

Sarah Delere

Ethics of Reconciliation – European Perspectives

Report on the 59th Annual Conference of the Societas Ethica (24.–27. August 2023)

1 Reconciliation – an ambitious and ambivalent concept

Reconciliation remains a colourful and charged term, labelling a process as well as an aspired end, a practical manoeuvre as well as an eschatological vision. But is reconciliation always desirable, and how does it relate to other concepts like justice, truth, coming to terms, narration, reparation, and self-determination? Which insights could be offered by philosophical or theological ethics? Those were some of the questions tackled by the 59th annual conference of the *Societas Ethica – European Society for Research in Ethics*. Set under the topic of *Ethics of Reconciliation – European Perspectives*, the conference took place in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from August 24–27, 2023, and thus offered a surrounding in which the theme was relatable in historical and societal ways besides the academic programme. Given that the conference was structured across parallel sessions, it is not possible to report neither chronologically nor comprehensively. Instead, I will draw overarching lines and attribute the papers to three main areas of research: reconciliation in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, societal and political dimensions, and theological and philosophical perspectives.

2 Setting the frame – contextualisation within Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina

An initial grounding of the debate around reconciliation in the local conditions and social circumstances of Bosnia and Herzegovina was provided by the pre-conference workshop for PhD students and post-doctoral researchers held by *Zilka Spahić Šiljak* (Sarajevo). Šiljak pointed out that, while explanations are often regarded as integral to reconciliation, in the

Bosnian Herzegovinian context there was less request by the victims for explanations than for being heard and believed. She raised awareness of the fact that, although several social roles and identities were designated by local and international donor programmes in order to *start the conversation*, many people, particularly women, still met their perpetrators in daily life, e. g., in the police. Based on the observation that the younger generation mostly cannot understand the trigger that the war in Ukraine represents for the older generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she questioned whether there is a connection between one's own experience and the ability to empathise with others that could affect one's understanding of reconciliation.

In his political science-based lecture on “Political reconciliation – illustrations from Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Dino Abazović* (Sarajevo) illuminated the concept of political reconciliation and its connection to social reconstruction. Building up on the premise that political reconciliation is required to go beyond a victim-centred approach and include other societal actors as agents, he questioned how Bosnia and Herzegovina could be reconciled in political rather than ethno-national terms. He described a two-fold movement of an ethno-nationalisation of the sacral and sacralisation of the ethno-national, in which calls for engagement by religious leaders were answered with silence. Abazović pointed out that reconciliation is a term which requires a high degree of negotiation as there is no adequate translation for the term “reconciliation” in local languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hence, the actual concept of reconciliation and its content need to be agreed upon locally. Despite the (normative) necessity, these conversations often would not circle around a confrontation with the past or reconciliation, but rather the idea of a return to “normal lives” and social reconstruction.

Another aspect of these local debates around reconciliation was highlighted by *Zilka Spahić Šiljak* (Sarajevo) in her keynote on “En-gendering reconciliation in the Balkans.” She noted a drastic decline in women's representation to a mere 2–4 % during the transition period, while at the same time religious leaders relied on women's parish groups. The predominant narrative about women shifted post-war from revered mothers who bore soldiers for the armies to marginalized, sinful women who had been raped and whose fate no one wanted to address. Šiljak, influenced by perspectives such as Uma Narayan's, emphasized not just the tangible, bodily aspects of (post-) war experiences in feminist post-war ethics but also the convergence of justice

and care. In doing so, she confronted and questioned male-centric ideas of security and the assumption that states can provide acknowledgement for human needs. Instead, she highlighted the work of individual women such as Danka Zelić and Sabiha Husić, underscoring their valuable contributions.

3 Reconciliation in societal and political contexts and concepts

Kjell-Åke Nordquist (Stockholm) initiated the conceptual peace-science exploration of reconciliation and delivered a keynote on political reconciliation, examining behaviour, attitudes, and issues as integral to conflicts. He stated that peacebuilders might best approach a conflict from the side of attitudes and introduced methods such as silence, compensation, memorialisation, legal methods or meeting the other in the reconciliation process. Nordquist addressed challenges with forgiveness (unilateral), distinguishing it from reconciliation (at least bilateral), emphasizing political reconciliation's focus on harm from politically motivated violence and the creation of a functional level of trust. He discussed power imbalances and contested the idea of a "before/after"-model in post-colonial relationships, among others, because the concept of restoration has no historic point of reference. Nordquist critically explored conditions signifying a reconciled society, like the importance of acknowledging historical truths or recognizing other people's stories as relevant to the own.

Next to his comprehensive introduction, the conference's exploration delved into three specific areas: historical, international, and social contexts. *Gary Slater* (Münster) sought to explore the relevance of the *Peace of Westphalia* for present-day theological and political inquiries concerning reconciliation. Drawing lessons from early modern Westphalia and its historical background (especially Spain in 1492, the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, and the Westphalian Peace of 1648) and referring to the Bosnian War of the 1990s (via Miroslav Volf and R. Scott Appleby), his paper posed two questions. First, how are religious and political borders related? Second, how can probing this relationship serve the ethical task of promoting reconciliation? He claimed that reflection on religious borders discloses practices that promote reconciliation across political borders, with Westphalian violence, peace, and border-making

as instructive. Recognizing that reconciliation must transcend certain boundaries, he posited two potential commitments: a) emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the religious origins of political borders and b) understanding the legacy of Westphalian borders by candidly addressing the ambivalence inherent in their norms.

