Repentance for the Holocaust

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In late 1965, Polish Catholics must have read with bewilderment and disbelief their bishops’ letter to their counterparts in both East and West Germany. First, the bishops included a short spiritual history of Poland in the letter that made it seem as if Poland needed Germany, saying: “We truly have much for which to thank Western—and German—culture and civilization.” Second, the bishops portrayed Polish suspicion and hatred of the Germans not as a direct and legitimate reaction to what the Germans had done to the Polish people, but as “our generation’s problem.” Third, in addressing the then-unresolved Oder-Neiße border dispute, the bishops recognized the “suffering of the millions of Germans who had fled or been expelled” above all, thus conceding that the annexation of the “German eastern territories (Ostgebiete)” was unjust

1. The Polish bishops’ letter, dated 18 Nov. 1965, was addressed to bishops in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.
to begin with. And finally, and most bewildering of all, the bishops not only offered forgiveness to the Germans, but also asked for forgiveness. According to a contemporary observer, the “message of reconciliation” was difficult not only for the Communist regime then in power to accept, but also for common Polish Catholics.²

Indeed, the biblical message that when it comes to reconciliation the burden of initiative (i.e., of enabling mutual-turning) rests with the “victim” is one that contravenes a popular understanding of how reconciliation “works”: the perpetrator first repents, and then, and only then, the victim may consider whether to grant forgiveness or not. As we have seen in part 1, this is not the case in the biblical tradition, where it is God who, as the victim, first “turns” in multifarious forms of “mercy” to the sinners/perpetrators, who now, and only now, have the opportunity to “re-turn” to God, as a response to his divine initiative. This chapter is dedicated to these forms of turning in the postwar period, and some of the immediate responses they evoked.

In October 1945, a group of church leaders from the Netherlands, the United States, Britain, France, and Switzerland arrived in Stuttgart; their mission: to tell the Germans that “we are here to seek your help, so that you can help us to help you.”³ They perceived that if the relationships between their respective peoples and the Germans, under whose name they had suffered immensely, were to heal, the Christian Church, which had preached and continues to preach reconciliation and renewal through repentance, would have to take this duty seriously. Yet, as one of the initiators and participants noted, “The estrangement between nations cannot be overcome by simply turning a new page or by conceding blithely that the war was a great tragedy for all and therefore

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everyone is guilty of this sin. It’s not that simple. A specific word of repentance was necessary."  

What was meant by “a specific word of repentance”? A word of apology dedicated to the “victim-nation”? No. For the foreign delegation made clear on 18 October 1945, the first day of the “surprise meeting” with their German counterparts, in Stuttgart: “[We] hope that we can talk to one another, as if we were standing before the face of God.” The delegation also expressed that they were not there representing their churches to “cancel out each other’s trespasses,” to issue a blank-check absolution, so to speak, but to acknowledge to the German church that they, too, were “ready to recognize and accept their co-responsibility for what had happened in Germany.”

The church leaders who came to proclaim this message of “turning” did not leave Germany empty-handed. On the next day of the meeting, Bishop Theophil Wurm, representing the newly established EKD, read to the foreign delegation a statement from the German church, the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt (see P2), which later enjoyed an enthusiastic reception abroad, but suffered—at the time—scathing criticism at home, even within Christian churches.

This and other similar early gestures of mercy (in the form of turning toward and reaching out) from the Christian ecumenical movement were apparently so impressive—or have made subsequent initiatives look relatively commonplace—that it did not seem inappropriate to the German bishops to respond to the Polish bishops’ letter of 1965 by recounting how the French and the British Christian leaders had already undertaken similar initiatives in the early postwar years.

At the heart of these gestures of mercy is the recognition that the relationship between the victims and the perpetrators is important—not important for something else, but important in

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4. Ibid., 228.
5. Ibid., 232. More on the idea of nonmutual cancellation of guilt in P11.
itself. In fact, it is so important that the victims are willing to take a risk, the risk of nonresponse or further humiliation, to turn and communicate this perceived importance to their victimizers. As Raymond Aron, a French-Jewish intellectual who also contributed to German-French reconciliation after World War II, put it, all questions concerning war guilt, demilitarization, and change become intractable when the quintessential, orientational idea is lost—the relationship between peoples. He demanded from France such a relationship-centered reorientation when criticizing Charles de Gaulle’s “obsession with security” after 1945.

