peaceful coexistence”, which after a certain period of time and through decades determined the perspectives of people, their mentality and techniques of survival. Indirectly, this setup was further reinforced by the attitude of the West, or gestures such as the Pope

⁹ Ld. HONECKER, Martin: Einführung in die Theologische Ethik, Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1990, 7–8.

receiving János Kádár in the Vatican, the British Queen or the US President receiving the unrepresentable Ceaușescu, and Helmut Schmidt German Chancellor receiving, even if with a sombre expression on his face, Erich Honecker. This peaceful coexistence after a certain period of time resulted in *pragmatic thinking, which tended to relativize individual responsibility*: a self-acquittal technique, which learnt to reject the expression of individual thought and taking individual responsibility, and forgave and accepted silence and compromise under the pretext of necessity and with reference to the power of circumstances. This way the individual situation and room for manoeuvre of the individual, as Péter Nádas puts it in one of his essays, became an interim territory: on the one hand, they counted on the individual's loyalty for his home country, this is what they hauled him up for, and this was the basis for organising agents, informers; on the other hand, the person concerned (a national, religious or intellectual minority or having a status endangered in some other way) retreated into his own "imaginary", made-up homeland,¹⁰ into his reality made up of spiritual/intellectual building blocks; this is where he started from in the morning and where he arrived in the evening. But in between the two there was a field of landmines: there was no knowing when and under whose feet the landmine would explode, who would be sent a political joke, a seductive woman, some financial benefit with the promise of social advancement, an error, a sin dug up from his past and used as the basis for blackmail ... Everybody played their own role – and every role was a lie to some extent because the whole system was a lie. And yet, we cannot say that anybody can mount their high horse, or climb the peaks of abstract morality because as long as I was not in the situation that I wish to judge, my judgement cannot be credible. There are no two identical attitudes in such situations: there were people who were able to preserve their integrity even under the pressure of blackmail or attempts to recruit them, others thought of their homes, wives and children, there were some who seemed to be pigeons even for this task, or who came to realise their naivety later, and others gave tips to the recruiters and keepers as to how to deal with the third person ... The list of examples goes on.

But let us take a theological approach. First and foremost, we have to note that in the communist states the situation of the churches was determined by the fact that the state made all the efforts it could to integrate, "gleichschalt" into the political system the religious communities as well as other segments of society, at least until the point these communities ceased to exist as a result of education and raising awareness in the spirit of historical materialism. But until then, the primary goal was to weaken the church or possibly make it function in accordance with the objectives of the regime. Why was this necessary? The response is simple: the state considered churches as its ideological enemies,

¹⁰ NÁDAS Péter: Szegény, szegény Sascha Andersonunk. In: *Esszék*, Pécs, Jelenkor Kiadó, 1995, 150–185, 174.

organisations that might open the doors to Western ideology or could be hotbeds of societal reaction. Churches could not change this social system. The question of power seemed to have been settled for a long time. The task was the following rather than anything else: how is it possible to ensure relatively free space for manoeuvre for the individual, to ensure the relative freedom of congregational services and the functioning of the church in an adverse environment? Finding the *modus vivendi* and being able to communicate with the representatives of the power were unavoidable and essential tasks for individual congregational leaders, ministers and for the leadership of the institutional church covering the whole of society and the country. We do not wish to dispute responsibility and good intentions, but the collaboration with such power even bearing certain realities in mind is *theologically absurd*. Politically or psychologically it is possible to explain why the collaboration, the undercover activity, the relinquishing of opposition was a must or why people chose the lesser evil (i.e. why people became collaborators rather than resisting heroes or martyrs?). But why is it untenable from a theological perspective?

