

C. K. Martin Chung

Repentance: The Jewish Solution to the German Problem

The following words, passed on by Martin Buber and attributed to Rabbi Bunim (1765–1827), appeared in the *Freiburger Rundbrief* in the 1960s, a periodical published by German Catholics engaged in the “reconciliation” with the Jews. “Die große Schuld des Menschen sind nicht die Sünden, die er begeht – die Versuchung ist mächtig und seine Kraft gering! Die große Schuld des Menschen ist, daß er in jedem Augenblick die Umkehr tun kann und nicht tut.” What the citation was intended to convey is not entirely clear, for it was placed merely in between opinion pieces about the then ongoing Frankfurt Auschwitz trials.¹ One could only surmise that the editors found it pertinent to the context, possibly in the sense of reminding their readers to do repentance.

Remarkably enough, the question of applicability was not raised. To put it bluntly: Could one simply appropriate this teaching from Judaism for post-war Germans? That is: “The major guilt of the Germans is not the Shoah, the crimes they have committed – for the temptation is powerful and their power little! The major guilt of the Germans is that in every moment they can repent but do not.”

Such appropriation would have been problematic indeed. Just as Ulrike Jureit accuses Richard von Weizsäcker of having offered the Germans what was not his to offer – the Jewish hope of redemption through remembrance as one of the German “illusions of Vergangenheitsbewältigung,”² one could have raised that question to Gertrud Luckner, the founder of the *Rundbrief* in 1948: How can it be so blithely assumed that the possibility of repentance still exists for the Germans even after the Holocaust? According to Hannah Arendt, the “enormity” of Nazi crimes has produced a guilt so immense that “beggars and shatters” all previous legal orders.³ Can such a guilt be also beyond repentance?

Such theological questions are obviously outside the purview of social scientists, who can neither affirm nor negate what is not socially observable,

1 Die große Schuld, in: *Freiburger Rundbrief* 15 (1963/1964), no. 57–60, 32.

2 Ulrike Jureit/Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Bonn 2010, 42.

3 Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, 17 August 1946, in: Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers, *Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. by Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, Munich/Zurich 1985, 90.

who, with Buber's words, are no prophets entrusted with a message, but thinkers with a teaching.⁴ As such, though one cannot definitively confirm or refute Jureit's criticism of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* without venturing into the realms of the religious and the theological, one can certainly – based on social observation – retort that the Jewish saying in question had been “imported” into the German public sphere as monition as well as encouragement already before Weizsäcker's speech from 1985. Jews and personalities with Jewish roots⁵ have figured prominently in this process of importation (see below). However, the doubt persists that, when it comes to the Holocaust, even Jews may not make this religious “offer” to the Germans; it is but a social and historical fact that Jewish theological concepts have been summoned time and again by Jews and Germans alike in their dialogue over the Holocaust.

This phenomenon interests the author of the present article: the influence of the victims' responses on those of the perpetrators, and the correspondence of these responses with the biblical notion of repentance. As a Chinese researcher brought up in an age of deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations, I seek for alternative responses to historical traumata other than the nationalist recipe of “wealth and strength” or the Confucian edict of “uprightness,”⁶ for neither point to viable ways towards remembrance and reconciliation. Incomparable as the historical atrocities may be, the same

- 4 Martin Buber, *Die Forderung des Geistes und die geschichtliche Wirklichkeit*, in: *Neue Wege* 33 (1939), no. 2, 65–76, here 75. For Buber, a message (*Botschaft*) is received from God for a particular situation, whereas a teaching (*Lehre*) endeavors to “change social reality” based on the knowledge of the social thinkers and observers. See *ibid.*
- 5 I do not intend to delve into Jewish identity debates. When an idea or a certain personality is referred to in this essay as “Jewish,” it is only to be taken to mean that they are or can be perceived as Jewish. Whether the basis for such perception is justified or not is not within the scope of this study. My intention is merely to give recognition to whom it is due. It would be absurd to praise someone as “Christian” or “German” for their contribution to the process of coming to terms with the past, when in fact they were persecuted as “Jews” during the Nazi era. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Dan Diner and Prof. Sander Gilman for their kind help in refining my thinking concerning this.
- 6 “Wealth” and “strength” are literal translations of *fugiang* which has several variations in meaning, among them the most common being “making the state (*guo*) wealthy and the military (*bing*) strong.” See Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation. Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, New York 2012, 237f. On the Confucian concept of *zhi* or “uprightness” as a response to past wrongdoings in the Sino-Japanese context, see Tu Weiming/Ikeda Daisaku, *New Horizons in Eastern Humanism. Buddhism, Confucianism and the Quest for Global Peace*, New York 2011, 57. For a critical evaluation of the applicability of this concept, see my own article: C. K. Martin Chung, *Rethinking, Reflection, Repentance. Comparing “Coming to Terms with the Past” in Europe and China*, in: *European Union Academic Programme Hong Kong Working Papers*, Hong Kong 2013, <http://europe.hkbu.edu.hk/euap/publication/Europe-China%20VgB%20paper%20draft_17dec2013.pdf> (15 September 2015).

relational recuperation is sought after nonetheless. Moreover, the potency of biblical repentance in German coming to terms with the past – as will be demonstrated in this essay – also serves as an example to show how traditional intellectual resources can be utilized in solving problems between modern states and nations.

The present investigation of this phenomenon known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is not aimed at painting an idealized image of postwar Germany, or proving the authenticity of repentance of individual – much less collective – social actors. Instead of speculating on hidden intentions and moral realities, observable forms of expression are analyzed here in order to demonstrate the influence and correspondence mentioned above. In the extended research project,⁷ from which this article is derived, the biblical concept of repentance – *tshuva* in Hebrew; *umkehren/Buße tun* in German⁸ – is developed into an analytical framework for the historical analysis of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The result is a new assessment of Germany's postwar history, which in the meantime has become a "model" for other nations in need of their own coming to terms with their pasts. It is claimed that this "model" can be better analyzed and understood in a *relational* rather than *national* paradigm. In other words, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is not to be accounted for as a national "achievement" (i. e. explainable by the so-called German national character) nor as a structural "product" (i. e. of Cold War dynamics), but to be located within the interaction between the victims and the perpetrators as well as their later generations, sustained by the intellectual resources shared among them.

