

Wounded words in a wounded world:

Opportunities for the mission in Central and Eastern Europe today

Abstract

The goal of this paper is both descriptive and prescriptive. The European sub-region called Central and Eastern Europe is understood and analyzed mostly through social scientific theories and models which have a Western European or North American origin. The region is often observed from the outside, and many interpretations of regional transformation are based on codes and categories of these external perspectives, which I will call heteropoiesis. I try to argue for an autopoietic approach from the opposite direction, from the inside. In my approach, I focus, first of all, on the historical and contemporary social experiences of the societies of the region. After authoring many theoretical and analytical works on it, I have come to believe that the key characteristic of the region is its *wounded collective identity*. The main narrative in the region is backward looking and nostalgic, also characterized by a feeling of victimhood and revenge feelings. Nationalism and xenophobia in the region are consequences of this traumatized self-understanding. To understand Central and Eastern Europe one must understand the wounds of history and the role of the trauma-centered narratives of today.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, wounded collective identity, Good Samaritan, weak theology, mission

1. For an autopoietic kerygma in Central and Eastern Europe: Preliminary remarks

30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, societies and churches in Central and Eastern Europe¹ (CEE) seem to be well-known for being unsatisfied with democracy, freedom, and market economy. There is, in general, a mutual disillusionment, which is very influential in both the Western and the Eastern part of Europe. People from the former Eastern Bloc were and still are confronted with a lower level of well-being in comparison with Western Europe and have already lost any illusion of achieving Western standards one day. Why should we have democracy if it does not go together with

¹ The European sub-region Central and Eastern Europe contains three regions: the Baltic, Central Europe, and the Balkans (for it as a technical term, see e.g. the entry in the EU Vocabulary <http://eurovoc.europa.eu/914>). Although the entire region has many historical, economic, political and religious differences, the scholarly literature sees and interprets it as one region (cf. e.g. Bremer 2008; Berglund 2013; Frucht 2000; Gebhardt 2013; Kool 2008; Máté-Tóth 2019; Parushev 2007).

well-being – they ask. On the other hand, Western Europeans can hardly understand all the post-communist features in CEE: the nationalism, the rise of new oligarchs, and the xenophobic attitudes against the European Union and the refugees. Was the entire extension of the EU in 2004 and what came after a mistake, if the new members cannot be happy with it – they ask (Bozóki 2015; Vogt 2005). A general bad mood in Europe is clearly perceptible today, but at the same time, this disillusioned continent presents the deepest challenge for Christianity and for the Christian churches too for finding the appropriate approach to proclaiming resurrection and freedom. In this paper I am arguing for a genuine autopoietic understanding (Luhmann 1984 and 1986) of the region and of the kerygma and mission of the Christian churches.

2. The parable of the Good Samaritan

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Luke is a very inspiring text that has been analyzed and commented repeatedly by many theologians since the patristic time to the present day. I want to use this parable as a basic matrix to support my own arguments. The parable has namely a special hermeneutical status for an appropriate understanding of the region, especially regarding one of the main characteristics of the region: the deep sensitivity in the collective search for (national, cultural and ethnic) identity (Dingley 2020; Spohn 2016; Swatos 1994; Tomka and Szilárdi 2016).

While focusing on the “second world”², I will not go into a general introduction about what is commonly called post-communist societies and states in Europe, but I want to start first and

² The technical term “second world” was used originally in the period of the Cold War to describe the communist or socialist countries in Europe under the rule of the Soviet Union (Wienold 1978). In the context of the recent study the term is used to characterize the societies of CEE in relation to their in-between geopolitical and geocultural status. For the theological use of this notion see my former contributions. (Máté-Tóth 1991, 2000, 2007, 2013, 2019)

foremost by touching the main wounds of this geocultural region (Máté-Tóth 2019). I am increasingly convinced that the region can be understood correctly if we focus on its wounded collective identity. As Jesus was identified by Thomas the Apostle after his resurrection through touching His wounds, we will be able to understand the Second World also through a closer observation of its traumas and of the narratives concerning its traumatic history. In the Second World we should focus on the robbed man when reading the parable of the Good Samaritan. For the Second World he offers an appropriate surface for identification. Societies in the CEE region are well represented by the wounded man on the side of the road, quite similar to the self-understanding of the people in the Third World. While the people in Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenal 1977) identified the Good Samaritan with communism, the people of CEE are already aware of the experiences with real existing communism and have learned that the latter is better identifiable with the robbers than with the man who brings salvation. The main question from an autopoietical point of view concerning CEE is how we find ourselves in the robbed man of the parable.