The reason is that the only way freedom in the church can be achieved is through preaching the Gospel and following it. Preaching and listening to the Gospel has consequences in three areas: (1) firstly, in terms of discovering the freedom of conscience (as Luther put it with the words of Paul: my conscience is captive to the Word of God); a person with such an inner freedom will be free to hear the other person’s problems, he can take them seriously, turn to fellow human beings and will be free for solidarity, i.e. to serve. (2) Secondly – and my personal experience confirms this – due to the power of the Gospel the church could perhaps have been the last “ideology-free” periphery where free thinking, life free from political propaganda, self-education and culture were possible. (3) And thirdly, if based on the interpretation of evangelic freedom the believer or the theologian seemingly identified “grains of truth” of socialism in the current social system, naively or honestly, and made efforts to identify signs of human behaviour and a conduct able to be reformed, this could not have been done without also pinpointing actual distortions. (We cannot rule out such things existing, even if the Christian-Marxist dialogue in our country was conducted as a result of political expectation and political order rather than driven by the scientific need to mediate between theological and philosophical ideas.)

All three were areas which the totalitarian state cannot tolerate if it wants to possess man in its entirety. On the part of the totalitarian state, the objective was not to recognise the islands of freedom or reinforce or support them; on the contrary, to eliminate them. Therefore, this was at stake with regard to the recruitment or negotiations with church leaders, nothing else! Hence the representatives of the church unintentionally achieved an objective which was contrary to their intentions, even if they managed to reach varying sizes of compromises as positive results. In church and around church, freedom is born through obedience, obeying the Word of God, and every human effort to ensure spaces of freedom either in a totalitarian regime or in a democracy is possible only

through compromises and allowances, which as forms of human behaviour have an inherent risk of error and are completely dependent on the mercy and grace of God.

More specifically:

- ministers who were willing to collaborate with the suppressive political organisation, either under pressure or voluntarily, provided information and contributed to the functioning of the system not only felt a moral split with themselves because gentlemen (supposedly) do not do such things; the reason for the split was that as Christians they *subjected themselves to an alien power* instead of or in addition to the Lord, or as ministers *did not keep their own ministerial oath*, or as church leaders and theologians were engaged in silencing any inner religious theological criticism of the then political regime (on the basis of false historical/theological premises¹¹).
- in the case of the official church leadership, the situation is even more peculiar: the collaboration with the suppressive power, even if it was under compulsion, qualifies as “position-specific”¹² sin, because in terms of its substance it happened behind the scenes, behind closed doors and as such they did not render themselves accountable to the community of the church, or they were accountable only on the surface, which was quasi-accountability. This behaviour is completely against the essence of the Reformed Church and is not compatible with a self-definition of the church according to which the Reformed Church is a loving and serving community; what might have been the question with regard to the agreement with the state which affected the whole church, but which the leadership of the church was not obliged to report to the committee calling and putting them in charge (within the meaning of the synod – elder principle)?
- last but not least, such and similar conduct (if they come to light at all later on) are not observed in the context of penitence and hope of forgiveness, but “were explained” as unavoidable compromises requiring ex-post theological justification, legitimacy or in an even worse case, glorification.

Thus where the political power exerts influence to such an extent and in such a manner on the internal life of the church, there the *testimony of the church* and its *testimony of the truth* are harmed, as Wolf Krötke¹³ put it in the context of relations between the

¹¹ See VÁLYI NAGY Ervin: Isten vagy történelem, in: *Minden idők peremén. Válogatott írások* (ed. Vályi-Nagy Ágnes), Basel/Budapest, EPMSZ, 43–57.

¹² See HERMS, Eilert: Schuld in der Geschichte, in: ZThK 85 (1988), 349–370. FAZAKAS Sándor: Az egyház nevében? A reprezentáció történelmi változásai és jelenkori kérdései, in: Fazakas, S.–Ferencz, Á. (ed.): „Krisztusért járva követségben...” *Teológia–Igebírdetés–Egyházkormányzás*. Tanulmánykötet a 60 éves Bölcskei Gusztáv születésnapjára (Acta Theologica Debrecinensis 3), Debrecen, DRHE, 2012, 445–472.