The German Problem of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

"Coming to terms with the past" as a research subject: Though the list of related literature is long, the exploration of the phenomenon's religious roots has been largely neglected.⁹ So far as the author could gather, there is no

7 It is in fact my doctoral dissertation at the University of Hong Kong (2013) bearing the same title.

8 *Tshuva* is generally translated as *Umkehr* or *umkehren* throughout the Bible in the *Einheitsübersetzung* (1980). In the *Lutherbibel* (1984), however, *Buße (tun)* appears alongside with it in the New Testament, as well as *Bekehrung* or *bekehren* in the Old Testament. See Jer 31:19, 2 Kgs 17:13 and Mt 3:2.

9 A subject search in the catalogue of the German National Library shows only about forty books related to the topic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (or so registered) published in the first four decades after 1945. The following decade (1986–1995) saw a strong increase of more than 400 books. From then on until the time of writing (June 2015), more than 2 000 books have been added.

existing work in German or English investigating the connection between *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and *tshuva*.¹⁰ The classics in this field by Norbert Frei and Constantin Goschler follow by and large the “policy” approach looking at specific aspects of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* from the viewpoint of politics and foreign relations.¹¹ Peter Reichel attempts, on the other hand, to synthesize the relevant “political-juridical debates” into one single narrative.¹² Torben Fischer’s and Matthias N. Lorenz’ *Lexikon der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”* adopts the “affairs” approach that is particularly useful when background information on certain controversies is of concern.¹³ Thorsten Eitz and Georg Stötzel’s *Wörterbuch* complements this with its “thematic” framework that cuts across distinct “incidents.”¹⁴

On top of these are studies focusing on specific events and “sectors” of the broader history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Charles Maier’s *The Unmasterable Past* – also published in German – investigating the *Historikerstreit* and the roles of German and non-German historians, is a representative work in this category.¹⁵ The volume *Coping with the Nazi Past*, edited by Philipp Gassert und Alan E. Steinweis, concentrates on the 1960s, widely regarded as a “turning point” of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.¹⁶ Whereas Matthew Hockenos’ *A Church Divided* details how German Protestants confronted the Nazi past, Lucia Scherzberg’s compilations on theology and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* revisit the Catholic Church’s role in the crimes of the Third Reich and offer “theological reflection” as a means of

- 10 Konrad Hugo Jarausch’s narrative of the “deutschen Wandlungen” is called *Die Umkehr*. See idem, *Die Umkehr. Deutsche Wandlungen 1945–1995*, Munich 2004; an idea he borrowed from Gustav Radbruch, *Die Erneuerung des Rechts* (1947), in: idem, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 3: *Rechtsphilosophie*, ed. by Arthur Kaufmann, Heidelberg 1990, 107–114, here 112. The contents of the religious concepts remain, however, unutilized in connection with the “transformations” he was observing in postwar Germany.
- 11 Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, Munich 1996; Constantin Goschler, *Schuld und Schulden. Die Politik der Wiedergutmachung für NS-Verfolgte seit 1945*, Göttingen 2005.
- 12 Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland. Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute*, Munich 2001.
- 13 Torben Fischer/Matthias N. Lorenz (eds.), *Lexikon der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” in Deutschland. Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945*, Bielefeld 2007.
- 14 Thorsten Eitz/Georg Stötzel, *Wörterbuch der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.” Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch*, 2 vols., Hildesheim/Zurich/New York 2007–2009.
- 15 Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988 (Ger.: *Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit. Geschichte und die nationale Identität der Deutschen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1992).
- 16 Philipp Gassert/Alan E. Steinweis (eds.), *Coping with the Nazi Past. West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict, 1955–1975*, New York/Oxford 2006.

coming to terms with the past.¹⁷ In other words, these works present *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within theology rather than analyzing the wider phenomenon *through* theological concepts.

Of particular relevance to the present article are two studies that to a certain extent address the religious roots of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – with opposite conclusions. Aleida Assmann’s essay in *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit* (co-authored with Ute Frevert) takes the debate between Martin Walser and Ignatz Bubis as a starting point to analyze the previous controversies in which the same or similar contentions occurred and recurred.¹⁸ A list of *Schlagworte* in the debates is offered, among which some – such as *Schlussstrich*, *Normalisierung* and *individualisierte Schuld* – are traced to their biblical roots. To Assmann, these concepts derived from Judaism are not only useful in analyzing and understanding debates in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but essential in giving meaning to the phenomenon itself: “Das ganze Konzept der Versöhnung durch Buße ist nur denkbar auf dem Boden einer Schuldkultur.”¹⁹ The fundamental features of this concept, according to her, are in the Book of Ezekiel and transported to the post-1945 context by Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt.²⁰

While Assmann recognizes the influence of biblical concepts on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Ulrike Jureit seems to stand decidedly against such religious intrusion into the “secular system” of coming to terms with the past. In her book, *Gefühlte Opfer* (co-authored with Christian Schneider), she criticizes the alleged *Opferidentifizierung* of the initiators of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,²¹ and derides, as mentioned above, Weizsäcker’s (ab)use of the Jewish saying – “Das Vergessenwollen verlängert das Exil, und das Geheimnis der Erlösung heißt Erinnerung.”²²

17 Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided. German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*, Bloomington, Ind., 2004; Lucia Scherzberg (ed.), *Theologie und Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme im interdisziplinären Vergleich*, ed. in cooperation with Werner Müller, Paderborn et al. 2005; idem (ed.), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung im französischen Katholizismus und deutschen Protestantismus*, ed. in cooperation with Werner Müller, Paderborn et al. 2008.

