Teshuvah - Turning

29.06.1997 | Interdenominational Group, Milan, Italy

Letter to the delegates of the Second European Ecumenical Conference 23-29 June 1997 in Graz (Austria)

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Letter to the delegates of the Second European Ecumenical Conference 23-29 June 1997 in Graz (Austria) of the Interdenominational Group, Milan, Italy.

We are Catholic and Protestant Christians and work in our respective communities for a process of reconciliation of the Christian churches with Judaism. Our group was formed in response to a suggestion by the Milan Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue. It has initiated a number of studies and encounters of Christians and Jews and invited ministers, pastors and teachers of religion of the different churches in Milan. For many years it has compiled documents in preparation for January 17, the day, which the Italian Conference of Catholic Bishops has dedicated to the study of Judaism.

Up to now we have embarked on a way, which was rich in moments of encounter and true, deep dialogue: dialogue in light of the differing ways (we think *complementary* ways) in which God has called both Judaism as well as Christianity; encounter, which strives for a better mutual understanding in the spirit.

In such moments we have wondered, why our churches have so far not made a clear and open confession of guilt about all the defamations, hate and persecutions, which were committed against the people of Israel, and for their continual silence, their responsibility for their silent toleration during the Shoah.

The experience we have made so far appears to us a beginning or at least an attempt, which could continue on the way of reconciliation in the spirit of the European Ecumenical Conference, Graz 1997.

For this reason we would like to share with you our considerations and some questions in the hope, that contributions like this may be useful for your work, as ‘individual grains of wheat are making up the common bread".

The process of overcoming Christian anti-Judaism has begun with great difficulty only after 1945. Considerable uncertainties accompanied the process during these 50 years. But there were also important steps forward. Still, we think it necessary to point out that anti-Judaism is not a problem that touches Christianity only at the edge (ad extra, as is widely believed, as if it only concerned its relationship to Judaism). In fact it concerns a genuine (ad intra) Christian question, namely the specific Christian identity. For often Christian identity defined itself basically as the ‘overcoming’ and ‘substitution" of Judaism. We will not be able to honestly speak about an effective elimination of Christian anti-Judaism, as long as we are not able to extinguish in sermons and Christian education the substitution theory, as long as a typological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible does not give way to historical exegesis. These distorted readings were the cradle of the doctrine of contempt, which in turn nourished antisemitism. It still has an important key function in theological

understanding of the Christian church, even worse, it lives as always in the church's practice (in biblical commentaries, in lectionaries, in liturgical texts).

The starting point for the question of God can today be no other than Auschwitz, a point, behind which there is no return.

To think about God after this unimaginable event carries with it a deep break in the present Christian self-consciousness. The Shoah is an event, which happened in modern and Christian Europe, was planned and executed by baptized persons. Christians can not escape this fact. They must confront the challenge that here people tried 'to kill God by killing God's people.'

When Christians now again look at Judaism, they must be aware of the danger to instrumentalize the Jewish tradition or to take possession of it in order to give their own Christian identity a new coloring or facelift. This would be a complete misjudging of the otherness of Judaism. It would be just another form of exerting control. Judaism has an indestructible integrity of its own, which Christians will have to acknowledge.

Points, which are posed as questions:

- What are the consequences for our Christian faith, when we ascribe to the Old Testament, the Holy Scriptures of Israel, an independent value in the divine revelation, and not read it only as announcement of something still to come, but consider it as an event already fulfilled in itself?
- What are the consequences for our Christian faith, when we do not consider the New Testament as modification or replacement of the Old, but as an enriching complementation of the First Testament? What kind of relationship would emerge on this basis between the Old and New Testaments? What would be the consequences for our reading of the Bible?
- Our Christian faith stands side by side with other confessions of faith. They challenge us. They expect our consideration, our exchange with them. But the faith of Israel, which exists also without us and apart from us, exists very similarly *in us* as inseparable part of our own faith. In view of this, do we not have to concede that the relationship between Christians and Israel is of a particular and fundamental nature, distinguished from our relationship to other faiths?
- Do we not have to recognize as Christian churches the perhaps greatest ecumenical possibility, if we engage jointly in this process, that in view of Israel our own Christian identity will redefine itself completely?

Translation from Italian to German by Holger Banse, member of the group Teshuva in Milano and

(unauthorized) from the German by Fritz Voll

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