Peace be with you!

Margot Käßmann

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The greeting of Jesus as the risen Christ to his disciples has been a challenge and obligation to Christians and churches all over the world ever since. Therefore, the issues of the “Decade to Overcome Violence” have been at the heart of the ecumenical movement since its early days. And I am convinced that the theological relevance of the topic and the ethical implications have to be part of the future work of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

When the churches of the world assembled in Amsterdam 1948 they declared that war is contrary to the will of God. After all the hatred and destruction of World War II, it had become obvious that churches as well as the nations and societies they lived in had gone astray from God’s will for peace. That is especially true of the churches in Germany. But already in the midst of war the ecumenical voice made itself heard. One example is Bishop George Bell who, in the British Parliament, spoke out against the bombardment of German cities. A courageous option with regard to the enemy.

The issue of violence stayed on the agenda of the WCC. Is there any justification for violence whether in war, in revolution for a just cause, or in defence of human rights? At the Uppsala Assembly in 1968, Martin Luther King was invited as a speaker. He was assassinated, but his voice spoke to the assembly anyway. And his voice is still to be heard: it is a very real message for today! In a speech on 4 June 1957, “The power of non-violence”, he said:

“We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is non-aggressive physically, but strongly aggressive spiritually.”

As we come to the end of the Decade to Overcome Violence, I would like to highlight two sources especially. One is the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. When the churches came together for the sixth assembly in Vancouver 1983, the churches of East Germany asked the WCC to call a Council for Peace like Dietrich Bonhöffer had in 1934. In his central speech Alan Boesak from South Africa argued that churches cannot commit to peace ignoring the reality of injustice in the world. Darlene Keju-Johnson in her speech related peace and justice to the reality of nuclear testing and waste in the Pacific.

In the end it became obvious: justice, peace and the integrity of creating must not be debated separately. We cannot talk about the one without having in mind the other. And this is not just an ethical issue. No, the “esse”, the being of the church is in question with regard to these issues. A church that ignores war, injustice and the destruction of creation is not a church. It became more than obvious that ecclesial and ethical issues are radically linked.

Affirmation VI in the final document of the World Convocation for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in Seoul 1990 argued assertively for non-violence. That statement had a
major impact on the debate in Australia on the Gulf War, made a substantial contribution to the strong anti-war sentiment of the Canberra Assembly 1991, and finally led to the decisions in Johannesburg 1994.

The other source is the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. It was initiated during the WCC Central Committee meeting in Buenos Aires 1985. Baerbel Wartenberg had led the WCC delegation to the UN women’s conference in Nairobi. Their report made very clear that the community of women and men in the church, as a former programme had been named, needed to be at the top of the agenda. The decade was launched in 1988 and had its final highlight in 1998 at the assembly of the WCC in Harare.

The last year of the decade was spent with team visits to member churches. Official delegations of two women and two men each visited as “living letters” all member churches in order to find out what was the reality of women in the life of churches. The result was evident: violence against women is a vital issue in the majority of member churches. In the final report about those visits we can find proof of the unwillingness of many churches to deal with the problem:

- “One church leader spoke of ‘disciplining’ his wife and being thanked by her later.”
- “Several others queried the definition of ‘violence’, wanting to distinguish between violence that resulted in death, and ‘just hitting’.”
- “The churches are responsible for the ‘violence of silence’.”

The report made evident: Violence is not just a theme somehow “outside in the world”, but a topic within our churches, our relations as Christians. Thus many women saw the Decade to Overcome Violence as a consequent follow up to the final report of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with women.

**Biblical ambiguity**

When the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches was able for the first time to meet in South Africa in 1994, Bishop Mogoba called for a Programme to Combat Violence as a follow-up to the Programme to Combat Racism. Oh yes, that seemed the right consequence. Member churches from all over the world reported about violence destroying the lives of people and entire communities. But, did we ask then, is “combat” the right word? The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans writes, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom. 12:21) But can violence be overcome? Has not violence been a fact of life ever since Cain and Abel? Here it needs a closer look at biblical and theological issues.

There is, in fact, ambiguity regarding the legitimization of violence within the Hebrew part of the Bible. In part, this is due to the differences in context and perceptions among the authors. Certainly the longing for a God who fights for the people and the understanding of crisis as a punishment from God are well known in almost all religions and all contexts, including Christianity. But alongside the clear references to a warrior God, a red thread of nonviolence runs through the Old Testament. This seems to be the much more exciting part because it is unusual and unfamiliar.

Rather than being troubled or repelled time and again by the legitimization of violence within the Hebrew part of the Bible, we should point to texts like the story of Shiphrah and Puah, an account of courageous civil disobedience (Ex 1, 15-22). Or take Isaiah 53 as an example, the well-known passage about the suffering servant. We can also think of prophecy like Isaiah where swords become ploughshares (2,4). God gives Shalom. God liberates.