¹³ KRÖTKE, Wolf: Das beschädigte Wahrheitszeugnis der Kirche. Zu den Folgen der Einflussnahme des MfS auf die Kirchen, in: Vollnhals, C. (Hg.): *Die Kirchenpolitik von SED und Staatssicherheit*, Berlin, Links Verlag, 1996, 405–414, 414.

former East-German Lutheran Church and the state, but his observations apply to every analogous situation.

3. Once more about the question, but in a systemic context

Remembering the past, therefore, is remembering the history of sin. It is easy to understand and see that the credibility of the church and the authority of a position or office still largely depend on the credibility of the person holding that office or position. After the political and economic changes in Central and Eastern Europe, the demand for screening and exploring sins of the recent past was articulated to make it possible for key positions, offices and ranks in public life to regain their prestige, so that the person holding a prestigious post should be appointed on the basis of his expertise, credibility and aptitude rather than due to his network and political loyalty. On the other hand, publicity, transparency, the democratic culture of debates and the commitment to values should characterise public life instead of interest-driven relations inherited from the past, or instead of reproducing and reactivating the old elite.¹⁴ Yet if this did not happen so, and such anomalies of public life are manifest on a daily basis, it indicates that “we do indeed live in societies in transition”.¹⁵ That is, 25 years after the changes, “the structural, personal and mentality-related features” of the outdated political, social system¹⁶, these not exactly elegant ways of forming the elite as well as asserting and enforcing interests, have survived. Obviously, this demand to bid farewell to the cumbersome heritage and acquisition of the new culture of cohabitation is articulated not only with respect to the branches of power and functional subsystems ensuring the operation of a society (for example, courts, education, culture and science, health care, etc.), but it is also articulated

¹⁴ See MEIER, Christian: *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns. Vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit*, Bonn 2010, 91–97.

¹⁵ Nowadays, there is a specific field of study within social sciences, called “transitology”, designed to research this, to identify the correlations between working mechanisms and authoritarian regimes. See RUPNIK, Jaques: 1989 als Weltereignis. Die grosse Transformation in Europa und die Globalisierung, in: *Letter International* 104, Berlin 2014, 15–21; PICKEL, Gert: Nostalgie oder Problembewusstsein? Demokratisierungshindernisse aus der Bewältigung der Vergangenheit in Osteuropa, in: S. Schmidt/ G. Pickel/S. Pickel (Hg.): *Amnesie, Amnestie oder Aufarbeitung? Zum Umgang mit autoritären Vergangenheiten und Menschenrechtsverletzungen*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag, 2009, 129–158; TÖKES L. Rudolf: “Transitology”: Global Dreams and Post-Communist Realities, in: *Central Europe Review* 2 (2000/10), URL: <http://www.ce-review.org/00/10/tokes10.html> (2014.06.26.)

¹⁶ See KÖNIG, Helmut: Von der Diktatur zur Demokratie, in: König, H. – Kohlstruck, M. – Wöll, A. (Hg.): *Vergangenheitsbewältigung am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Leviathan–Sonderheft 18/1998), Opladen/Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998, 371–392, 375.

with respect to religious organisations, historical churches and the institutional systems thereof.

At this point, it will be obvious that the “sin in the church” or the “sin of the church” is not only historical, and most of all not simply a personal question. Of course it has historical and personal aspects as well: in a certain period of the church’s history, in specific historical, social and political situations, religious figures representing the church were not able to preserve their moral integrity, but this phenomenon has further *clerical-organisational* and *theological* aspects, as well.