It was out of the same fixation on relationship—concrete relationships between human persons and peoples rather than metaphorical, compartmentalized “relations”—that “turners” like Gollancz would not be satisfied by an act of “mercy” toward the German people that was undertaken out of self-interest. When spearheading the “Save Europe Now” campaign in Britain to stave off the impending famine in Germany in the winter of 1945, Gollancz and his supporters lambasted not only the voices favoring the starvation of the Germans, but also some of the arguments for saving the Germans. The British people should not save the Germans only because they feared suffering the resulting epidemic themselves, argued Gollancz, but because it was simply right to help starving neighbors. In other words, it could not be self-interest, or even “enlightened” self-interest, but the concern for the well-being of

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8. As a matter of fact, the Polish bishops were disappointed by the initial response from their German counterparts, whose reservation was more indicative of careful political calculations than spontaneous and courageous turning. The contemporaneous Protestant and subsequent lay Catholic expressions have to some extent remedied this insufficiency (see below). Robert Zurek and Basil Kerski, “Der Briefwechsel zwischen den polnischen und deutschen Bischöfen von 1965: Entstehungsgeschichte, historischer Kontext und unmittelbare Wirkung,” in Kerski et al, Briefwechsel, 32–42.


10. Ibid., 355.

the other, the wrongdoer, that should characterize mercy-turnings. Unconcern was for Joseph Rovan, a French-Jewish survivor of the Dachau concentration camp, the “terrible canker (Krebsschaden) that Fascism had left in our hearts.”

In 1945, just a few months after his own liberation from the camp, he asserted unabashedly that “it is not enough that the material life [in Germany] is maintained . . . , it is necessary that the administrator, just because he is French, feels himself duty-bound to ‘his’ Germans.” “The French . . . must honor, respect, and love the German spirit, which is now entrusted to them.”

It is with this fundamental form of mercy, expressed as the victims’ concern for the perpetrators, that other forms of mercy—such as “showing the way” and guiding with an “accompanying gaze”—can begin to take on meanings other than “exercising control” or “lingering mistrust.” Some turners, such as Alfred Grosser and Joseph Rovan, took it upon themselves to engage in postwar German “reeducation” (Umerziehung). As Grosser told his French audience in 1947, “The German youths are groping their way; if they feel themselves isolated, as if shut out for eternity, the danger is that they will first lose courage completely, and then fall for whichever ideology that promises them a glorious future.”

Grosser then went on to “open doors and windows” for the German youths to encounter the outside world, not the least by contributing to the radio education project of Jewish historian Henri Brunschwig in the French occupation zone. Rovan, on the other hand, focused on political reorientation, on imparting the “democratic knowledge,”

12. Joseph Rovan, “L’Allemagne de nos mérites: Deutschland, wie wir es verdienen,” in Zwei Völker—eine Zukunft: Deutsche und Franzosen an der Schwelle des 21. Jahrhunderts (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1986), 90. The essay was first published in French in Esprit on 1 Oct. 1945. The original German word Rovan used was chancre. Quotations from this essay are translated from the German version.


14. Ibid., 100. A German reviewer of Rovan’s writings took him as living proof of the fact that “people from the other side of the border are concerned and unsettled by the same worries we have here in Germany.” See Rüdiger Proske, “Ein Weg zur Verständigung,” Frankfurter Hefte 2, no. 4 (1947): 324–26.

the “spirit of universalism and human dignity,” which “must be taught through and with the example [of France].”