In line with more recent political developments, *Sarah Delere* (Hamburg) investigated the surprising lack of discourse on reconciliation in state-building within theological ethics. She questioned why there is extensive literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation but minimal focus on state-building and reconciliation. According to her analysis, this gap exists for conceptual reasons, which suggests that mainstream conceptions of state-building overlook the need for reconciliation within the process. She drew upon, among others, Grainne Kelly's differentiation between vertical and horizontal reconciliation and transferred this to institutions in post-conflict settings. On the basis of an understanding of state as a type of persistent and self-controlled situation, she advocated for reconciliation as a crucial conceptual link between state-building and peacebuilding. Delere was later awarded the Young Scholar's Paper Award by the Societas Ethica.

Katharina Leniger (Würzburg) shed light on an often-overlooked social context and posed the question "How to do justice to whom?" in her equally titled paper, in which she explored the concept of Restorative Justice within the German adult penal system. Leniger reframed terminology, discussing offenders as "responsible individuals" and victims as "affected individuals". She explained that awareness had grown that an exclusive focus on work with offenders may not suffice to do justice to the involved parties and which led to the emergence of "victim-oriented" programmes and "offender-victim mediation." In her discussion, she navigated between the institution's punitive and security-focused roles and the desire to address the individual needs of all parties involved. She examined whether community-based Restorative Justice, with its temporal distance from the offense and its potential for granting ownership and agency to all sides, could help. However, despite the potential she highlighted in her ethical analysis, she cautioned that the moral discrepancy between involved parties, assimilation of Restorative Justice principles into the existing normative guidelines of the penal system, and risk of a hasty adoption of claims for reconciliation, should be critically evaluated.

4 Reconciliation from a theological and philosophical perspective

Philosophical-theological perspectives formed another focal point of the conference. In her paper, *Alexandra Lebedeva* (Uppsala) turned to a philosophical critique of a context often connected to reconciliation and analysed testimony in truth commissions. Using Jacques Derrida's deconstruction in *Poetics and Politics of Witnessing*, she argued that testimony poses two challenges: Derrida emphasizes testimony's uncertainty not as evidence but as a faith-based act, highlighting its relational nature. First, Lebedeva suggested testimony necessitates reciprocal performativity – witnesses promise truth, listeners promise belief, entailing responsibility for both. Truth commissions often restrict testimony to economic reparations, neglecting moral responsibilities tied to human rights violations. Second, she questioned testimony's representational capacity, underscoring unique experiences. Lebedeva linked this to moral responsibility, citing the aporetic irrepresentability of testimony and stressed the duty to acknowledge representation's inevitable failure, recognizing privilege and power imbalances in attempts to represent.

Decidedly theological approaches to reconciliation were at the centre of Martin Leiner's lecture and the panel discussion that concluded the conference. *Martin Leiner* (Jena) analysed "Fundamental decisions for a theological ethics of Reconciliation" in his keynote and opened by setting the premises that in theological ethics, too, conflict in itself is not bad, and reconciliation might be able to shed a different light on conflict than traditional peace and security studies with a focus on conflict resolution. Addressing six facets of reconciliation, Leiner's discussion commenced with the description of reconciliation not just toward the other, but also within one's own biographical development. He concluded that even the seemingly positive action of individual reconciliation with the adversary could lead to less reconciliation with one's own community, thereby rendering it less desirable. Ultimately, it is impossible to cater similarly to all facets and loyalties of reconciliation and, thus, require forgiveness for the individual choices of reconciliation. Leiner contributed his Christian-theological perspective by emphasizing the salvific role of God's reconciliation with the world in Christ, underscoring that it applies universally by being and not solely by suffering. In reference to this and Ricœur's understanding of forgiveness, the imperative would be forgiving people, not deeds.

The final panel discussion by *Zorica Maros* (Sarajevo), *Rabbi Ute Steyer* (Stockholm) and *Margaret Kamitsuka* (Cleveland) centred around theological resources and limits of reconciliation in contemporary Europe. Maros highlighted the complexity of forgiveness amidst the unforgivable, citing terminological ambiguities of “victim” and a culture of competitive victimization in Bosnia and Herzegovina which perpetuated violence. She questioned forgiveness’ applicability as she emphasized the state’s role in pursuing justice and contrasted it with forgiveness as an individual act. Justice precedes forgiveness but is restrained, resulting in a dichotomy where the unconditional nature of forgiveness cannot be granted and consequently limits the power of the victims once again. Steyer emphasized atonement’s importance in Jewish thought, stressing that transgressions are forgiven only when peace is achieved between individuals. She scrutinized the challenge that forgiveness can be unattainable as forgiveness needs to be granted by the victim, i. e. murder cannot be forgiven. Kamitsuka delved into feminist ethics, advocating for a gender-balanced understanding. She emphasized the epistemic value of women’s bodily experiences, highlighting that the challenge lies less in reconciliation and more in believing in and addressing what their bodies convey – even if those affected do not have a term for it (yet).

5 Concluding remarks

The 59th *Societas Ethica* annual conference offered a thorough theoretical exploration of the subject of reconciliation, delving into various contexts and perspectives in an intersectional manner. The conference intertwined theoretical analyses with societal landscapes often overlooked, including the realms of incarceration, European colonial history, and the local reality of Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Notably, the discussions brought to light the intricate paradoxes inherent in reconciliation and forgiveness or testimony. However, if one were to identify areas for future thought, they might primarily reside in the theoretical domain. First, while the concept of reconciliation was thoroughly interrogated, questions lingered regarding its tangible benefits compared to more precise terms like reparation, forgiveness, or coming to terms. An ongoing process of deconstruction might offer more clarity. Second, it could prove pertinent to explore whether the concept should extend

beyond the individual experiences to a collective realm. Can it be applied analogously on both levels? How might ethical claims shift then?

The 60th annual conference of the Societas Ethica will take place from 22–25 August, 2024, in Uppsala/Sigtuna, Sweden and will focus on *Human Rights – Critical Perspectives*.

About the Author

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