The *clerical* organisations were not able to remain unaffected by the impacts of social organisation in the New Age. The *organisational* structures and forms of religious communities have always been affected by contextual impacts and in the closed society of a totalitarian political system, the challenge is even more daunting: shall we insist on our own clerical constitutional traditions and/or meet the expectations of the environment? Though the demand for the church’s external framework to be in harmony with its own internal confessional / *theological* foundations can be articulated, in practice, no church is as independent from the context as it wants to be or as it judges itself retrospectively. In an authoritarian society, the leadership structures, the structures of governance within the clerical organisation even adapt to the environmental pattern (due to the limited external freedom and the control exercised by the power). However, judging this tendency is not only the result of a sense of real policy and pragmatism; within Protestantism we can find *theological tropes* which did not drive the representatives and bodies of clerical leadership to a critical separation but rather made them adapt and adjust. This is because the recognition that the clerical administration – according to the summary of Herbert Ehnes – has a direct role to play in the mission of the church and that the organisational structures do not have a “redemptive, but a serving function” led to the conclusion that the organisational form of the church cannot remain unchanged and be valid forever.¹⁷ From a historical perspective, this argument proved to be right to counterbalance the process of the clerical organisation becoming self-centred and autotelic, but in a less friendly or adverse political-social context it became the supporter or supporting pillar of *pragmatic adjustment*. Besides the traditional explanation of the 5th Commandment of the Decalogue, the obligation to respect parents and the worldly superiority accompanied by a *genealogical – theological interpretation* (i.e. that the current world order, and the fate and mission of peoples and nations, is driven by the will of God), and together with the *philosophical thought of the metaphysical validity of the current system*, prevented Protestantism from being critical of the objective external order for a long time.¹⁸ If it was critical, then it was in the spirit of establishing an alliance with opposition political forces or political

¹⁷ EHNES, Herbert: Art. Kirchenverwaltung/Kirchenbehörden, in: TRE 19 (1990), 165–171, 166.

¹⁸ See HONECKER, Martin: Individuelle Schuld und kollektive Verantwortung: Können Kollektive sündigen? In: ZThK 90 (1993). 213–230, 225.

forces (as shown by the intertwining between Hungarian Protestantism and national liberalism¹⁹) or based on certain social-critical theological recognitions, which sooner or later were silenced either politically, or were doomed to failure within the church. The representatives of such ideas were considered “lonely prophets” and these recognitions were not consequently implemented within the church.²⁰

All this led to the church giving up the opportunity to make a thorough and profound analysis of its own situation and social environment to search for ways to make progress. This is why the only remaining alternative for the church was either to be *enthusiastic* about the great and true objectives of the incumbent power, or make *moral-political and theological allowances*. It is interesting to observe that different versions of this clerical enthusiasm are present in every significant historical moment, turning point, period or crisis: 100 years ago the contemporary clerical press enthusiastically praises waging war²¹ as it does the great and true objectives of the socialist regime and people’s democracy, or later the shaping of the dialogue between Christians and Marxists and their exemplary collaboration for peace.²² The moral/theological allowances were born in order to avoid a supposedly bad or worse solution: for example, in the Upper House of the Hungarian Parliament the high-ranking clergy voted in favour of the first two *numerus clausus* under the pressure of the argument that this was the solution to prevent a presumably realistic and threatening situation that was even worse, namely the radical right gaining the upper hand or to avoid German occupation.²³ However, these respectable gentlemen were also the children of those times and even if they rejected racism based on ethnic origin, they shared the practice of *numerus clausus* applied to the Jews in order to maintain “the economic and social balance”.²⁴ But all this revealed that the exegesis and interpretation of Romans 11 was far behind the theological recognitions we know today

¹⁹ See FAZAKAS Sándor: Protestantizmus és/vagy liberalizmus, in: *Confessio* 29 (2005/1), 55–62.

²⁰ Twentieth century theological history provides sufficient evidence to prove it, and within Hungarian Protestantism the proof is the discrediting and forcing into the background of representatives of official theology and alternative theological thinking considered as “non-progressive”.

²¹ See A kohóban, in: *Protestáns Szemle* 1914, 9–10. 521–528.

²² See „Amit az evangélium ígér, azt váltsa valóra a demokrácia”. Részlet a református püspökök közös pásztorleveléből, in: *Élet és Jövő* 1945. augusztus 18. 1.