3. A wounded collective identity

Collective identity is the basic self-interpretation of a given group or society, containing various elements of consciousness, some stable and some changing in a dynamic harmony, which makes it possible for individuals to belong to this common orientation and for the group to have a "we-consciousness". A wounded collective identity is characterized by a definitive motif of the memory of a special set of indirectly experienced collective traumas. What I claim is that CEE is uniquely characterized by a special common set of directly and indirectly experienced traumas, which is the leitmotif for its collective identity. Five main wounds can be differentiated in the center of the collective memory of the region. Although

with different combinations and accents, but they are all present in every society of the region, and exactly this common presence makes the region unique among the regions of Europe and of the world (Máté-Tóth 2019).

Wound 1: A lack of nation-state autonomy and sovereignty due to occupations by three big hegemonic powers. The in-between geopolitical and geocultural position of the entire region prohibited the building and/or rebuilding of sovereign nation states for between 100 and 400 years. Mainly beginning with the historical period of the rise of modern nationalism, in every sizeable ethnicity an irresistible desire arose for a sovereign nation state, which was fulfilled in some cases only after 1991 (the Baltic states), 1994 (the Balkan states³), and 2008 (Kosovo).

Wound 2: A prohibition of exercising human rights, especially of ethnic minority rights. One of the main consequences of the lack of state sovereignty and of the looser overlap between cultural/ethnic and nation state borders is the overall minority status of larger populations in the region. Because of the main logic of ethnicity-based nation states, the prohibition of exercising ethnic minority rights, primarily of the public and official use of minority languages, was a logical but negative consequence of the situation.

Wound 3: Forced mobility. Under state forced mobility I understand two kinds of mobility throughout the 20th century; first, the mobility of ethnic minorities under ethnic cleansing and deportation (Jarausch 2016), and, second, forced status mobility, i.e. a forced mobility between social strata and career paths as required by loyalty to the new regime. To this second type of forced mobility belong all deportations to labor camps as well.

³ Although four republics of the former Yugoslavia declared independence in 1991-1992, the very fight for true national autonomy started in these years only and resulted in the Balkan wars.

Wound 4: Persecution of religion, churches, and dissidents. In the period of state supported religion (mainly Christian religion), non-Christian and small Christian denominations were not recognized and/or were persecuted. This was not only due to the theological logic of “the right religion”, but also to the strong connection between the state and the dominant religion and churches. During the long period of communist rule, major religions and the dominant churches – first, the Roman Catholic Church, because of the church’s center in the Vatican, a capitalist country – were considered enemies and were persecuted, not uncommonly in a brutal and violent way. Every perspective and institution which did not share the ideology and the goals of the communist rulers was seen as an opposing power, with dissidents being treated in the same way as people of religious conviction.

Wound 5: Genocides and other mass killings. First, early in the 20th century it was the communist state that caused millions of deaths, then the dictatorship of National Socialism, and, more recently, the regular and irregular forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Totalitarian states are referred to by Rummel (2018) as “mortocracies” and “megamurderers”.

Geographically, genocides and other mass killings occur with a higher likelihood in CEE than elsewhere in Europe.

A wounded collective identity means, therefore, a special kind of mindset characterized by the unrefurbished traumatic past with an uncertain national and state sovereignty in the center.

One of the most important solutions taken from religions, especially from Christianity, would be a strong and stable religious teaching and faith. The certitude of the kerygma would be able to provide cultural crutches at the turbulent time of collective hysteria and borderline syndrome. In the contemporary political culture of CEE, the populist messages and rhetoric are experiments for the re-establishing and re-stabilizing of national and state stability. In the

field of religion, the same is present with simplifications and the vulgarity of the kerygma and of the sermons.