Other turners like Gollancz and those concerned with the justice of the war crime trials employed an even more stringent approach of “showing the way”: not by holding oneself as already knowledgeable of the way to which the perpetrators must turn, but by turning oneself as an object lesson. The British publisher, for instance, considered those who talked about the “reeducation” of the Germans arrogant, who must first do repentance themselves. “The very word [reeducation] is detestable, so instinct is it [sic], as commonly employed, with an odious pharisaism. . . . ‘We, being without sin,’ is what we are saying, ‘will graciously teach you, very gradually we are afraid, to become a decent people—in fact, to become in the end perhaps almost as good as ourselves.’ ”

Noteworthy, however, is not the apparent disagreement between Gollancz and Rovan regarding “reeducation,” but their shared commitment to the use of “example,” the self as example, in turning-education. As Gollancz conceded, “Re-education, properly understood . . . is more important than almost anything else in European politics today. . . . There is really only one way to re-educate people, and that is by force of example.”

These and other similar “self-turnings” as object lessons of “showing the way” no doubt expose oneself to risks of abuse or rejection—especially when the other party clings to the contents

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17. The term *pharisaism* is highly contested in Jewish-Christian discourse, especially because of its historical links with anti-Judaism and antisemitism, that is, since the Pharisees are often portrayed as morally questionable and spiritually misguided in the New Testament (e.g., Mt 23; exception: Acts 5:34–39) antisemites have in various times used the label to stigmatize the entire Jewish people, with the implied assumption that “pharisaism” essentially defines Jewishness. The use of this term by Gollancz (and Arendt and Kogon, etc., as we will see in subsequent chapters) as a vehicle of turning must therefore be evaluated with this etymological background. See Martin Buber, “‘Pharisiertum,’” *Der Jude: Sonderheft; Antisemitismus und jüdisches Volkstum* 1 (1925–27): 123–31.


19. Ibid.
rather than the spirit of these turnings. Yet, it is precisely in this act of turning, by the “victims,” that an essential lesson of repentance is taught: voluntary vulnerability. As we have seen its central idea before (R11) and will see its concrete manifestations later (P11), willed vulnerability is a hallmark of biblical repentance, which characterizes both of the mutual-turning parties.

By “showing the way,” in both positive and negative forms, the victims “liberate” the perpetrators from being “stuck” in conceptualizations that leave no “escape hatch” (R6). By granting a “guiding gaze,” also with its positive and negative forms, the victims conform with the biblical conception of repentance as one of “accompanied passage” rather than a “wandering in seclusion.” In postwar Germany, this continual “gaze”—whether it be in guarding against reverse-turnings to Nazism, antisemitism, or nationalism—has been furnished by many, not the least by the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland (Central Council of Jews in Germany, or ZdJ), established in 1950. While the ZdJ’s “moral watcher” role has been loathed by some and scathingly criticized by others, a place for it, for an “external inspector,” had already from the beginning been prepared in Karl Jaspers’s conception of German “purification” (Reinigung): “We must be ready to receive reproaches . . . we must seek out rather than avoid attacks on us, because they are for us an inspection (Kontrolle) of our own thoughts.”

And even as in moral guilt and metaphysical guilt a person faces the judgment of his own conscience and his God rather than that of other people, “communication” and “talking

20. See P7.

21. Karl Jaspers, Die Schuldfrage (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946), 105. It is important to note the apparent contradiction of Jaspers in this regard. A couple of pages before he had also said: “Purification is not the same for all. Everyone goes his own personal way. It is not to be led forward or shown by somebody else” (103). In light of his broader work, it becomes clear that he was in fact fighting two “mis-turnings” simultaneously: first, Germans turning to each other to assign blame and to escape guilt, and second, Germans turning away from the outside world from which accusations came. It is important therefore to keep in mind to whom and of whom Jaspers was speaking in each instance. In this sense, the suppression of “internal judgment” in favor of “foreign interference” is itself an important turning that reverses the internal/external order of precedence.
“to one another” can help a person attain “moral clarity,” especially with “fellow human beings” (*Mitmenschen*) who are “lovingly concerned about my soul.”

Hence when in today’s Germany the necessity of a Jewish “inspector” in safeguarding democracy against racism of all kinds is recognized across the political and religious spectrum, the formational idea remains that mercy in the form of “guiding gaze” is essential for continual repentance, rather than something to be rejected by the “repentance-accomplished.”