18 Aleida Assmann/Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*, Stuttgart 1999.

19 Ibid., 91.

20 Ibid., 80.

21 Jureit/Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer*, 25–29. The concept of “victim-identification” can be conflated, however, when the difference between “self-identification *as* victim” (i. e. falsification of identity by a non-victim à la Wilkomirski, the archetypal “gefühlte Opfer” for Jureit) and “self-identification *with* the victim” (i. e. to concern oneself as non-victim with the concerns of the real victim) is neglected. Jureit herself points to the necessity of the latter in the process of coming to terms with the past. Ibid., 35 f.

22 Ibid., 9.

For Jureit, the promise of redemption through remembrance is a grave misunderstanding on the part of the Germans:

“Es gehört zu den zentralen Missverständnissen unseres opferidentifizierten Gedenkens, dass ein religiöses Heilsversprechen in ein säkulares System der Vergangenheitsbearbeitung transformiert wird, ohne über die damit verbundenen Verheißungen Rechenschaft abzulegen. Um es ganz deutlich zu sagen: Niemand wird wegen permanenten Erinnerns von der eigenen oder überlieferten Schuld freigesprochen werden.”²³

It is not clear from the context whether Jureit is against the introduction of the religious promise per se into the supposed-to-be secular system of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or only because such a Jewish promise was “Christianized” as she claims.²⁴ In any case, her strict demarcation between religious ideas and collective coming to terms with the past – not the least between Jewish intellectual resources and postwar German reflection – begs justification. After all, if Weizsäcker had “misappropriated” the Baal Shem’s dictum for the benefit of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, he was hardly the first to do so: Ernst Benda, a German politician of Jewish ancestry,²⁵ after traveling to Jerusalem and reading these words at Yad Vashem, had already “imported” it to the Bundestag during the *Verjährungsdebatte* in 1965.²⁶ And when Weizsäcker and his team were composing the 1985 speech, the Israeli historian Saul Friedländer used the selfsame saying to remind his German readers how fragile the German-Jewish relationship still was and how German remembrance of Nazi crimes could help strengthen it.²⁷ In this broader relational perspective, the question is not about the abuse of religious notions for secular purposes, but the existence of a spiritual resource at the disposal of the victims and their descendants, who *did* use it to help the perpetrators and their later generations to arrive at an insight that was otherwise inaccessible to them.

This study seeks to give recognition to this extraordinary and indispensable help to understand what it means “to turn,” as *tshuva* literally means, and

23 Ibid., 42.

24 Ibid.

25 Benda’s grandfather was Jewish and his grandmother was one of the participants in the Rosenstraße Protest in 1943. See Dietrich Strothmann, Kärmer der Gerechtigkeit, in: Die Zeit, 19 March 1965.

26 Ibid. See also Rolf Zundel, Strich unter die Vergangenheit?, in: Die Zeit, 19 March 1965; Peter Borowsky, Das Ende der “Ära Adenauer,” in: Informationen zur politischen Bildung 258 (1998), <<http://www.bpb.de/izpb/10093/das-ende-der-aera-adenauer?p=all>> (15 September 2015).

27 Saul Friedländer, Bewältigung – oder nur Verdrängung?, in: Die Zeit, 8 February 1985; Harald Steffahn, Richard von Weizsäcker. Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991, 107 f.

the corresponding willingness and openness on the other side to receive and to respond to that help.

“Coming to terms with the past” as an existential problem: The emergence of the phenomenon of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can be traced to the time around the military defeat in 1945, even as the name itself was only given a decade later.²⁸ In this period, a number of German intellectuals inside and outside the country reflected on the fate of the nation after National Socialism. Common in this reflection was the realization that the existential crisis – “die deutsche Frage,” “das deutsche Problem” – begotten by the twelve preceding years was of such catastrophic proportion that only through the fundamental act of “returning” – whether it be to Germany’s religious roots, humanistic tradition, or Western democratic civilization – could postwar Germany have any hope of survival.

In 1946, Alfred Weber spoke of the “katastrophalen geschichtlichen Zusammenbruch” and the “ersten großen und grundlegenden Sünde, die das Abendland an sich selbst begangen hat.”²⁹ With this “sin” he meant the establishment of a state system in which state actions are considered to be beyond moral supervision. As the “deeper cause” of the catastrophe he identified the “dogmatizing” tendencies in European history, leading towards the nihilism that dominated the period. The way forward, according to him, was “Europa und insbesondere seine deutsche Mitte [...] auf einer die Menschenwürde und Menschlichkeit vertretenden freien demokratischen Basis zu organisieren.”³⁰ The German people must engage in self-education for self-renewal and self-transformation through returning to the “großen undogmatischen europäischen Vorgestalten.”³¹ Weber saw the future of Germany lying along this path of returning to the democratic West.³²

Carl-Hermann Mueller-Graaf (Constantin Silens) concurred with Weber that the age in which Europe had been the “head and master of the world” (“der Kopf und der Herr der Welt”) was bygone.³³ But in his 1946 book, *Irrweg und Umkehr*, Silens concentrated on the “German problem” instead of

28 According to Helmut König et al., the earliest documented use of the term was by Erich Müller-Gangloff of the Evangelische Akademie Berlin in 1955, who called upon his contemporaries to deal with “den Schatten einer unbewältigten Vergangenheit.” Helmut König/Michael Kohlstruck/Andreas Wöll (eds.), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Opladen/Wiesbaden 1998, 8.

29 Alfred Weber, *Abschied von der bisherigen Geschichte. Überwindung des Nihilismus?*, Hamburg 1946, 12–20.

30 *Ibid.*, 251.

31 *Ibid.*, 251–253.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Constantin Silens, *Irrweg und Umkehr. Betrachtungen über das Schicksal Deutschlands*, Basel 1946, 245.