4. Wounded words

The main context for the contemporary kerygma in CEE – meaning the content, method and manner of the self-understanding and communication of the Christian teaching – is characterized not only by the wounded collective identity but, by far not independently from it, also by very fragmented knowledge about the Christian teaching and by the deep lack of an original theology relevant to core questions of the region. The challenge for mission is not a practical one but, most importantly, a substantial one. The thinking according to which churches that have the Gospel available to them do not have any other task but to convey this Gospel to contemporary society in an appropriate language is, unfortunately, nothing else but ecclesial self-deception. In contrast, it is true that, on the one hand, the quality of the Christian teaching in various schools and colleges is low, not least because of the long decades of prohibition of such teaching, and, on the other hand, because of what seems to be more dramatic to me, namely, the basic challenge for a contextual theology does not appear at all. Christianity in the region today can have only “wounded words”⁴ in the wounded world of the region. In the center of missiology is the task to accept this kind of twofold woundedness, similarly to a kind of wandering in the “landscape of cries” (Sachs 1957) with the help of only a part of the relevant map. With the description and interpretation of the Christian churches’ work conditions in CEE I do not aim to provide a comparison between the former Eastern

⁴ The metaphorical term “wounded words” goes back to the book of poems by Cora Berry Whitin published at the end of the great war in 1919 (Whitin 1919). She wanted to explain how the language of her poems is deeply influenced by the tragedies of the war. In an almost same way Litsa Chatzivasileiou the Latin American poet quoted Vicente Huidobro, “Open your mouth to receive the host of the wounded word”, in an allusion to the multifarious experiences of suffering and pain of the continent (Chatzivasileiou 2006:100). I am combining the term with the experience of aphasia in the region. See more below.

Bloc and the Western Bloc. On the contrary, I will try to focus on the historical and cultural characteristics of CEE and to understand them as the main “*locus theologicus*”.

5. Wounded worlds: An aphasic uncertainty of faith

To understand and analyze the fate and challenge of the Christian mission in CEE today, a deeper reflection concerning the certainty of faith seems to be unavoidable. It is not easy at all to answer how the traditional security of faith capitulated in the face of modernity, and what the impacts of the “short twentieth century” are (Hobsbawm 1995). According to Peter L. Berger and other theorists of modernity and religion, the deep change from a tradition-led religiosity to a decision-led religiosity occurred around the late 1960s (Berger 1980). Perhaps this could be valid for this region as well, although we have almost no precise data from this time, and the great impact of the communist indoctrination should be also kept in mind. In the first period of communism, which I called elsewhere the Egyptian captivity, a religiosity that was traditionally taken for granted and the church's importance were inherent components of consciousness in general (Máté-Tóth 2013; 2015). People grew up in an almost “Christian society”, and the change of religious routine cannot happen overnight. In the second period of communism, called by me the Babylonian captivity, as the communist pressure was no more as direct as before, people started feeling themselves at home in the new circumstances of materialism and atheism, and step by step the marginalized status of the churches became part of the experience that was taken for granted. The definitive majority of the population became totally illiterate in religion except for a minority of churchgoers.

Although after the political transitions in the 1990s in some societies of the region, we have observed an increase in religiosity and growing importance of Christian churches in public life, a broad stratum of society still remained in the communist paradigm. The 30 years of

freedom of religion and freedom of the churches do not seem to be enough for making up religious literacy and certainty. There was hard censorship during communist times, and in the period of freedom it has been the confusing pluralism hampering the stabilization of faith.

Our words are wounded, I argue, and with this metaphor, I intend to point out some characteristics of the regional communication capacities. I use the term “wounded” as a synonym, among other things, for “broken” and “traumatized”, in the sense as in a cultural aphasia that dictates one to remain silent, and also as in aphasia as a speech disorder. The latter type of aphasia can be a consequence of post-traumatic disorder in a person. Ann Laura Stoler uses the term “colonial aphasia” in her 2011 study concerning the French discourse about colonial past by explaining that people have an occlusion of knowledge, difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things, and a difficulty comprehending the enduring relevance of what has already been spoken. (Stoler 2011) Although her perspective focuses on the heirs of French colonial history, her points are also relevant for better understanding of the discourse situation in societies of CEE colonized by hegemonic powers of both the West and the East.