This “accompanying inspection” does not only criticize (prod- ding) but also encourages (comforting). It does not speak out only when the other is doing wrong or about to do wrong, but also when the other is doing right, especially when in doubt or challenged. Hence at a time when many—not the least in Germany—criticized the newly established Bonn democracy in 1950, it was Raymond Aron who stood up to challenge the doubters in France, and to affirm the political path that the (West) Germans were taking at the time. At times also when the hope of repentance and reconciliation is mocked for its seeming impossibility or insurmountability, voices of encouragement and affirmation continue to speak out from across the relationship. Commenting on the postwar “acts of repentance” in Europe, especially by the Germans, René-Samuel Sirat, former chief rabbi of France, spoke of Jewish “astonishment and admiration.” When the proposed Berlin memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe was hindered by resistance on the one

23. See “Eine wichtige Instanz—Politiker und Kirchen gratulieren dem Zentralrat der Juden zum Sechzigsten,” *Jüdische Allgemeine Wochenzeitung*, 19 Jul. 2010. This reading of the expressions, of course, does not answer the doubt concerning “political correctness.” Yet, to reject all these expressions as unauthentic just because they seem to conform to mainstream consensus requires a presumption of intention, which is arguably no less difficult to prove. Rather, the criticism itself is also revealing: why would such a demonstration of self-mistrust be politically correct in Germany in the first place, when it is hardly so elsewhere in the world? In other words, it is not to be taken for granted that the necessity of external inspection is recognized by the political consensus.
hand and skepticism on the other, James Young, the only Jewish member of the Findungskommission tasked to break through the impasse, stood up in critical moments to reassure his German counterparts of the value of their initiative:

The memorial comes as close as humanly possible to meeting Germany’s insoluble [memorial] problem. . . . With his decision to create a space in the center of Berlin for the commemoration [of the murdered Jews of Europe], the federal chancellor [Kohl] reminds Germany and the entire world of the self-inflicted void in the heart of German culture and of German consciousness. This is a courageous, difficult act of repen-
tance (Akt der Reue) on the part of the government.27

These responses of mercy—that is, the conscious “turning to” from the compulsive “turning away”—in its various forms (encourage-
ment, admonishment, appreciation, etc.) were not expressed in vain. On several occasions in the postwar period, “acts of repen-
tance” could be identified as clear and direct responses to mercy. Before analyzing the multifarious forms of these acts in the chapters to follow, we will cite a few examples here to highlight the responsiveness of these acts.

Right after Alfred Grosser’s call to bring German and French youths together in 1947, a public response came from Hamburg, with a proposal to send German youths to help rebuild the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane, destroyed by the Nazis in 1944, thus prefiguring the subsequent atonement-volunteerism in postwar Germany. Even as the offer was eventually turned down by the few survivors in the village, Grosser affirmed the attempt by the Ger-
man youth as a sign of commendable readiness to do atonement.28

26. For a comprehensive documentation of these debates, see Ute Heimrod, Günter Schlusche, and Horst Seferens, eds., Der Denkmalstreit—Das Denkmal? (Berlin: Philo, 1999).
27. See James E. Young, “Die menschenmögliche Lösung der unlösbaren Auf-
gabe,” Der Tagesspiegel, 25 Aug. 1998. Later he also praised Germany, for “no other nation has yet attempted to reunite itself on the foundation of remembrance of its crimes.” Young, “Was keine andere Nation je versucht hat,” Berliner Zei-
While responding to these “positive” gestures of mercy could be rather straightforward, responding to its “negative” forms could be delicate. For there exists the problem of “seeing the contents but not the spirit,” already mentioned above. That is, if the repentance seeker merely repeats the contents of these “negative,” self-guiltifying, “showing-the-way” expressions from the victims, then he is not doing his own turning, or even falling into the traps of self-victimization and other-blaming. This is the problem of subject-position—that is, the same thing said by a Jewish survivor or an ordinary German can have the opposite relational effect. This problem is not something that can be simply “spirited away” by claims to academic objectivity. To deal squarely with this problem of turning-direction, a German publisher of Gollancz’s works had taken the step of issuing what amounts to a “precaution” to the readers: “The following report [of Gollancz’s works] is not published to earn applause from the wrong side. . . . What they read here is their shame. . . . Under their reign, writings like Gollancz’s would be impossible.” Rather, it should serve as a source of hope for the young, the old, and the active opponents of the Nazi regime: “May his voice be a shimmer of hope for them.”