“Europeanizing” it as Weber did.³⁴ He professed to belong to “jenem christlichen und konservativen Deutschland” and claimed that “die große deutsche Schuld [...] ist die Abwendung von der Christlichkeit des Abendlandes.”³⁵ He named Darwin, Nietzsche and Spengler “tatsächliche Verführer,” those having truly mislead the German nation.³⁶ Therefore, he called on his fellow Germans to repent. “Es geht hier nicht um Buße im Sinne der weltlichen Rache [...]. Es geht um Buße in dem großen Sinne des Christentums, die Erkenntnis und Bekenntnis des Fehlers meint. [...] Buße als reuige Erkenntnis des eigenen Bösen.”³⁷ Without this, Silens was convinced, there would be no future for Germany.³⁸

In a similar tone, the Catholic theologian Johannes Hessen spoke after the war at the University of Cologne about the “Gemeinschuld” of the Germans:

“Es gibt nicht nur eine Schuld des Einzelnen, es gibt auch eine Schuld der Gemeinschaft. Dadurch, daß wir zu dem Volke gehören, dessen Führung diesen Krieg entfesselt und damit unsagbares Leid und Elend über die Menschheit gebracht hat, ist letzten Endes jeder von uns schuldig geworden vor der Menschheit und vor Gott.”³⁹

He made use of the opening verse of the Book of Lamentations to frame Germany’s material and spiritual devastation.⁴⁰ The way towards rebuilding the religious sphere was for him the imitation of the exceptional Christian examples given by Martin Niemöller and Clemens August Graf von Galen.⁴¹

The language of guilt and repentance was apparently so commonplace in this period that even economists like Wilhelm Röpke spoke about the necessity of “Reue und Wiedergeburt” for the Germans after their “physical, political and moral suicide.”⁴² Committing collective suicide, however, was not an option for the German people, who would, according to him, “umkehren, sofern man ihm einen Rückweg zeigt.”⁴³

It is not necessary here to go any further into the early German responses to the “catastrophe” of the long decade of Nazi Germany; the brief survey above is enough to highlight the prolific use of the theologically charged vocabulary of *Sünde*, *Schuld* and *Buße* to perceive and analyze the “German problem,” and propose solutions to it. One can of course disagree with all or

34 Ibid., 10.

35 Ibid., 253.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 248 f.

38 Ibid., 10.

39 Johannes Hessen, *Der geistige Wiederaufbau Deutschlands. Reden über die Erneuerung des deutschen Geisteslebens*, Stuttgart 1946, 103.

40 Ibid., 10.

41 Ibid., 25 and 72.

42 Wilhelm Röpke, *Die deutsche Frage*, Erlenbach-Zürich 1945, 9 and 222.

43 Ibid., 224.

some of their diagnoses – for instance, would a simple return to Christianity be enough as “German repentance” when the German churches themselves had yet to deal with their own guilt of the Nazi past? Would returning to the democratic West be a satisfactory answer to the many victims of National Socialism who were from or still in the then undemocratic East? Irrespective of the actual validity of these proposals, the historical fact is that biblical concepts were employed to communicate with one another (i. e. as Germans to fellow Germans and non-Germans) with regard to the “German problem.” Such a (continual) social practice points to the conceptual constellation surrounding biblical repentance as constituting that pre-existing intellectual infrastructure or, to use Husserl’s term, *Lebenswelt*, shared by both Germans and Jews, victims, bystanders and perpetrators, in which one could think and talk about the monstrous Nazi legacy, as well as judging how to deal with it.

The Jewish Solution of Repentance

Without any substantial basis for evaluation, it would seem that all proposals for postwar Germany in this discourse on “(re)turning” have equal validity, which is certainly not the case. Yet “turning” in the Bible is not an empty concept: Not all acts of turning or returning are repentant turnings. Buber has clearly shown that some turnings found in Scripture are nothing but devious reverses.⁴⁴ For anyone who endeavors to investigate the connection between biblical descriptions and historical expressions of turning on a national scale, it is hence necessary to first come to grips with the biblical notion, in order to highlight the features of collective repentance. My work therefore differs from Assmann’s in the sense that I do not begin with the “catchwords” of coming to terms with the past and trace backward to their biblical origins, but start with biblical concepts and work forward to identify their equivalents in the discourses of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This way I seek to render more visible that intellectual infrastructure or “cultural ground” (Assmann) on which these discourses take place. This approach also differs markedly from Frank Stern’s, who has chosen to conduct his investigation of the German-Jewish relationship outside the “realm of special Jewish historiography” in order to prove the analytical strength of the “triangular relationship between Americans, Germans and Jews.”⁴⁵ The pre-

44 Jer 34:15, 16 and 22. See Martin Buber/Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox, Bloomington, Ind., 1994, 35.

45 Frank Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge. Antisemitism and Philosemitism in Postwar Germany*, Oxford et. al. 1992, xv and xx.

sent approach examines rather how a repentance-informed outlook of history with its God-victim-perpetrator triad may have an impact on the relationship between Jews and Germans in the aftermath of the Holocaust.⁴⁶

The following section begins with the explication of turning between God and human being, followed by interhuman turning.⁴⁷ The lynchpin of this biblical investigation are the *Bußpsalmen*, or the Psalms of Repentance: a selection of seven Psalms traditionally used by Christians for the expression and education of repentance, with the fourth *Bußpsalm*, Psalm 51, recognized by Jewish sources as *the* Psalm of Repentance.⁴⁸ Maimonides' *Die Lehre von der Buße* and *The Gates of Repentance* by Rabbeinu Yonah (Jona Gerondi) are consulted as exegetical guides.

“Turning” in the God-Human Relationship

“Wasch meine Schuld⁴⁹ von mir ab, und mach mich rein von meiner Sünde! Denn ich erkenne meine bösen Taten, meine Sünde steht mir immer vor Augen. [...] Entsündige mich mit Ysop, dann werde ich rein; wasche mich, dann werde ich weißer als Schnee” (Ps 51:4, 5 and 9).