Behind the metaphorical term “wounded words”, therefore, I understand, in sum, all the complex problematics of societal communication in the region characterized by the wounded collective identity. I understand the region to be wounded, and in this wounded region the words of the kerygma are also wounded – although they are bandaged with theological approaches and vocabularies taken from the time before WWII or from Western European works. As in the questions of social and cultural uncertainties, the main answer seems to be in CEE a kind of nationalistic stability and security, churches’ communications and theologies in the region are also tempted to not accept the basically wounded characteristics of their

language and as a kind of an escape they take recourse to the apparent stability of neo-Thomistic dogmatism or of indisputable hierarchical or theological authorities.

In contemplating the passing down of the Christian gospel, there is a fundamental question to answer concerning the contents and significance of the words of everyday language use and of the words of the Christian churches and especially of Christian theology. For almost a century, philosophers and philologists have relativized the congruence between the syntax and the content of our language, arguing for a greater independence of both the syntax and the content while stating that contents of the words are merely results of societal conventions. Where these conventions are no longer present, words lose their content and are no more than “broken and empty shells” (Bellah 1992).

In the cultural region of CEE, a certain type of aphasia is of defining significance. People and institutions are not really able to come to terms with the past, they have not had enough time to arrive at a well-balanced reflection on their own experiences. In the societies of CEE, there tend to be sweeping general discussions concerning the mere naming of historical facts and of the countries people hoped to build after the collapse of communism.

There are almost no statistical data from the time before the communist takeover, but we have data for the entire CEE region from 1997 and 2007 concerning the main “dogmas” of the teaching of the Christian church (Tomka 2011). The Pew Forum also offered data regarding religiosity in CEE. Based on these statistical sources, we are able to draw a very differentiated picture about religious beliefs in the region.

There is a considerable difference between Western and Eastern Europe after 1990 concerning belief in God. The proportion of people who claim to believe in God has decreased in Western Europe but increased in CEE. The growth in the belief in God is especially considerable in those societies of the region which were part of the Soviet Union

before 1990. Regarding the role of religious institutions, researchers observe a decline in the importance of churches for individuals. But at the same time, in the last decade churches changed their societal and political role in many countries of the region.

“We can indeed speak of the decline in the determinant role of the church, a process of the weakening of ties to the church. But the claim of the weakening of religiosity would be a complete misconstruction of fact.” (Tomka 2011:104-105)

Religion has a cultural potential in the region. If we identify the robbed man in the parable of the Good Samaritan with the societies of CEE, then we can ask whether religious sources in the region could play the role of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps religion, faith and the churches have an answer to the traumas of the region. At first sight, they do. After the system change and during periods of conservative governments in the region, Churches and faith-based organizations enforced their presence and ministry in the fields of healthcare and public education. In many societies of the region in the non-governmental sector religious institutions represent the definitive majority. *Diakonia* works, but although it is very important, it is only one part of the Christian testimony of faith. In the field of the teaching of Christian worldview, concerning meaningful private and social life we can observe some difficulties. Many think that silent service is more important than the teaching. This approach goes back to the time of the communist persecution of religion and church activities in the region. And if we look back to the metaphor of the Good Samaritan, we see no evidence that the good man spoke to the robbed man. The Good Samaritan seems to have handled everything in silence. Only his acts for the wounded other are reported by Luke, providing a message about love and about fulfilling the Torah. Silent work is the gospel – at least in this case.

This character of the story can lead us to two experiences of CEE. The first occurred at the time of the communist rule, and the other is still happening now. As private and collective statements about the Gospel and about the church's teaching were excluded from the public sphere (not uncommonly by using bureaucratic and violent tools), the faithful and the church's representatives were of the opinion that silent work managed in love and selflessness can fulfill the missionary rule given by the Lord as He said to His disciples: "Go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt 28:19). Being a nice and fair colleague at the workplace, and a loving parent and friend in the private sphere without speaking about the Gospel constituted a Christian life as such. Only extraordinarily brave people were obligated to proclaim the Gospel and suffer the consequences, which were sometimes very difficult.

Keeping in mind this tradition of a silent testimony, we should ask which kind of speaking about God and the Gospel could be relevant and appropriate in our time in CEE. One solution in the region is the renewed use of theological works, teaching materials, and methods from the time before the communist takeover. The other one is the translation of the post-conciliar literature from Western Europe. Both are legitimate, but it seems to be important to sensitize those responsible for Christian teaching to be more sensitive to the contemporary kind of public discourse. The balance in the teaching between indubitable answers and challenging questions is the true art of mission today.