²³ See BRAHAM, Randolph L.: *A magyar Holocaust*, I. kötet, Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 1988, 122; K. FARKAS Claudia: Zsidótörvények – egy egyházi ember szemével, in: Fazakas Csaba (szerk): *Fiatal egyháztörténészek írásai*, Miskolc, Miskolci Egyetem BTK, 1999, URL: <http://mek.niif.hu/02000/02082/html/index.htm#tart> (2014. október 25.); *Felsőházi napló* (1935–1939) III, 308.

²⁴ See Ravasz László: *Emlékezéseim*. Budapest, A Református Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya, 1992, 213; *Felsőházi Napló* (1939–1945) II, 163. 288–295; K. FARKAS Claudia: Zsidótörvények, i.m.; TÖDT, Heinz Eduard: Die Novemberverschöbung 1938 und der deutsche Protestantismus. Ideologische und theologische Voraussetzungen für die Hinnahme des Pogroms, in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 2 (1989), 14–37, 27.

(theological recognitions on the lasting selection of Israel started to take shape in these times, for example, see Barth and Bonhoeffer).

These examples indicate that the involvement of the church in historical sins is not simply a question of the unsuitability or psychological discord of individuals. Obviously to some extent it is, but beyond this and primarily it is a crisis of *theological orientation* and all dubious individual and joint decisions can be traced back to this very point. This obliges us to draw two further conclusions: on the one hand, the personification of sins, i.e. reducing them to one “prominent sinner” and putting them in a pillory cannot be the solution, nor the generalisation that we are all sinners. This can only be an instrument to reject responsibility. On the other hand, the sin affecting the church belongs to the reality of clerical life not only in the past but in the present as well: who can say that only good decisions are made in the current socio-economic and political context? Or who can say that our current decisions do not or cannot have victims, they cannot negatively affect anybody and the decisions we made yesterday and today do not need the forgiving mercy of God?

So we can see that the sins of the past cannot only be identified where people collaborated with the suppressive regime driven by fear or giving in to pressure or blackmail, or voluntarily and hoping for a reward, or where people did not choose to criticise it or were silent when they should have made their voices heard and did not stand by those persecuted; the sins of the past can also be identified in situations where we did not judge the compromises of the church with the world, where we failed to analyse the reality around the church, and the interpretation of the “here and now” message or requirement of the Bible. Christian individuals and the church are not only responsible for ensuring their deeds are in line with moral norms, they are responsible for the *interpretations of reality*, of the Bible, yes, for its theology and for the consequences thereof.

Individual and joint decisions taken yesterday and today have one feature in common. Namely, the *individuals are not able to control and direct the consequences of their decisions to the desired extent*. Human beings not only suffer from history, they also shape history to a large extent too. Their decisions or the failure to take decisions, actions or omissions will enter into an *interactive* relation with further decisions, actions and omissions will acquire their *own dynamics*, and generate further expectations, communication content and, as a consequence, structures. Sociology with a systemic approach²⁵ and church theory²⁶ might be of help to us when trying to understand this. These are partner sciences of theology. In modern times, human beings are not able to exert control over

²⁵ See LUHMANN, Niklas: *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1977. Vö. LUHMANN, Niklas: Die Organisierbarkeit von Religion und Kirche, in: Wössner, J. (Hg.): *Religion im Umbruch. Soziologische Beiträge zur Situation von Religion und Kirche in der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart, Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1972. 245–285.

²⁶ See HERMS, Eilert: *Kirche für die Welt*, Tübingen, Mohr & Siebeck, 1995.