- 46 On the use of biblical resources for the purpose of collective reconciliation, see John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, D. C., 1997.
- 47 In consideration of length, only five of the fifteen interrelated propositions of repentance are outlined here. The complete list consists of: 1. The sinner is not sin; 2. The twofold damage of sin; 3. Mercy precedes repentance; repentance responds to mercy; 4. Recognizing punishment as just; 5. Confession as the only acceptable sacrifice; 6. Repentance as inner death and rebirth; 7. “Helping others repent” as the new task of the repentant; 8. Repentant disagreement; 9. Even God repents; 10. Sin as relational sickness; 11. Repentance’s representative minority; 12. Justice between abused perpetrators and abusive “victims”; 13. The sin of the fathers as cross-generational guilt; 14. Remembrance for life as cross-generational responsibility; and 15. Reconciliation as turning to each other through turning to God.
- 48 See Rabbeinu Yonah, *The Gates of Repentance*, trans. and comment. by Yaakov Feldman, Northvale, N. J./Jerusalem 1999, 49 and 70. According to Christian tradition, the seven Psalms of Repentance are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143 (following the Hebrew numbering system). See Willy Staerk, *Sünde und Gnade nach der Vorstellung des älteren Judentums, besonders der Dichter der sog. Buspsalmen*, Tübingen 1905; Heinz-Günter Beutler-Lotz (ed.), *Die Bußpsalmen. Meditationen, Andachten, Entwürfe*, Göttingen 1995.
- 49 Biblical quotations in German are drawn here mostly from the *Einheitsübersetzung*. In case of important differences to the *Lutherbibel* or other modern translations, alternatives are added in the footnotes. In this verse, for example, instead of *Schuld*, *Missetat* is used in the latter one. Focus here is not the question of accuracy, i. e. in relation to the source texts in their original languages, but of latency, i. e. what *is* translated into German as such, and which meanings and connotations does it possess.

The *Bußpsalm*, from which these words are drawn, was a song of David's according to tradition, who had abused his power as a king: He had sent Uriah the Hittite to certain death in order to conceal his own affair with the loyal soldier's wife, Bathsheba (2 Sam 11 f.). But God sent his accusatory words through Nathan to David, upon which the king turned and confessed his guilt. In this expression of the repentant sinner, who counts among the paradigmatic figures of repentance in the Bible, a subtle but clear distinction is stressed, or rather, reiterated:⁵⁰ That is, I, my wrongdoing and my sin are distinct entities but entangled as a result of my own doing. That the sinner is not sin (Proposition no. 1), or the criminal is not crime itself, is an essential distinction – though insufficient by itself – that makes “turning” possible. Otherwise “repentance” will have no meaning other than self-mortification or suicide, and “reconciliation” becomes either an impossibility or a hypocritical act of “moving forward” that sees no evil, condemns no evil.

Though sullied by his misdeed/guilt, his inherent dignity as a being created “in the image of God” (Gn 1:27) is not thereby destroyed. As Maimonides put it:

“Ebenso wenig denke aber ein Buße Thuender, daß er wegen seiner Frevel und Sünden, die er begangen, noch sehr weit von jenem hohen Grade der Frommen entfernt sey; denn dem ist nicht so, vielmehr ist er ebenso geliebt und auserkoren vor dem Angesichte des Schöpfers, als hätte er niemals gesündigt.”⁵¹

In a striking passage in the Book of Isaiah (19:21–25), this indestructible human dignity is explicitly granted even to the traditional enemies of the Israelites: the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Hence the universal applicability of the sin-sinner distinction.⁵²

According to these verses in Psalm 51, sin and guilt can be “washed away”; the sinner can be pardoned, excused and purified – but not by the sinner himself out of his own power. This process can only be completed by God, the injured party, the victim, to whom the sinner must turn to seek purification.⁵³ The divine promise to do just that (Is 1:18) is therefore the only hope left for those entangled in their own sins.

50 See for example Gn 4:7.

51 Moses Maimonides, *Die Lehre von der Buße*, in: idem, *Mischne Tora. Das Buch der Erkenntnis*, ed. by Eveline Goodman-Thau and Christoph Schulte, with postfaces by Eveline Goodman-Thau, Christoph Schulte and Friedrich Niewöhner, Berlin 1994, 408–509, here 479.

52 Whether this is also universally accepted – that is, reciprocal recognition – is another question.

53 Nevertheless, Rabbeinu Yonah, interpreting Ps 51:4 in conjunction with Jer 4:14, also stressed the importance of the sinner's participation in this process. See Yonah, *The Gates of Repentance*, 12.

“Erschaffe mir, Gott, ein reines Herz, und gib mir einen neuen, beständigen Geist!”

Such is the plea of the repentant (Ps 51:12). Repeatedly, the biblical notion of turning revolves around the change of the sinner’s heart and spirit. In the Torah and the Prophets, the “circumcision of the heart” is exhorted (Dt 10:16 and 30:6; Jer 4:4). The images of transplanting or circumcising the heart should point one to the apprehension of coming to – or going through – death, for how else could one accomplish something like that? But in this conception, one kind of death is required, and another not. And for the right kind of death to be achieved, the essential asymmetric mutuality between God and human is stressed. In the words of Rabbeinu Yonah, “Among the good things God has done *with* us [is *tshuva*].”⁵⁴

The corresponding divine promise of participation was pronounced through the prophet Ezekiel: “Ich schenke euch ein neues Herz und lege einen neuen Geist in euch. Ich nehme das Herz von Stein aus eurer Brust und gebe euch ein Herz von Fleisch” (Ez 36:26). What is meant by the “heart of stone” can be gauged in context: the indifference to the suffering of fellow human beings (Ez 36:13, 18). The “heart of flesh” can therefore be understood as a vulnerable heart. Those innermost roots of indifference, no matter how internalized as part of the self they may have become, are what needs to be put to death by the sinner himself.⁵⁵ Hence repentance as inner death.

