

## The theme of reconciliation in political philosophy

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**B**riefly looking at the great political philosophy treatises – from Plato’s Republic to John Locke’s Two Treatises of Government, through Aristotle’s Politics, Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract, Machiavelli’s The Prince and Hegel’s Philosophy of Right – one finds few references to reconciliation. Yet, in the nineteen laws of nature cited by Hobbes in the Leviathan, two could be related to reconciliation: “the faculty of pardon” – the sixth law – and the “law concerning mediators” – the fifteenth law. For instance, he formulates the law on pardon as follows: “A sixth law of nature is this: that upon caution of the future time, a man ought to pardon the offences past of them that, repenting, desire it. For pardon is nothing but granting of peace; which though granted to them that persevere in their hostility, be not peace, but fear; yet not granted to them that give caution of the future time is sign of an aversion to peace, and therefore contrary to the law of nature.” However, Hobbes does not give the same importance to all the laws of nature. They oblige only in *foro interno*, but not always in *foro externo*. In fact, given the restive nature of human beings, their natural propensity to violence, the CIVITAS (The Republic) would only be viable if all power were confided in one person, the great Leviathan, this “mortal god”, who would establish peace and protection for all without relying on the internal tendencies of individuals.

In his Philosophy of Right, Hegel also speaks of reconciliation. He assigns to his political philosophy the mission of “reconciliation”; “philosophy as reconciliation”. However, he uses the term “reconciliation” (*Versöhnung* in German) within the context of a critique addressed to Emmanuel Kant concerning the dichotomy that the thoughts of the latter create between individual autonomy (liberty) and the well being of the state (in the moral sense of the term: *Sittlichkeit*). The role of political philosophy, according to Hegel, consists in demonstrating that veritable individual freedom is only achieved through the political, economic and other structures of the state. This is the process of integration of the individual into the state which Hegel calls “*Versöhnung*.”

If we turn our attention to moral philosophy, an ancillary of political philosophy, it leads us to one conclusion: reconciliation is rarely mentioned in the great treatises of moral philosophy. Consider, for example, two classical authors: Aristotle and David Hume. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle lists the moral virtues which should assist people to lead a good life in the *polis*. Among the twelve moral virtues mentioned, the word reconciliation is nowhere to be found. The same is true in David Hume’s survey on the principles of morality. Reconciliation is nowhere to be found in the catalogue

comprising approximately eighteen “qualities immediately useful to ourselves and others” to lead a good life in society.

Moreover, classical political philosophy is generally silent with regard to reconciliation. Why this silence? Was reconciliation not considered an important ingredient in ending disputes or social divisions which, nonetheless, also existed in these societies?

One plausible explanation for this silence is related to the nature of the theme itself. In effect, reconciliation has strong religious connotations, above all when by reconciliation we also understand notions such as pardon and conversion of hearts. Political philosophy is the study of economic, legal and political structures which seek to promote a rightful society. In this context, reconciliation, understood as essentially religious and/or regarding interpersonal relations, has little to do with the essentially structural approach of political philosophy.

However, after Hegel, reconciliation emerged in political philosophy in a new light with the publication, in 1971, of *A Theory of Justice*, by the Harvard philosopher, John Rawls. The background of Rawls’ reflections (which he begins to develop in the 1950s) is the context of a post-Reform society where the future of the world is marked by religious and cultural pluralism, as opposed to the pre-Reform society characterised by conflict and violence due to religious wars. The work of John Rawls’ is thus set within the context of a post-conflict society. One of the goals of *A Theory of Justice* is precisely to save modern society from the horrible wrongs before the Reform, notably the religious wars.

In truth, the title of John Rawls’ major work, *A Theory of Justice*, can also be understood as a ‘theory of reconciliation,’ even, a ‘theory of tolerance.’ Was it to avoid the title of the famous Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke, written during the height of the Reform crisis (1689) and considered as a vibrant promotion of reconciliation of religions and other different forms of life, that Rawls preferred “*A Theory of Justice*” to “*A Theory of Tolerance*”? This is not impossible. However, what appears clear is that the fundamental question lying at the heart of *A Theory of Justice* deals with reconciliation. This appears clearer in his second work, *Political Liberalism*, where Rawls attempts to clarify his thoughts, formulating the question of reconciliation as follows: “How is it possible that there may exist a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?”

In this way, reconciliation appears as the challenge *par excellence* of the modern world. For Rawls, reconciliation was not a solution. It is rather a question, given that it is dependent on the problem of pluralism, which is a natural fact of human existence. Whether we want it or not, we are, by nature, different and sometimes reasonably irreconcilable. To deny this would be naïve; we would risk seeking unrealistic solutions to resolve our differences.

Consequently, if reconciliation is, by nature, a problem, the challenge consists in seeking efficient solutions to prevent our differences from becoming the source of divisions, conflicts and wars. Here Rawls proposes justice as the principal way of promoting reconciliation and, therefore, a stable society; tolerance being one of the essential components of justice.

In political philosophy, the question of reconciliation is, thus, strictly tied to that of justice. This is the ideal means through which reconciliation between individuals, peoples and states can take place. In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls develops the principles of justice which ought to reconcile the nations of the world. It is in this context that Rawls declares that justice is the “first virtue of social institutions” in the promotion of peace and social stability. We also understand beyond doubt why Aristotle, and after him St. Thomas of Aquinas, before Rawls declared that justice is the “mother of all virtues”, embodied in all the other virtues. In other words, without justice, none of the other virtues make any sense, including reconciliation. On the contrary, thanks to justice, the other virtues are enriched.

In modern political philosophy, justice plays a psychological and, overall, an immensely therapeutic role in reconciliation and, therefore, the peace process. Without a doubt, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, so to say, before as well as after violence, the justice to which each one of us is entitled (*suum cuique*) reassures, creates confidence and provides guarantees for the future. Justice is this “ingredient” which provides confidence to build stable relationships. This is why reconciliation can be considered as the daughter of justice, which establishes reconciliation from the bottom up.

This being so, what about the current debate on reconciliation? If it is true that reconciliation is the daughter of justice, one must disapprove of the current tendency, above all by certain peace activists, to separate reconciliation from justice.

With the theme of reconciliation very much in fashion, in the context of the Society of Jesus and the Church in general, it is feared that the vision, once vigorous and well-developed, of the defence of the faith and the struggle for justice will give way to a weaker vision, based essentially on reconciliation which must engender peace and justice. This thematic shift can be the source of confusion and frustration for those awaiting structural changes for a better world for all. Since General Congregation 32 solemnly proclaimed justice as something which produces, or better engenders (literally gives birth, causes to exist) reconciliation, our commitment must be unwavering and absolute. Otherwise, we will continue to clutch at the symptoms, overlooking the real causes which divide and fragment our societies and our world, making them vulnerable to conflicts and wars. Moreover, today, it should be noted that violence has changed its face. It is no longer only a question of war.

The absence of violence does not at all mean peace. This would be a negative understanding of peace, as Johan Galtung says. Today, violence

appears in many forms. It is not enough to wait for violence to break out somewhere to apply reconciliation therapy and hope for eternal peace. Such a fireman strategy does not pay in the long term. Only thanks to the unrelenting struggle for economic, political, cultural and environmental justice for all will we learn to promote reconciliation and, thus, durable peace for all; while encouraging, of course, the use of spiritual, therapeutic, psychological and other approaches to interpersonal reconciliation.

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