social, economic and political correlations to the extent they would like to, what is more, they have to give up the illusion that only they maintain and control the social system. We have to admit that beyond a certain point, human beings are not able to either direct or control this process. And the more complex the social system is in which the human beings find themselves in a responsible position, the more global impacts a position-specific (or managerial) decision will have, and the more autonomous the dynamics of such a decision's outcome will be, which will not be consistent with the original intention. Instead, it will live its own life based on communication processes and expectations of individual or groups, it will create its own structure, institutions and organisations within the context of politics, the economy and religion.²⁷ Totalitarian regimes in the 20th century proved that social sin cannot simply be considered the sum total of individual sins. There is more to it than that! *“Viciousness takes on its own dynamics against the person generating it, in an alarming way it starts to live its own life, impact on people as an objective power, generate new sins and create a devastating vicious circle of minor causes and fatal consequences.”*²⁸ The phenomenon and the result, in our context, can be demonstrated as follows: *“Maybe the operational plan of the secret police included small actions, which seemed insignificant and were carried out by a large number of people; however, the end result was suitable for destroying a whole life. But who is the perpetrator to be blamed for the sinful act, and who should be held accountable? Here our former moral ideas on human sin and responsibility fall apart and criminal law reaches its own limits”*.²⁹

4. Searching for the solution: reconciliation – but how?

The systemic relations of historical sins, which go beyond the level of individuals, cannot lead to the false and self-comforting position that it is not personal sins and omissions that are the real tragedy (saying we were only small drops in the ocean), but the system itself was poisoned to its very heart. Obviously a system predetermines the room for manoeuvre of individuals, but individual responsibility cannot be relativized with reference to circumstances. Instead, we have to bear in mind and make it clear that personal sins, decisions and omissions do count and they carry a heavy weight. Why? Because due to the systemic necessities mentioned (action and interaction, effect and counter-effect) the

²⁷ See Ralf DZIEWAS: *Die Sünde der Menschen und die Sündhaftigkeit sozialer Systeme. Überlegungen zu den Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten theologischer Rede von der Sünde aus sozialtheologischer Perspektive*, Münster, Lit Verlag, 1995.

²⁸ Michael BEINTKER: *Die Eigendynamik der Sünde in sozialen Systemen*. Manuskript, 3.

²⁹ Klaus TANNER: Amnestie Fragezeichen, in: ZEE 39 (1995/3), 170–173, 171.

decisions and actions of the individual become part of the so-called *social identity* or *collective self-interpretation*. They integrate into our community life, determine relations, reflexes, prejudices and opinions, they lead to judgement or moral considerations, survival techniques and a sort of pragmatism conforming to the incumbent system. We do not remember its origin, but we suffer in it; at the same time we feel that we are unable to break out from under its spell. In the meantime, we err again and again: if knowledge of the past (or at least some knowledge of the past, from secret service dossiers for example) is acquired by people or groups of people, for example the new leadership or elite, but they do not know how to deal with this new knowledge and new information, there will inevitably be new historical and social sin relations. Information is power – and knowing another person's assumed or real sin is also a source of power, in the possession of which a human individual can play God over others. This does not mean that there is no need to explore truth and doing justice (*iustitia civilis*), but truth cannot be turned into an idol which wants to show the naked truth by all means. Therefore in terms of coping and living with the burdens of the past, I think the solution is to be found in the following direction (without wanting to give prescriptions, there is no perfect solution, which is proved by the various reconciliation models tried all over the world).

4.1. *Sin*, individual and historical sin, can and should be talked about only in concrete terms! But this is subject to profound and professional fact-finding work. The analysis is the analysis of the specific situation and the political/social, moral, cultural and theological aspects constituting the full context. The objective is not an advance on God's judging forum, be it the needs of society, the church or the media looking for some sensation. Though we know that only a fragment of the written documentation, dossiers and sources are available, we cannot give up the idea of the profound and scientific exploration of the system's *modus operandi*. Not because history might repeat itself, which we should prevent (this is a popular argument in political remembrance culture). No, according to Christian time theory, history does not repeat itself... But there might be situations in which human beings – for lack of information and being unable to analyse and see through the situation and with the disorientated vision of reality (and theological vision) – will not be able to reject decisions, which destructively or seriously influence the fate of a fellow human being, or the life of the community and cohabitation, directly or indirectly. Therefore, we should learn to assess, at least approximately, the potential consequences of our decisions and actions – knowledge about the past might help here. Otherwise, what remains is the unquestioning and unconditional enthusiasm for doubtful causes or a series of unprincipled allowances and compromises...