Words are wounded not only in the case of speaking about the traumatic past but also in the case of speaking about religion and God. Concerning the postmodern discourse, the apophatic character of the discourse about God in philosophy and theology is a broadly discussed topic. To mention only one very relevant publication, the famously short book by Derrida symbolizes already with the structure of the book his main point about the impossibility of speaking about God and, in general, about any content of faith. The book consists of an

introduction and notes – but without any chapters. Following him, Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo and others argue for a weak faith and weak theology, which strives to resolve the problem of speaking in general and of speaking about God in particular (Derrida et al. 2001). Although Derrida and others observe societal and cultural processes of what has been called the post-modern space, their arguments for the lost capacity of speaking are also valid for the wounded region of CEE, it is only the historical experiences which cause the same difficulties that are different here. Western societies are defined by post-modern cultural circumstances, but Eastern societies are defined more by their post-Gulag experiences. The mission of theology and the church can be reflected on and conceptualized properly if we do not exclude the questions of the lost contents of the kerygma and the lost capacity of the words to explain the regional experiences and the experiences connected to the Almighty.

6. Towards a search for words

The necessary contextual reorientations in spirituality, the church's teaching, and theology needs a new language, or, more precisely, it requires a permanent search for a new language. Churches are well trained in sharing more or less complete insights and normative statements concerning their religious teaching. Before WWII in a religious situation supported by society, religious teaching was done in a well-functioning and relevant teaching system. In the period when numerous obstacles hindered religious and church life during communism, churches were still able to preserve their mindset, because the communist ideology was, for them, in diametric opposition to Christian thinking. After the breakdown of the communist ideology, churches were challenged to be active in teaching again, and they often started to use the language of the interwar period. The use of this quite unreflecting language can be termed “reprint teaching”, because many earlier books and schoolbooks were reprinted after

1990. The other solution for the possibility of being publicly active was the translation of theological books and spiritual brochures from German, Italian, and English into the smaller languages of the region. This model can be called import teaching, because these texts come from a different social and cultural matrix. By now the time has come for Churches to learn their own language which could be appropriate for the culture of the wounded collective identity. Before the beginning of language there was silence, a kind of aphasia. The original sources of Christian spirituality can go back to the tradition of apophatic theology and religious language. Because under the fundamentally new circumstances Christianity needs a fundamental reform(ulation) of its core teaching. Whereas in the interwar period and also in the communist period, churches spoke a strong language and had a strong theology, now at the time of freedom and plurality they must learn a weak spirituality and a weak theology (Caputo 2006).

7. Towards an autopoietic theology in Central and Eastern Europe

If we found wounded collective identity in the center of the regional self-understanding as the main marker, a theology that aims to be regionally relevant can only focus exactly on this wounded identity.⁵ There is a fundamental overlap or correspondence between the central marker of the region, the wounds, and the central marker of the main Christian teaching, the resurrection of the wounded Christ. This kind of correspondence provides a relevant setting for Christian kerygma and mission, just like for the Third World it provides the correspondence of freedom in society and freedom in Christian teaching. The mutual correspondence has a twofold hermeneutical and methodological regional relevance of pre-

⁵ In outlining the theological consequences of the wounded collective identity, I feel deeply connected to theologians of the region, whom I cannot all give credit here. I want to mention here a few names meant to represent many others: Oto Mádr, Josef Zvěřina, Tomáš Halík, Joseph Tischner, Karol Józef Wojtyła, Dumitru Stăniloae, Nicolae M. Popescu, and György Bulányi etc.

eminent importance. The wounded collective identity, as the main regional marker, typifies the highest-ranking challenge for the theological work in CEE and, on the other hand, the central position of the wounds in Christian teaching offers an appropriate and original hermeneutic for the understanding of the region and, moreover, for a possible change of perspective on regional identity as well. For a regionally relevant theology, the deep coherence between the wounded region and the wounded Christ provides the basis for the approach. The wounded collective identity can be evaluated in the mirror of the theology and spirituality related to the soteriological and ecclesiological perspective regarding the wounded Christ. Starting with this point of view opens many ways for the private and collective reality of the region. The Christian perspective about the wounds is broadly embodied in the spirituality and the main liturgies of the Christian churches, so it provides many junctures for the everyday spiritual life of the faithful and of the Christian communities.

