

CONCLUSION

It would not have been even remotely decent for a non-Jewish person to have suggested to Jews that they ought to become reconciled to the Germans immediately after World War II.¹

DUTCH VISITOR TO SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUTH AND
RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (TRC)

The event that is called repentance from the world's side is called redemption from God's side.²

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I

The preceding chapters of this book have sought to demonstrate the contributions of the Jewish instrument of repentance to the German process of coming to terms with the Nazi past. In this process, both Jewish and German individuals as well as some other

1. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 1, chap. 5, para. 48, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>.

2. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 141.

relational partners have made use of the Jewish resource of repentance (*tshuvah*)—defined as asymmetric mutual-turning in the first part of this study—to reach out to each other, to perceive and analyze the German problem, and to propose viable solutions to it. Hence not only “reconciliation” is a joint venture, as is popularly perceived, but “repentance” itself is shown to be a collaborative effort. Though the samples collected here are in no way “representative,” statistically speaking, their spheric diversity—from philosophical treatise to political-juridical debate, from theological reflection to civil initiatives, from literature to historiography and mass media—does show that such collaboration is also in no way a “niche” phenomenon, negligible and insignificant.

This has not always been the case. In the aftermath of World War I, the German-Jewish philosopher Max Scheler³ repeated his call for the “act of repentance” (*der Akt der Reue*)⁴ as the path to rebirth from the “collective guilt of Europe,” but apparently in vain, for “modern philosophy tends to regard repentance as an almost only negative and also most uneconomical act.”⁵ If Scheler’s assessment is any indicator of the intellectual climate of the inter-war period, or of modernity in general, it is but a stark reminder of how even a shared intellectual resource such as biblical repentance can “fail” if nobody is paying heed. “And so the oppression of guilt (*Schulddruck*) is allowed to amass into an avalanche.”⁶

To Scheler, repentance empowers the guilt-laden to break away from that “determining power of their past,” or to use a

3. Born to a Jewish family in Munich in 1874, Scheler later became a noted Catholic thinker of his time. Zachary Davis and Anthony Steinbock, “Max Scheler,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/scheler/>.

4. *Reue* is usually translated as “regret” in English. However, it is clear in the context that by *Reue*, Scheler was in fact referring to repentance in its fullest sense, i.e., an ability “God lent to the soul” to “return to him.” Max Scheler, “Reue und Wiedergeburt,” in *Vom Ewigen im Menschen* (Leipzig: Der Neue Geist, 1921), 1:12. This essay was first published in 1917. See its English translation as “Repentance and Rebirth,” in *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972), 33–65.

5. Schele, “Reue und Wiedergeburt,” 6, 48.

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

prophetic expression, the uncovering of guilt is a fate-changing event.⁷ Though one may not share his optimism that the language of repentance bespeaks true repentance as spiritual reality,⁸ the preceding chapters have nonetheless shown that repentance according to Jewish thought is a source of answers to the myriad of conundrums besetting postwar Germans—from the dilemma of condoning and scapegoating to cross-generational guilt and responsibility to the possibility of reconciliation itself. One may of course further disagree with these answers, or propose better ones based on alternative intellectual resources and measured by alternative standards. In any case, it is no longer possible to overlook the correspondence between biblical repentance and the history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, if the latter is not to be preconceived as a purely “secularized” domain (see the introduction).

II

The desecularization of the study of German coming to terms with the Nazi past will hopefully create a new space for debates and dialogues in connection with other regional experiences of dealing with past atrocities. In overcoming the legacies of apartheid in South Africa and other gross human rights violations in Latin America, it has long been observed that religious concepts such as “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” have played a significant role in these processes—for better (i.e., overcoming violence or civil war) or for worse (neglecting retributive justice).⁹ The German example, however, has rarely been accorded such conceptual focus,¹⁰ result-

7. Ibid., 18; Lamentations 2:14 (esp. the Einheitsübersetzung version).

8. Schele, “Reue und Wiedergeburt,” 46–48.

9. See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 54–55; and John Borneman, *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice, and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

10. One exception is Ralf K. Wüstenberg’s theological study of dealing with guilt in transitional Germany and South Africa. But the handling of the “red past”

ing in the bizarre situation that even those who would like to learn from this experience—imperfect and incomplete as it is—often do not know where to begin.¹¹

With the central argument of this book—that the Jewish idea of repentance has been at work in the German history of coming to terms with the past—it is now possible to engage in comparative case studies and debates about the relative merits and “blind spots” of a forgiveness-dominated discourse versus a repentance-centric one, and of the different visions or “levels” of reconciliation embedded in these discourses.¹² It would be a blatant oversimplification to attribute the relative emphases on repentance and forgiveness to Judaism and Christianity respectively, as if the two concepts and traditions were alien to each other. It would be meaningful, however, to compare the ramifications in terms of societal transformation in postatrocity settings with these relative preoccupations.