4.2. Implementing the *ethical dimensions* of remembrance and the exploration of the past. Remembrance is a moral obligation. This has now become a cliché. It is true, but why? Forgetting used to be a guarantee for peaceful progress. But after two World Wars in the 20th century, two dictatorial regimes and individual and community traumas of dictated peace, giving up the opportunity to remember would not only expose victims

to injustice for the second time, it would also re-qualify injustice as justice and deprivation of rights as possessing rights³⁰ ... French Protestant philosopher, Paul Ricœur draws attention in his last great work to the fact that (the work of) *remembrance* is most closely related to *forgetting* and *imagination*. Forgetting provides the precondition for remembrance, on the other hand, imagination makes it possible to present and to imagine in the present what happened in the past, and interpret it in a contemporary context.³¹ But due to the nature of imagination and remembrance this goes hand in hand with errors, mistakes, disloyalty to facts and unfortunately misuse or abuse. Therefore dealing with the past bears the inherent risk of selecting, manipulating and simplifying information at the level of remembrance, or in extreme situations, making up something (i.e. creating non-existent stories). Remembrance culture and politics which simplify certain aspects of the past and deal indifferently with other historical experiences cannot be morally justified. Therefore continuing Paul Ricœur’s line of thought, dealing with the past and remembering cannot be done without the perspectives of justice and truth. However, from an ethical perspective, dealing with history is only acceptable if we call a sin a sin, and the deprivation of rights and injustice as injustice.

4.3. Taking human *feelings* and *emotions* seriously – in two directions – is related to the above. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that behind certain historical sins and morally unacceptable actions there were sentiments and emotions: enthusiasm (e.g. the propagandistic enthusiasm for the great objectives of a nation, people or a political regime), which not only lost rational control but became the hotbed of horrific criminal acts. This is why Thomas Mann wrote in his diary in 1944 (on 17 July): “We should not forget \[...\] that national socialism was an enthusiastic revolution spreading sparks, a German national movement demanding horrible emotional commitment, belief and enthusiasm”³². It is yet to be explored what was and what could have been the force, the power which could mobilise masses under the symbol of the swastika and then later under the sickle and the hammer between propaganda and reality. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the emotions and feelings of the victims who were traumatised by a certain segment of the past. Here we not only talk about concrete acts of humiliation, torture, fear and loss, but also situations where the victim cannot talk about things, cannot remember things, because this is prevented by circumstances. We could list endless literary

³⁰ Andreas HETZEL: Bezeugen, Vergeben, Anerkennen. Ethische Motive in der Geschichtsphilosophie Paul Ricœurs, in: Burkhard Liebsch (Hg.): *Bezeugte Vergangenheit oder Versöhnendes Vergessen: Geschichtstheorie nach Paul Ricœur* (DZPh Sonderband 24), Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2010, 217–232, 223.

³¹ Paul Ricœur: *Gedächtnis, Geschichte, Vergessen*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paderborn, 2004, 92. 652.

³² Thomas MANN: *Tagebücher 1944–1946*. Herausgegeben von Inge Jens, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 1986, 78.

examples of how torturous it is for example “to survive survival as a survivor”³³, i.e. to live among people who mastered the technique of looking the other way. But it is also possible that under certain emotions (be it desire for revenge, retaliation, self-justification), the former victim becomes a perpetrator and the perpetrator becomes the victim. Today it is nearly unbelievable, but barely a few decades ago, societies considered modern and civilised but tortured by economic and social crises reached stages of inhumanity and barbarism previously unknown by joining the then “mainstream”, alongside declared “basic moral principles” but in a heated emotional state.³⁴ This is why the Christian church and theology share an extraordinary responsibility in this area as well, for example, in shaping and working on the *ethics of compassion*. This cannot mean anything else but the church and congregations establishing the fora and protected spaces – naturally with properly qualified experts, mediators and colleagues – where people have the opportunity to remember the history of their sufferings, their fears, the injuries they suffered or the shame they lived through. Of course, this does not happen in a descriptive manner, but through stories and narratives during which the shameful or offensive story is presented again and talked about loudly. Obviously, there is a risk with this endeavour, the subjective attitude to the individual stories, but here the objective is not to have a competition between individual narratives, stories and their variants and choose the real one. The objective is to let the stories remain open, available for comparison with objective facts derived from research and interpreted to make it possible for later generations to deal with these experiences sensitively and for the generation who lived through history not to have to experiment with quasi forms of identity throughout their whole lives...