Although the repentant sinner is capable – and only he is capable – of this, he is also by this very act of self-mortification exposing himself to the danger of despair (“Nothing is possible for *me* anymore ...”, he thinks). This happens when he begins to see the magnitude of his guilt, but is without the hope of repentance, which Rabbeinu Yonah aptly called an “escape hatch.”⁵⁶ In extreme cases, suicide ensues. In the *Bußpsalmen*, and in the Torah in general, the creative as well as redemptive power of God is therefore emphasized: the power to create and to give a pure heart and a new spirit (Ps 51:12). Not only is the sinner called to circumcise his own heart, but God has also promised to partake in this process: “Der Herr, dein Gott, wird dein Herz und das Herz deiner Nachkommen beschneiden” (Dt 30:6). Hence repentance as more than just inner death, but also spiritual rebirth (Proposition no. 6).⁵⁷

54 Ibid., 4. Rabbi Yaakov Feldman, who translated the work into English, added in the commentary, “*tschuvah* is a means of solidifying and deepening our’s and God’s mutual love.” Ibid.

55 See also Rom 8:13.

56 Ibid., 12.

57 The second proposition presented here is in fact the sixth in the original fifteen propositions. For the complete list see fn. 47.

Repentance has nothing to do with death in the bodily sense of the word. The sinner is called to repent so he may live (Ez 18:32). For Maimonides, there is no chasm too great for repentance to overcome, that nothing but death remains. “[D]enn es giebt keine Sünde, welche nicht durch die Buße gesühnt werden könnte. [...] [S]o muß auch ein Jeder sich Mühe geben, Buße zu thun [...] damit er [...] auf diese Weise zum Leben der künftigen Welt gelange.”⁵⁸ The omnipotent life-saving power of repentance is thus affirmed.

“Kehre dich ab⁵⁹ von deinem grimmigen Zorn und laß dich des Unheils gereuen, das du über dein Volk bringen willst. [...] Da gereute den Herrn das Unheil, das er seinem Volk zgedacht hatte” (Ex 32:12–14).

There is an element of repentance not spoken of in the *Bußpsalmen*, and only rightfully so. It goes beyond God’s merciful turning towards the sinner and the divine participation in the renewal of his heart. It is the turning of God himself in the sense of “regret” in the face of the sinfulness of human beings. Had the repentant sinner voiced this aspect of turning, as if he could now demand the repentance of God (Proposition no. 9) – that the creator should look into his own guilt in the wrongdoing of his creature – it would have nullified every other expression of repentance on his part. For then the sinner would be in effect blaming God for his sin, like Adam, rather than owning up to it himself.⁶⁰

Elsewhere in the Bible, references to this distinct divine turning are ready to be found, right from the very beginning. The God in the Torah is not a god who is only concerned with justice and mercy, but is also self-blaming and willing to change himself in response to the sinfulness of men. If not, the Flood would have been perceived as “justice served” rather than something “never to be done again” (Gn 8:21) – even without any prior human guarantee that his heart and his world would never be filled with that much evil again (Gn 6:5). If not, the threats of punishment would have been counted as “merciful reminders” rather than something to “regret” (Ex 32:14). This regret thus arises from the consciousness of both the guilt of one’s constitutive part in the sin committed against oneself, and the consequence of being caused by the human evil done to think and/or to do evil as a reaction, which does not know the freedom of turning as a response, as a “perpetual possibility” against the iron law of cause and effect.⁶¹ Moses was the only one standing between God’s fury and his people, to remind the Lord of this possibility (Ex 32:12–14).

58 Maimonides, *Die Lehre von der Buße*, 445 and 479.

59 Or “Laß ab” (*Einheitsübersetzung*).

60 Gn 3:12.

61 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York 2001, 43 (first ed. 1962).

Interhuman and Collective Repentance

“Hoffe Israel auf den Herrn! Denn bei dem Herrn ist die Gnade und viel Erlösung bei ihm. Und er wird Israel erlösen aus allen seinen Sünden” (Ps 130:7f.). Even as it is obvious that the *Bußpsalmen* are concerned mainly with personal repentance in the divine-human relationship, their potencies go in fact beyond that to the interhuman and collective relationships. For in the biblical tradition, the former is often upheld as the hermeneutical context and behavioral model for the latter.⁶² In the succinct formulation of Buber: “[Die Duwelt] hat ihren Zusammenhang in der Mitte, in der die verlängerten Linien der Beziehungen sich schneiden: im ewigen Du.”⁶³ Concerning this triangular relationship, Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “The unique feature of religious living is in its being *three-dimensional*. In a religious act man stands before God.”⁶⁴ “He does not take a direct approach to things. It is not a straight line, spanning subject and object, but rather a *triangle* – through God to the object.”⁶⁵

On the collective level one encounters the problem of representation. Are there “representatives” who repent for their or other communities? Or must every single community member repent in order to render collective repentance “effective”? There are two biblical stories which apparently offer diametrically different answers: the Abrahamic plea for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 18:16–33) and the repentance of Nineveh (Book of Jonah). From the first one can draw the interpretation of an “absolute minority principle,” for a mere handful of the righteous is enough to preserve entire cities from divine obliteration – that is, from definitive unrepentability. Not to mention the long list of “intermediaries” of repentance between God and his people, from Moses to Josiah, Nehemiah and Jeremiah. From the second story, however, one can derive a second opinion, for *all* the people of Nineveh, “from the greatest to the least,” repented, even before the king’s order to do so (Jon 3:5). In comparison with Josiah’s “failed” representative repentance (2 Kgs 23:25–27),⁶⁶ the success story of Nineveh seems to show that collective repentance is only effective if *everyone* in the community without exception partakes in it. How can one resolve this apparent contradiction?