The hope that was “received” consisted partly of the sin perspective of Nazi atrocities, as we explored in the previous chapter, which made repentance conceptually possible. But mainly it was the concern expressed in Gollancz’s writing, which the report-writer did not fail to pick up from the biblical texts and ideas quoted by Gollancz to call for mercy. In one critical passage of the original work, Gollancz condemned the formulation—which he attributed to Bernard Viscount Montgomery—that repentance should precede mercy, and asserted: “[It] seems to me, as a Jew who believes in Christian ethics, a somewhat heretical application of Christ’s

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 50, 11–13, 25, 26, 41.
teaching: and fifty bishops will not make me, who can read the New Testament as well as they, think otherwise.” In reference to this delicate passage, the report-writer tactfully hid the quoted saying of Montgomery’s while retaining Gollancz’s own words, thus dampening his critique. Although this would make the “reversal” Gollancz was talking about less intelligible, it was perhaps deemed necessary to prevent this message of mercy from being “misapplied” in turn to justify German impenitence. In the same spirit, Dolf Sternberger, editor and publisher of Die Wandlung, took great care in presenting another work of Gollancz’s, In Darkest Germany (1947), to his German readers:

This incomparable book . . . is ruthless (erbarungslos) regarding the facts and full of mercy (Erbarmen) regarding the people. . . . It is critical against those responsible in the zone and those in England. . . . What Gollancz says to his Londoner friends . . . does not concern us, or almost not at all. I mean: in the moral sense. Everyone should mind his own business (Jeder kehre vor seiner Tür)!

The one initiative of turning that has evoked probably the most memorable response in postwar Germany, culminating in the quintessential symbol of German repentance, Willy Brandt’s spontaneous Kniefall in Warsaw in 1970 (which will be analyzed in P5), was the Polish bishops’ letter of reconciliation in 1965, already cited at the beginning of this chapter. Its groundbreaking impact was evidenced by the fact that, as late as 1968, when (West) Germany was on the verge of a transformation that would have far-reaching societal and also political consequences, a group of German Catholics (mostly lay intellectuals but also clerics and

33. Gollancz, Our Threatened Values, 115.
34. Mayer-Reifferscheidt, Gollancz’ Ruf, 49–50. The “heretical application” was summarily rendered as “When Christianess (Christlichkeit) is made a condition, then the true spirit of Christianity (Christentum) is lost.”
36. This point was emphasized not only by the German media reports at the time, but also by Willy Brandt himself. See Brandt, Begegnungen und Einsichten: Die Jahre 1960–1975 (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1976), 525.
theologians) spontaneously published their own response to the Polish initiative. They were the “Bensberger Kreis,” or the “circle of friends of Pax Christi,” meeting in Bensberg, near Cologne.

This initiative grew partly out of the disappointment with the German Catholic responses to the Polish bishops’ letter thus far. “It is depressing for us . . . that German Catholicism has not summoned up the courage and the power to protest” for the rights of Polish victims, but obstructed reconciliation with their “lethargy” instead. Indeed, although the German bishops’ letter in response expressed the “turning around” of values between homeland and people-to-people relationships, saying that “no German bishop wants and demands anything other than the brotherly relationship between the two peoples,” and that the German claim of “right to homeland” had really no “aggressive intention in it,” it still left too much to be desired. Whereas the Polish bishops had taken great risks in turning their own people from the fixation on their own victimhood to see that of others, their enemies’, and consequently, to see not only the need to forgive but also their own need for forgiveness, the German bishops’ response was incommensurate in “determination, courage, and readiness for reconciliation,” especially in light of the earlier initiative of their Protestant counterparts, which threatened to tear the EKD apart with its taboo-breaking contents (see P4).