4.4. This form of searching for reconciliation *must not know any constraints*, it can only be done out of free will. Neither forgiveness nor repentance can happen under external expectations or moral pressure. Obviously, if there are no fora and frameworks and appropriate culture, there will be no openness. I am convinced that this tension will linger on for a long time and we will have to live with it: the legal and political requirement to encounter the past, the scientific needs driving knowledge and the personal spheres of confessions, communication, repentance and forgiveness cannot be mixed through force and power with or under the auspices of an ideology focusing on managing or dealing with the past or reconciliation. A scene from André Van In’s film comes to my mind on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: the mother and widow of a brutally murdered victim meet the perpetrator in the courtroom. The woman asks: “How could I forgive this sinful person?” The representative of the Commission tells them: “These people ask for amnesty, but you are not obliged to forgive them. You

³³ Cornelius HELL: „...dann hat Gott sich mir im Bild von Auschwitz offenbart“. Das Werk des ungarischen Schriftstellers Imre Kertész. In: *Orientierung* 60 (1996). 220–223, 222.

³⁴ See Johannes FISCHER: *Verstehen satt Begründen. Warum es in der Ethik um mehr als nur um Handlungen geht*. Stuttgart, Kohlhammer Verlag, 2012. 133–136.

are not obliged to forgive them at all – but we pardon them.” Such a scene and similar ones indicate the psychological/moral and religious dimensions of exploring the past and reconciliation do not overlap with legal and political dimensions. Rather, they indicate the complexity and multifaceted nature of this whole issue; what is more, its contradictions – regardless whether we are talking about the process of reconciliation in South Africa, the story of the officers and informers of a single partisan totalitarian regime or conflict situations which now characterise Ukraine. But without reconciliation between individuals, no community is able to forgive, and without political/social will and the right legal community and cultural frameworks and milieus, the individuals will not come out from behind the protective wall of denial, shame or the loneliness of victims.

Reconciliation is *always a process*. It is not a state but a process, which requires impulses, gestures and fora, and obviously requires a lot of patience, empathy, professional competences and the need, the demand to reveal the truth. But the endeavour to explore the past and the reconciliation programme, which focuses on exploring historical truth, the opening and publishing of secret dossiers or closing them for purposes other than forgiveness, for other human and political objectives, will trigger new injustices and generate new historical crimes and sins.

This is why I am not finishing this line of thought, but will rather leave it open with the thoughts of Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop, the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

“The past, as they used to say, is another country! What is told about the past and the way it is told, changes over the years. But the limelight of remembrance will light up individual details, reveal old lies and illuminate new truths. The more complex the picture becomes, the more complete the puzzle of the past will be with pieces falling into their proper places... The future is also a different country. We cannot do anything else but put at its feet the crumbs of knowledge and truth we collect from our experiences today.”³⁵

³⁵ Cited by Thomas Hoppe see Thomas HOPPE: Erinnerung, Gerechtigkeit und Versöhnung. Zum Umgang mit belasteter Vergangenheit in Post-Konflikt-Gesellschaften, in: Jörg Calließ / Christoph Weller (Hg.): *Friedenstheorie: Fragen, Ansätze, Möglichkeiten* (Loccumer Protokolle 31/03), Loccum 2003, 233–263, 233.