In general, Robert Schreiter formulated the most important challenges for theology of mission as follows:

“A theological meta-frame for the uncertainties of the present might pose the question in this way: How are we to see the *missio Dei* unfolding amid the undoing of a more cosmopolitan approach to the world, with its retreat into a *tribalism*? Can a deeply interconnected world, a world that faces an ecological crisis that cannot be resolved by any single nation or group, survive an inward turning toward a *local isolationism*?” (Schreiter 23/08/2019, S. 5; my emphasis)

At this point, it is necessary to comment on an argument formulated by Robert Schreiter in his keynote. Schreiter correctly identified the challenge for theology in a world characterized by tendencies of what he called “tribalism” and “local isolations”. Reflecting from the perspective of CEE, tendencies of tribalism are understood generally as a representation of

national interests and local isolation in defense of national and state sovereignty. I argue for a mutual understanding between the approaches from the West and the East. I do not think that it would be wrong to tag particular tendencies in CEE as tribalism, but I argue for a deeper insight into CEE in the interest of a more appropriate understanding of this tribalist tendency. In focusing on the wounds of today's societies, I argue, tribalism is a cry because of the wounded collective identity. It is not the explication of the case but the case itself that needs an explication. And in this sense, I fully share Schreiter's invocation as he mentions that a *missio ad vulnera* "might be seen as a mission from the wounds of Christ to the wounds of the world" (Schreiter 23/08/2019, S. 5). Theology has the responsibility to elaborate on and proclaim an approach using the *vulnera* of Christ as its starting point and interpret the *vulnera* of society.

The main lines of theology from the Second World thematize the basic fact that religion and churches are an inherent part of the culture and society of the region, and they should understand themselves as such and not as being alien to the system. For an understanding of the main transformation in religion and the churches, the main marker of wounded collective identity constitutes the primary starting point or matrix. Although the long shadow of communist tradition of marginalization of religion and the churches is still there, the new understanding of the region alongside the wounded collective identity can help churches to leave the (post-)communist hermeneutic behind and to strengthen a deeper and more appropriate self-understanding. This perspective can help churches to resist the strong temptation of a nationalistic canon and to resist the reinforcement of its identity by supporting the political program of state sovereignty. For a successful new hermeneutic, it is an indispensable task for the church to confront its own wounded history and identity and also to evaluate in a well-balanced way its own role in this history, not only as a victim but also as a bystander or perpetrator. The spiritual and theological traditions of Christianity have a special

richness concerning the understanding of wounds and giving meaning to suffering and pain in a constructive way. With the refreshing of this tradition, Christianity can have a very useful contribution to the societies of the region.

8. Victim-labelling

The region marked as wounded by the above listed five types of traumas obviously led to a self-understanding of societies as victims, and interpretations outside of it often consider the region to be a victim. Van Dijk criticizes victim labelling for many reasons. The term suggests that perpetrators acted motivated by a higher goal, similarly to the Jewish or Christian priests; the victim is absolutely passive as if they were held captive in their social role. Relating to those labeled as victims can be done primarily through compassion, and secondarily through forgiveness. Historically, he argues, the term victim was first used for Christ.

“A cursory check on etymological dictionaries of other European languages confirms that the word victim is used to refer to Jesus Christ. [...] The use of the term victims in informal language most probably hinged on the incremental humanization of the imagery of Jesus Christ, starting in Renaissance religious art and culminating in highly realistic pictures and sculptures in popular Christian art. An important source of inspiration for the broader *victima* concept may well have been the extremely popular Passion Plays which have for centuries presented explicit imagery of the passion of Christ to large audiences.” (van Dijk 2009:4)

Van Dijk concentrates in his critique on victim-labelling that originates from the perspective of the perpetrators and argues instead for sensitivity regarding the right of self-labelling of those affected. In my opinion, it is more important to formulate a criticism of self-labelling of those affected when this is done in a manipulative way to achieve various social benefits.