62 See for example 2 Chr 36:14–23, and Mt 18:23–35.

63 Martin Buber, *Ich und du*, Heidelberg¹⁰1979, 119 (Engl.: *I and Thou*, trans. by Roland Gregor Smith, Edinburgh 1958, 100 (emphasis in the original).

64 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*. Studies in Prayer and Symbolism, New York 1954, 133 (emphasis in the original).

65 Idem, *The Prophets*, 29 (emphasis added).

66 In the biblical account, the king was leading all the way in implementing religious reform while the people appeared to be only “following orders.”

For Maimonides, quantity alone is not what counts in collective repentance. Concerning Sodom and Gomorrah he said,

“Diese Abschätzung der Sünden und guten Thaten geschieht nun nicht nach der Zahl, sondern nach der Größe derselben. Es giebt manche gute That, die viele Sünden aufwiegt [...]. Das Abwägen aber kann nur in der Weisheit des Allwissenden und Allmächtigen erfolgen.”⁶⁷

The acceptance and appreciation of repentance’s representative minority (Proposition no. 11) demonstrates therefore only the immense willingness on God’s part to turn away from his anger and to grant once again a chance to the community in need of repentance. This divine characteristic – whose imitation by the pious is called for (Lv 20:26) – is abused, however, if the members of the sinning community now think that a few repentant ones are “enough.” They miss in fact the chance of doing their own repentance. Hence advised Maimonides,

“Daher muß jeder Mensch sich stets so betrachten, als wäre er halb gerecht und halb schuldig oder frevelhaft, imgleichen die ganze Welt halb gerecht und halb schuldig. Begeht er nun eine Sünde, so fällt die Sünde entscheidend auf die Waagschale des Bösen [...] und verursacht Verderben. Begeht er hingegen eine gute That, so hat er nicht nur für sich, sondern auch für die ganze Welt den Ausschlag zum Guten gegeben, und verschafft sich und allen Menschen Hilfe und Rettung.”⁶⁸

Such should be the attitude of those seeking repentance. When it comes to collective reconciliation, or reconciliation among peoples, aside from the question of representation there is also the question of generation: Is there cross-generational guilt? What is the responsibility of different generations? The *Bußpsalmen* as a whole express the awareness of the cross-generational “properties” of sin: “Denn ich bin in Schuld geboren; in Sünde hat mich meine Mutter empfangen” (Ps 51:7). Simultaneously, the ability – and eagerness – of God to break the chain of condemnation is also expressed (Ps 51:16; 102:21). Indeed, the “sin of the fathers,” which sons (and daughters) are encouraged to confess (i. e. to uncover) and to learn from in order to reform themselves and their present society (2 Kgs 22:13; Neh 1:6f.) is a frequent motif in the Bible (Ex 34:7; Nm 14:18; Dt 5:9).

To confess the sin of the parents as cross-generational guilt (Proposition no. 13) belongs to the “movements” of turning. When a generation confesses the sins or wrongdoings of the former generation, they recognize both the cross-generational longevity of sin (e. g. in human nature, customs and institutions) and the cross-generational consequences of sin (e. g. man-made natural and social disasters). By this very act of recognition, they are also exer-

67 Maimonides, *Die Lehre von der Buße*, 429–431.

68 *Ibid.*, 433.

cising the freedom to break away from the wrongful practices and frames of mind, and shouldering the responsibility for the aftermath of the crimes and wrongdoings by former generations. Jeremiah exclaimed before such a responsibility, “Es ist *meine* Plage; *ich* muß sie leiden” (Jer 10:19).⁶⁹ Such is the attitude of the repentant generation. For Maimonides, the most essential aspect of collective confession practiced by Israel since antiquity is the phrase, “*Wir* aber haben gesündigt ...”⁷⁰ The self-inclusive *we* is characteristic of this recognition.

On the other hand, if one proclaims himself to be a judge and condemns entire families, communities or nations for the sins of one or some among them, he in fact denies them such a freedom of turning and hence, by extension, negates real personal responsibility. It is no surprise that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke out unambiguously against such repentance-depriving, biologically-based condemnation, and advanced instead the principle of personal guilt (Ez 18:2; Jer 31:29).

But when one blithely thinks that simply by virtue of being born late and having the benefit of historical hindsight, he is free from the sin of his former generation(s), he is in fact blind to the cross-generationalities, that is, presentness of sin, and hence necessarily fails to make the turning required by healing. This blindness also often misleads one to consider himself a “victim” of having to deal with the “unfair” consequences at all.

The entire fifteen interrelated propositions about collective repentance form a system of affirmations, or “relational movements,” whose new expression and reformulation are to be found in the history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Repentance is characterized as asymmetric mutual turning, which requires differentiated turning moves from both sides of the chasm caused by wrongdoing. Examples of such mutual-turning expressions will be shown below which, the author argues, correspond to the five potencies of repentance introduced above.

Some Examples of “Mutual-Turning” in German Coming to Terms with the Past

One of the biblical motifs appearing most frequently in discourses related to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the Abrahamic plea. Already in April 1945 the British-Jewish author and publisher, Victor Gollancz, wrote about the

69 Comp. this rather unusual translation of the *Lutherbibel* (1912) with later versions, in which the ownership of the affliction disappears.