The message of the New Testament is very clear. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus opens a whole new set of categories. It is not the warriors, the heroes and freedom fighters,
the strong and the brave who are blessed. Not, it is the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart the peacemakers and the persecuted ones. What a contradiction to the reality of this world! The church as a “sign of the kingdom” was present in the discussions at the fourth assembly of the WCC in Uppsala 1968. That means: ecclesiological convictions and worldly matters are linked. The credibility of the church depends among other issues on the way it deals with violence!

After the Central Committee meeting in Johannesburg 1994 we asked ourselves in the governing bodies what might be a practical consequence. A reference group was created and met in Rio de Janeiro to discuss what should be the initial focus of the programme, given the complexity of the issue and the risk that taking on too many of its facets at once could make it difficult to find a profile. During the meeting the participants were increasingly struck by the fact that large cities are a microcosm of the world as a whole. Thus seven cities in very different regions in the world were chosen in order to show what violence means in the lives of people, to highlight initiatives of the churches and to connect them in order to learn from one another: Belfast, Boston, Colombo, Durban, Jerusalem, Kingston and Rio de Janeiro.

At this point, I want to remember Salpy Eskidian who in person brought these cities and the Christian initiatives for peace and non-violence together. The Seven City Campaign was so convincing that after many difficulties the Assembly in Harare 1998 finally approved a motion of Fernando Enns to prepare a Decade to Overcome Violence. It was officially launched during the Central Committee meeting in Berlin 2001 – a very moving moment for me as a German. We lit candles near the Brandenburg gate where a wall had divided not only my country, but Europe for 28 years. One of the reasons the wall came down was that Christians in the German Democratic Republic had called for freedom, for justice, peace and integrity of creation. They brought the call of “no violence” from the churches of Leipzig and Dresden and East Berlin to the streets of those cities and made a non-violent revolution possible.

No theological legitimisation for violence
But the past ten years have not turned the world into a peaceful place – by a long way. Since 11 September 2001 terrorism and the so called “war against terrorism” have caused nameless suffering. Terrorists like Bin Laden have seen themselves as in the name of Islam fulfilling God’s will. Nations that declare themselves a democracy have been led astray, using terms like “crusade” and “axis of evil” in order to legitimize military action and a seemingly legitimate demand to “kill or capture!" Trade in weapons is increasing rapidly and steadily. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the German share of the world market in weapons rose to 11% between 2005 and 2010 only being overtaken by Russia with 23% and the USA with 30%. That means: our economies profit from the violence and war that we lament. Churches cannot stay silent with regard to that dreadful evidence!

It is obvious today that religion plays a vital role with regard to peace-making and overcoming violence. As the roman-catholic theologian Hans Küng says: “There is no peace between nations without peace among religions.” It is time that religion refused to be misused by pouring oil on the fire of war and hatred. Consequently, it is time to deny that there is any theological legitimisation for violence. There is no just war – that is what we have learned from history. There is only just peace. And that needs creativity, time, engagement and financing. In a convincing study of 40 international conflicts, Markus Weingardt has
documented how influential religiously motivated people can be in peace-making. They are able to build bridges between parties, because they are trusted. They have symbols of peace like common prayer. They dare to talk to “the enemy”.

We all know that those who believe in non-violence are often looked at as being naïve, not understanding the reality of power and politics. Let us accept that! Jesus was naïve himself if we look at his life with the measures of success. In the eyes of the world he failed, was convicted, suffered, died. But that dying man on the cross has been a challenge to the yearning for power and those who believe in victory ever since.

The power of love is greater than the power of weapons and force. That is what we believe. What a message! We believe in God who is not almighty but comes as an infant, dies under torture and thus non-violence and powerlessness challenge violence and power. That is the point of reference for Christians. They and the church have always gone astray in history when that was forgotten and violence and destructive power were legitimized.

I am convinced that here in Kingston, Jamaica, we are not at the end of a journey. The end of the Decade to Overcome Violence should mark a new beginning in four areas of focus for the churches of the world:

1. We need clear theological convictions that violence is in no regard to be legitimized by religion. There are two billion Christians in this world. If the radically stand up for non-violence, dare to dream the dream of a world without violence, it would definitely make a difference. Peace be with you...

2. It has to be our conviction that violence is not just one among many other ethical questions to be debated. We talk about ecclesiological questions, about the being, the “esse” of the church. In a violent world after all failures in the past the churches finally have to declare: There is no way to peace, peace is the way. Put the sword in its place.

3. All over the world we find people who out of their religious motivations try to mediate conflicts. They need support, spiritually and financially. Reconciliation is not just part of the liturgy, but hard work in reality. Blessed are the peace-makers.

4. Churches all over the world have to challenge the governments in their countries to stop producing, funding and purchasing weapons. It is a scandal that weapon production and trade is a source of economic wealth. Politics is not a separate reign that does not touch church interest. We are churches in the midst of this world and have to act in it. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares.

In the end we have to keep prayer and action in close contact. If we pray, “Blessed are the peace makers” that means that we are blessed, if we make peace. That can be a very radical message. The past has been full of challenges. The future will be, too. As Christians, churches and the ecumenical movement, challenge the forces of violence! We have a clear calling to overcome violence. Let us fulfil it.

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