Because of the great impact of the wounded collective identity on the church's self-understanding, the most important factor of blocking the context-sensitive renewal of the Christian teaching and mission in the region is playing the role of the victim. Playing the victim is a well-known manipulative strategy to evoke understanding, sympathy, and compassion. Although Christians and the Christian churches have had more than the average amount of persecution in the former communist countries, and although right-oriented politics and governments regularly use references to the Christian traditions of their countries and use churches in support of their nationalistic politics, the Christian perspective which is oriented on the wounded Messiah should avoid the temptation of the victim game.

Christians of the region have suffered, but this does not entitle them to claim various benefits, such as extra political support or a greater portion of the general benefits. Although playing the victim game seems to be a very useful method today in political discourses, churches have another vocation regarding suffering and pain. They ought to bear witness to the grace of the merciful God given to the victims. It is very important to pay attention to the inherent victim game logic according to which the self-understanding as victim protects one from overly strict self-criticism and can lead to the feeling of having a right to revenge. In the deepest divided political fields of CEE the right for revenge seems to be accepted as a possible or even necessary tool in the permanent fight for hegemony. However, exactly for this reason a Christian perspective regarding woundedness has the original duty to bear witness to the logic of compassion and mercy. And, consequently, Christians should prophetically criticize every injustice and accept discrimination and torture from those in power.

St. Thomas Aquinas differentiated between *misericordia passionis* (“mere sentimental emotion”) and *misericordia rationis* led by reason and on the basis of a logical concept of restoring justice (Summa Theologica, II-II, 30, 3). For me, it seems more real to merge the

two senses of passion, the first as mentality and the second as vision, of a world of freedom and solidarity.

Oto Mádr argued against the victim game in his 1986 essay “How the church doesn't die: Testimony from the troubled times of the Czech church?”. In the short evaluation of the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia after 1968, he described his view concerning the chances and tasks of the persecuted church. He noticed, however, that instead of the term persecution the term threat could be more precise to use, because persecution describes the situation of Christians at the time of the Roman Empire. They were persecuted until *martyria*, but Christians and the churches in Czechoslovakia “don’t die” although they have threats from, and problems caused by the communist power. Mádr summarized the tasks of the church in threatened circumstances, and his main stance is as follows: the church faces the same tasks as it does in periods of freedom and normalcy, only under suboptimal circumstances. As a moral theologian, Mádr evaluated the societal and political context at the time of threats in a well-balanced way, and exactly because of this approach he is a very good example of somebody standing up against the schematic approach of a victim game, which states that nothing can be done. (Mádr 1986)

At the same time in Western Europe theologians strengthened the approach of a new political theology which has relevance for the question of the theological understanding in CEE too. In the theological focus of Johann B. Metz, the main perspective remains the *memoria passionis*. It means basically the duty of the churches and of theology to have a vivid memory of the passion of Jesus Christ and, inseparably from it, of the passion of all victims. This approach is a general one, and so it should be regarded as relevant for the churches in CEE too. Churches were victims of the Nazi and communist regimes, so they should have a special compassionate capacity for adequate memory-work. Following this logic, we can or perhaps

should take a step forward by arguing for a *misericordia passionis* for an original Christian perspective of forgiveness and to break with the historical spiral of hate and violence.

Misericordia is not only the virtue of those in power but the attitude of forgiveness against those in power. *Misericordia* makes it possible to have freedom among the former persecuted communities, societies, and ethnic minorities. It opens the perspective for working together for a sustainable future without the duty to forget the tragic past and also without being compelled to revenge the past. *Misericordia* is the power of the victims, as demonstrated by Jesus on the cross.

The sometimes centuries long desire for national sovereignty and state autonomy formed the collective consciousness of the region of CEE. After becoming free around 1990, all societies tried to establish nation states, in the Balkan region sometimes at the cost of bloodshed.

Christianity and the Christian churches were and in some cases are still the most important strategic partners of the new states and new nationalistic politics. There is a strong interrelation between national sovereignty and the main denominations. Today, 30 years after the fall of communism, the nationalistic approach together with the victim game characterize the region as such and constitute significant driving forces of the churches too. One of the main questions for the churches is the decision between the canon of the nationalistic logic and the canon of the logic of the Gospel as the pre-eminent Christian tradition.