The repentance-perspective of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* also makes new contributions to the ongoing debates about the global effects of the “German culture of remembrance” (Confino). The globalization of Holocaust remembrance has been hailed as potentially boundary-transcending and sensitizing toward the suffering of others. Taking into account its historical development in Germany as well as Israel and the United States, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider argue that the shared “cosmopolitan memory” of the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany is a

after 1989 rather than the “brown past” after 1945 is the object of its comparative analysis. See Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Die politische Dimension der Versöhnung: Eine theologische Studie zum Umgang mit Schuld nach den Systemumbrüchen in Südafrika und Deutschland* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004).

11. It is a telltale sign that, for example, in the TRC report, the German case can only offer “lessons” in material reparations and memorials, nothing more. *TRC Report*, 5:9:102; 6:2:3:24.

12. Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin suggest that the (post-1989) German focus on “bilateral and communal reconciliation” and the South African emphasis on “political or national reconciliation” are due to the different types of damage left by the preceding regimes, which also account for the relative ease in the former case. See Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin, *Reconciliation in Divided Societies: Finding Common Ground* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 43, 70.

“memory that harbors the possibility of transcending ethnic and national boundaries.”¹³ Connecting Holocaust remembrance and the process of decolonization, Michael Rothberg contends that “multidirectional memory”—as against *competitive* memory of “our” versus “their” suffering—has the “potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice.”¹⁴ Both assertions are surprising: after all, isn’t it more reasonable to expect that the memory of one’s own suffering will *strengthen* rather than transcend ethnic and national boundaries?¹⁵ And the dualistic nature of Holocaust remembrance, as Rothberg concedes, can serve as both “screen projection” (leading to “disturbing” memories of one’s own) and “barrier to remembrance” (as diversion), with no telling in advance which will gain the upper hand.¹⁶ How then can one get closer to realizing the better “potentials” of Holocaust remembrance, especially in non-European settings?

That memory of suffering is an “ambiguous energy,” as we have seen (P13), has long been a problem in German VgB, which turners like Rabbi Harold Schulweis and Rabbi Robert Raphael Geis have attempted to tackle. Their strategy to steer this energy away from a pathos of self-pity or “brooding guilt” toward “constructive repentance” seems to be a promising solution to the problem we pose above. Its key elements of antidemonization of the perpetrator (R1), disproportionate remembrance of the righteous other (R13), and self-turning (R9) are crucial in harnessing this anamnestic energy for repentance. Is it possible that these are also among the determining factors in making Holocaust remembrance boundary-transcending and solidarity-creating?

13. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 4.

14. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5.

15. As Chinese are used to reminding one another, “[We were] backward, hence [we were] beaten up.” Ergo, we the victims need a “wealthy state and powerful army” to buttress our borders. The Great Wall is apparently not only a physical relic. See Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

16. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 16.

To transfer this strategy to the non-European and postcolonial relational contexts, one needs to look into specific discourses to see whether, for example, the crimes of the colonizers or the Nanjing Massacre are sufficiently decoupled from the perpetrators and viewed from the “sin-perspective” (P2)—that is, atrocities are not primarily seen as acts of the “demon others,” but sins of “ordinary people.”¹⁷ It is also relevant to determine whether there is a perceptible and persistent (or even institutionalized) remembrance of the counterstereotyping righteous others side by side with the remembrance of the suffering of one’s own people; and whether the increased “articulation of other histories [of suffering]” (Rothberg),¹⁸ brought about by the globalization of Holocaust memory, is geared toward “constructive repentance” rather than “brooding guilt.” And finally, whether there are authentic and legitimate attempts to identify one’s possible connections—no matter how improbable or objectionable by popular standards—to one’s own suffering or that of one’s own people. In other words, whether the globalization of Holocaust remembrance has in fact led to more instances of localized *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In this respect, it appears that a repentance-centric discourse can be more conducive to generating such unlikely responses to past atrocities than one predicated on forgiveness.