Hence the “Bensberger Memorandum” of 1968 by the German lay Catholics was significant in this regard—to bring about a risky, hence meaningful, “turning” that would measure up, as far as possible, to the Polish one. It was also this spontaneous act that was perceived by the Polish press at the time as a genuine

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40. The authors of the text had acutely perceived this point as they sought to convince their fellow German Christians to seize the moment to recognize the Oder-Neiße border: “When [such recognition] has become the order of the day, then it will no longer mean anything as a gesture.” Bensberger Kreis, *Memorandum*, 20.
“change” in the Polish-German relationship. While its contents will be further analyzed in subsequent chapters, suffice it here to highlight one important message of the memorandum: the German Catholics’ **gratefulness for the Polish initiative**, not only in a general sense, but also specifically for the Polish bishops’ “help” in making German turning less difficult, by not relying on untenable “historical arguments” in the claim of the Ostgebiete: “We thank the Polish bishops, that they . . . had based their argument rather on the new facts: the loss of territories in eastern Poland . . . and the life and work of the new settlers.” Likewise, the “lethargy of the German public sphere, especially the Catholics,” which was deemed “the greatest obstacle to the work of peace,” was juxtaposed to the initiatory “message of reconciliation” of the Polish bishops, which was regarded as a necessary “intervention in the historical process.”

As we have seen in the previous chapter, repentance as a response to mercy is not without risk, the **risk of being abused**. Rather than first ensuring that his own justice is well secured before making any turning, the repentant sinner, out of his gratefulness for mercy, ventures forth to take that risk. So it was with the Bensberger Memorandum. In one of the steps that went beyond the EKD Ostendenkschrift of 1965, which served as an indispensable basis of it, the Bensberger Kreis not only asked fellow Germans to accept the impossibility of getting back the lost territories, because of the new injustice that the process of regaining would inevitably bring upon the Polish people who had grown up and were now living there (this point was already in the EKD document; see P4), but also demanded that the government review its reparation (Wiedergutmachung) policy—which at the time excluded those concentration camp survivors who were citizens of states with which the (West) German government did not yet have diplomatic relations—so that the Polish victims could be compensated like the others. “These should in no way be reparation claims from one state against

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43. Ibid., 25.
another, but the claims of individual persons on a state. . . . ‘Damages should be repaired where injustice had been suffered. . . . no matter [to] which nation [these victims] belong.’”

Skeptics could easily find fodder in this “naive” proposal. Just as the renunciation of the German eastern territories could be framed not as a “reparation” for Nazi crimes but as a “concession” to the new evil—Communism—reparations to individual Polish victims at a time when West Germans enjoyed hardly any confidence of the Communists in the East could equally be disparaged as quixotic at best, just as the abovementioned German youth’s proposal to rebuild a Nazi-ravaged village in France was deemed “unrealistic.”

Yet it must be said that it is not the chance of success but the willingness to become vulnerable—precisely when “success” appears most unlikely—that is appreciated by the counterpart in a relationship, that is more “effective,” or affective, in evoking responses of turning.

But still, one serious problem exists in this model of collective reconciliation through “mutual forgiveness”: to put it bluntly, could the Polish bishops forgive on behalf of all the victims of Nazi atrocities? Not only Poles but also Polish Jews and non-Polish victims? Can Christian communities forgive each other when the Christian Church as a whole bears the guilt of bystander if not co-perpetrator vis-à-vis its victims—chief among them the persecuted Jews of the Shoah? We thus have arrived at a typical problem for collective reconciliation, namely, when internal mutual-turning poses potential obstacles externally, or mutual-turning in one relationship threatens the neglect of another wounded relationship. In this regard, the legitimacy of the forgiveness-issuers should not be taken for granted, as we shall discuss in P14.

44. Ibid., 22–23. They were quoting Heinrich Lübke’s 1965 Bergen-Belsen speech as president of the Federal Republic of Germany (1959–69). This demand would be (partially) fulfilled in 1980, when a 400-million-Mark “Hardship Fund” was set up to address precisely this deficiency, which unfortunately was marred by the Nachmann affair. More on this in P11.