In this context the Christian churches must remember the original meaning of true Catholicism, meaning “universal”, from the Greek word *καθολική* “universal”. The universality of the faith in God as Creator of the entire cosmos, in Jesus Christ as the Savior of all people of the globe, and in the Holy Spirit as the driving force for love in all human beings serve as the main foundations for the original Catholicism and can substantiate a sovereign position of the churches in the region. The answer to the questions of nationalism is

Catholicism, to formulate this simply. Following this logic, Christian churches – after a nuanced evaluation of their own past and after renewing their focus on their genuine sources and missions – can play a pioneering role in supporting the peace work among fighting ethnic groups and in other conflict zones, as they had done in many regions of the world successfully. As Miklós Tomka pointed out on the basis of an analysis of international survey data collected in the region in 2007:

“It is almost impossible to improve human relations and to advance reconciliation as long as people have shattered, disintegrated and uncertain identities. The first step to reconciliation is the healing of wounded identities.” (Tomka 2009:43)

One of the consequences and also one of the conditions of the true Catholicism is the enforcement of the sovereignty of the churches in the face of nationalistic politics as well as in the face of the mistakes and aberrations of the church’s own history. It will not mean that churches should be dissidents in their societies where they belong to the most important collective entities. On the contrary, they could use this importance and impact for a reorientation of the general mindset in society in making people sensitive to the marginalized and the poor. As the main secret of the original fast growth of Christianity was not the sheer teaching about Jesus Christ but the new practice of inviting and including the poor. It is not the closeness to the political forces and the nationalistic political aims that makes churches efficient but the work among people marked by various wounds.

“So, what shape does a *missio ad vulnera* take? It might be seen as a mission from the wounds of Christ to the wounds of the world.” (Schreiter 23.08.2019, S. 11)

9. Conclusion: From victim to faithful actor

Finally, I want to mention the research results of van Dijk concerning victim labeling. If societies in CEE are generally characterized by the wounded collective identity and are permanently tempted to self-label themselves as victims and to play the victim card, one of the most important chances for a successful coping could be through renaming or re-labeling themselves as survivors.

“In my view, ongoing secularisation has over the past five decades incrementally allowed those harmed by crime to resist their labelling as victims with its adverse, incapacitating role and expectations of meekness. Increasingly, victims reject being called ‘victims’, requesting to be called ‘survivors’ or harmed parties instead.” (van Dijk 2019:128)

In Jesus’s lifetime, as he was telling the story of the Good Samaritan to a man who asked him who his neighbor was, the primarily Jewish audience identified themselves with the priest and with the Levite in the story and were obviously shocked that he was not really able to act as the good but generally hated Samaritan. The Jewish audience prompted the change of the roles of the priest and Levite, neither of whom had compassion, for the role of the Good Samaritan, who had compassion and who acted accordingly.

Today, Christian commentators of the story, in general, identify the audience in the same way as the Jewish audience in Jesus's time, with the heartless clerics, and call for metanoia to become Good Samaritans. But in the case of CEE, I am tempted to hypothesize that Christians and churches are generally convinced that they are rather the stripped, beaten and half-dead man. The communist robbers left the church behind in a desolate state. It is not the case that the church should become a Good Samaritan, instead it needs compassion and help.

It is without any question correct to argue that Christians and churches were the main victims of the communist regime. But it is not less correct to ask 30 years after the end of the communist regime whether the time is ripe for giving up the victim status and, even more so, for giving up the metanarrative of victimhood as such. It seems to me very important to understand that the victim status provides definitive benefits in society. Victims cannot be asked about their own responsibility. If the Churches are not able and not ready for providing differentiated self-criticism concerning their own role during communist times, and, even more so, for producing a well-balanced status report on the facts of faith and beliefs, they will do everything to remain victims.

But if Christians, churches and theology can understand the victim position of CEE societies in the light of the Gospels, as this perspective emerges in the parable of the Good Samaritan, then new ways of context-sensitive testimonies of faith will open up for Christian and church life. Then regional theology will innovatively use theological aphasia as a focal point for speaking about God to the people of the region today. It will be able to successfully accompany the attempts of reformulation of the catechetical contents, the focal points of the training of priests and of the whole Christian language. In a constant concentration on Christ as the good Samaritan, it will humbly give its testimonies with its wounded words in the wounded world.

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