The problem with a forgiveness-dominant discourse is that it inadvertently predisposes a person to identify himself as victim—that is, one who is *in the position* to consider whether to forgive or not—or more precisely, to choose from among the possible identities available to him the one(s) that can allow him to imagine himself doing forgiveness. As an illustration: among those asked by Simon Wiesenthal about the possibility of forgiveness were one Tibetan and one Han. Whereas the Tibetan spoke about the dangers of self-righteousness and “losing compassion” as a reaction to decades-long Chinese atrocities against the Tibetan people,¹⁹ the Chinese also spoke about

17. This is the observation of Leung Man-Tao, a noted essayist in Hong Kong. See his “為什麼日本不像德國?” [Why Is Japan unlike Germany? I & II], *Ming Pao*, 4 and 11 May 2005.

18. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 6.

19. See the Dalai Lama’s response in Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 129–30.

victimhood under the Chinese government—his own. “During my nineteen years in prison, I often experienced harsh treatment at the hands of guards and prison officials. I was beaten and degraded,” he recalled.²⁰ Of course, as a persecuted dissident, the Chinese intellectual’s victim status vis-à-vis his own government is beyond doubt. The discursive environment of forgiveness, however, did not predispose him to see his own guilt and responsibility as a Han intellectual vis-à-vis the Tibetan people, that is, one in need of seeking forgiveness instead of granting it. Hence both the Tibetan and the Han spoke about the year 1959, when the Han Communists suppressed the Tibetan 10 March uprising,²¹ but the turning movement (for compassion, against self-righteousness) from one side of the wounded relationship was not met—albeit only indirectly—with a commensurate response from the other side.²²

This problem of victim-predisposal may have some legitimacy in the unusual situation where the victims and survivors are in fact in the position—in terms of postatrocity power relations²³—to consider the option of retributive or restorative justice, and where the predisposer has genuine credibility in his claims to shared victimhood with the predisposed.²⁴ Where the victims and survivors are not in that position, the talk of forgiveness becomes either an unbearable self-absolution (e.g., Han democrats “forgiving” Han Communists after the eventual democratic transition) or, to borrow Jürgen

20. See Harry Wu’s response in Wiesenthal, *Sunflower*, 271–74.

21. See Tubten Khétsun, *Memories of Life in Lhasa under Chinese Rule*, trans. Matthew Akester (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); and Palden Gyatso and Tsering Shakya, *Fire under the Snow: Testimony of a Tibetan Prisoner* (London: Harvill, 1997).

22. It has to be stated, however, that Harry Wu has also been a longtime supporter of the Tibetan cause on other occasions. Some of these are documented on the official website of his Laogai Research Foundation based in Washington, DC (www.laogai.org).

23. See chapter 2.

24. Appealing to the examples of magnanimity of both Jesus on the cross and Nelson Mandela ravaged by incarceration, Tutu’s response to Wiesenthal draws from the moral capital of these “ultimate victims” to effect a wider acceptance of forgiving as a response. The key question of “who is entitled to forgive what,” however, is left unanswered. Wiesenthal, *Sunflower*, 266–68.

Habermas's phrase, "coerced reconciliation."²⁵ As a Han Chinese pondering the possible futures of post-Communist China, where the reversal of the ethnic majority-minority power relations seems most unlikely, I am inclined to think that the repentance-centric discourse is more instructive, if Chinese coming to terms with the past—one that is truly worthy of its name²⁶—is to be realized, and if Han-Tibetan and Han-Uighur reconciliation—rather than mere "national unity" during transition²⁷—is to be achieved at all.

III

In the final analysis, my decade-long engagement with the problems of coming to terms with the past in Europe and in East Asia has led me to the conclusion that the Jewish tradition of repentance belongs to what the TRC final report calls "healing and restorative truth." The report

rejects the popular assumption that there are only two options to be considered when talking about truth—namely factual, objective information or subjective opinions. There is also "healing" truth, the kind of truth that places facts and what they mean *within the context* of human relationships. . . . This kind of truth was central to the Commission.²⁸

Indeed, this kind of truth, which provides a context and a sense of purpose²⁹ for the other types of truth—factual, narrative and

25. Jürgen Habermas, "Die Entsorgung der Vergangenheit," *Die Zeit*, 17 May 1985.

26. For some initial steps in this direction, see, for example, Yu Jie, "向西藏懺悔—讀《雪山下的火焰 一個西藏良心犯的證言》" [Repent to Tibet: Reading 'Fire under the Snow'], *Open Magazine*, Jun. 2004; Cao Changqing, ed., 中國大陸知識分子論西藏 [Mainland Chinese Intellectuals on Tibet] (Taipei: China Times Publishing, 1996); Li Jianglin, *1959 Lhasa!* (Hong Kong: New Century Media & Consulting, 2010); and Wang Keming and Song Xiaoming, eds., 我們懺悔：未刪節全本 [We Repent—Uncut Full Version] (Hong Kong: Great Mountain Culture, 2014).

27. "National unity" was in fact a professed aim of reconciliation efforts in post-apartheid South Africa. Daly and Sarkin, *Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 97–98.

28. TRC Report, 1:5:43 (emphasis added).

29. Ibid., 1:5:44.

social—³⁰ is beyond the subjective-objective dimension. It reminds one of what Abraham Heschel called the “three-dimensional” way of seeing—that is, not directly from the subject to the object (“2-D”) but through the inculcated divine viewpoint.³¹ From this vantage point, hitherto nonexistent or unnoticed possibilities emerge when one is dealing with otherwise intractable problems arising from interhuman atrocities—problems and questions not only about memory but also about justice, the comparison of guilt, the proper “apology,” the responsibilities of future generations, and the desirability of reconciliation itself.

During the revision and completion of this book, I taught an introductory course in European studies at my university in Hong Kong for undergraduate students who are not specializing in the subject. In the few lectures I could spare on “European reconciliation,” I introduced the Jewish concepts of repentance and reconciliation as an example of how shared ideational resources can have an impact on international relations. At one point I encouraged my students to think critically about these ideas, especially in view of the East Asian cultural context. Thereupon remarked a Hong Kong student: “I’m actually quite critical of the religious approach . . . but it seems to me that [the Jewish idea of repentance] provides the answer to the question, Why [should nations divided by past atrocities] strive for reconciliation at all?”

Without this basic commitment, taking the strenuous path of “coming to terms with the past” can seem pointless indeed. The findings of this study are perhaps only helpful to those who have

30. Ibid., 1:5:29–42.

31. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Perennial Classics (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 29. Ostensibly, the TRC report refers only to the human relationships among citizens and between the state and its citizens (1:5:43), while leaving the divine dimension unspoken. The centrality of this dimension to the actual proceedings of the commission, however, can be seen from the insistence of Tutu, its chairperson, on opening prayers before the beginning of commission proceedings, that is, the reenactment of the three-dimensional paradigm. Jennifer J. Lewellyn and Daniel Philpott, eds., *Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2, 108–9.

already somehow found the will to this commitment in their own relational contexts, which this study cannot provide. I can also imagine the disappointment of those expecting to find policy advice, a new periodization of postwar German history, or new formulas of “contrition score”³² in this book, which they won’t. These are some of the limitations of the approach I’ve adopted in this work, which, above all, is dedicated to those who, despite the fact that they are not in any position to affect government policy or effect “institutionalized Vergangenheitsbewältigung,”³³ seek nonetheless to “restore the [wounded] order of being (*Seinsordnung*) . . . in the given historical and biographical situations” in which they find themselves.³⁴

One cannot, even with the machinery of a prosperous and powerful state, undo the damages caused by the Nazis, Yasukuni-ists,³⁵ racists, and the like in the past. But by doing *tshuvah*, restoration is still possible, “for the wounds of the order of being can be healed in infinitely many places other than where they were inflicted.”³⁶

32. David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80, 215–18.

33. Wüstenberg, *Politische Versöhnung*, 65.

34. Martin Buber, *Schuld und Schuldgefühle* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1958), 41.

35. On “Yasukuni-ism,” see Yagyû Kunichika, “Der Yasukuni-Schrein im Japan der Nachkriegszeit: Zu den Nachwirkungen des Staatsshintô,” in *Erinnerungskulturen: Deutschland, Italien und Japan seit 1945*, ed. Christoph Cornelißen, Lutz Klinkhammer, and Wolfgang Schwentker (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2004), 246.

36. Buber, *Schuld und Schuldgefühle*, 41. See P6.