70 Maimonides, *Die Lehre von der Buße*, 425 (emphasis added).

“real meaning of Buchenwald.” Before that, he was known for vehemently speaking out against the persecution of European Jews. “Unless something effective is done,” he wrote in 1943, “within a very few months these six million Jews will all be dead.”⁷¹ But at this time, when the downfall of Nazi Germany seemed imminent and the international disgust over the Germans increased due to the intensified exposure of the “German crimes” in the concentration camps, Gollancz raised his voice once again – not for his fellow Jews but for the Germans. After rejecting the collective punishment of the Germans as the false lesson to be drawn from Buchenwald, he asked his English readers, “What is it that [...] makes it utterly impossible for the Judaeo-Christian tradition ever to compromise with fascism?”⁷² Thereupon he based his own answer on the incompatibility between thinking in collective terms and the doctrine of personal guilt and responsibility before God. “So far as Western civilization [...] is concerned,” he wrote, “the first great protest against the old blasphemy [of depersonalization] was made in the legend of Abraham pleading with the Lord to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.”⁷³ Just as Abraham appealed to the divine sense of justice by reminding God of the righteous minority, Gollancz pleaded with his public:

“I can only hope that the reader will at least give honour where honour is due [...] ‘Salute also to these German heroes of Dachau and Buchenwald [...] against whom Hitler employed all his malice, but could not prevail.’ [...] for all will know [...] some of these outcast Germans suffered more and suffered longer.”⁷⁴

Gollancz’ plea against the collective punishment of the Germans was perceived in Germany itself as “Hoffnungsschimmer.”⁷⁵ This shimmer of hope, fostered by the Abrahamic entreaty, was also offered by the survivors themselves. In this case, the employment of biblical texts served, however, another purpose: to make Jewish-German reconciliation attempts possible. In 1951, a couple of Germans in Hamburg started the campaign of “Friede mit Israel.” It was occasioned by the reluctance of the State of Israel to end the state of war with Germany, a decision, according to the German authors of the “appeal,” to be accepted with “understanding.”⁷⁶ Despite the “incorrigible followers of Hitler” in postwar (West) Germany, these initiators found hope for the fulfillment of their thirst for peace and wish for reconciliation

71 Victor Gollancz, *Let My People Go. Some Practical Proposals for Dealing with Hitler’s Massacre of the Jews and an Appeal to the British Public*, London 1943, 1.

72 *Idem*, *What Buchenwald Really Means*, London 1945, 14 f.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

75 Friedrich Mayer-Reifferscheidt, *Victor Gollancz’ Ruf: Rettet Europa!*, Munich 1947, 6.

76 Erich Lüth (ed.), *Die Friedensbitte an Israel 1951. Eine Hamburger Initiative. Mit Beiträgen von Rudolf Küstermeier, Moshe Tavor und Norbert Wollheim*, Hamburg 1976, 112.

in the perceived connection between the biblical stories of the righteous and the history of German resistance:

“[Die deutschen Widerstandskämpfer] haben die erste Brücke der Versöhnung zwischen Deutschen und Juden mit ihren eigenen Leibern errichtet [...]. Wo aber nur ein Gerechter ist, schon dort sollten die Bürger von Sodom und Gomorrha verschont bleiben. [...] Wir bitten Israel um Frieden!”⁷⁷

The publicized appeal for peace by Erich Lüth and Rudolf Küstermeier became a small movement, which partly paved the way for Adenauer’s speech on *Wiedergutmachung* on 27 September 1951. But the answer that counts could only come from the Jewish victims and survivors themselves, otherwise the appeal would only remain a hopeless monologue.

Fortunately for Lüth, such readiness to participate in communication with the biblical language made itself known from Israel. On the eve of *Versöhnungstag*, or Yom Kippur, Israel Gelber, who had survived the Buchenwald concentration camp, penned a carefully-worded open letter to the German initiators: “Ich darf nicht für Israel und nicht für einen der Millionen Leidtragenden sprechen, doch darf ich ebenso wenig für mich selbst schweigen.”⁷⁸ The survivor then recounted the help he had received as a *Häftling*, and which “viele deutsche Kumpeln” offered. “Solche Menschen *allein* könnten heute eine Brücke zwischen Juden und Deutschen bilden.”⁷⁹ The “many” and “alone” could be exaggeration in reality; but that is precisely the peculiarity of the Abrahamic “lens,” or the biblically-informed paradigm in general, which filters experiences and memories to seize upon the righteous as *the* reality among realities, statistically “insignificant” as they may be. Towards the end Gelber added, “Da Gott Sodom und Gomorrha verschonen wollte, wenn sich nur zehn Gerechte in ihren Mauern befunden hätten, kann Israel mitnichten eine dreistellige Zahl verlangen. [...] Ich schenke Deutschland den Frieden.”⁸⁰

Aside from being deployed to counter collective punishment and foster the readiness for reconciliation, the Abrahamic appeal fulfilled a further function still in the history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: to shape a culture of remembrance at the service of repentance. At the time of the Eichmann trial, Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, who was born in 1925 in New York to a

77 Ibid., 112–115.

78 Israel Gelber, Ich schenke Deutschland den Frieden, in: Freiburger Rundbrief 3/4 (1951/1952), no. 12/15, 13 f., <<http://www.freiburger-rundbrief.de/de/?item=962>> (15 September 2015).

79 Ibid. (emphasis added).

80 Ibid. The reference to the “three-digit number” can be read as a mild critique of Lüth’s claim that “viele Tausende von Sozialisten, Demokraten und Christen [...] im Widerstand [...] gestorben [sind].” Idem (ed.), Die Friedensbitte an Israel 1951, 114.

Polish-Jewish family from Warsaw, heard the testimony of Hermann Gräbe, a German civil engineer who had saved Jews from mass killings in Ukraine.⁸¹ He returned to his community in California and established the Institute for Righteous Acts (now Jewish Foundation for the Righteous) in order to search for, make known and take care of the rescuers wherever they could be found. In 1963 he published an article, *The Bias against Man*, which encapsulates his thinking on and lifelong commitment to the work of remembrance in the following decades. “Memory is an ambiguous energy,” he began, “it can liberate or enslave, heal or destroy.”⁸² Specifically referring to the Holocaust he asked, “We dare not feign amnesia, but how are we to remember without destroying hope?”⁸³ As “moral educator” he found the answer in the “moral act of remembering” which is to become the “father of conscience and of constructive repentance.”⁸⁴ For him, simply remembering wrongdoing and pointing fingers at the wrongdoers is beside the point: “Rather than struggle against your verdict of me, I may adopt it and live up to the reputation you place upon me. [...] Such resignation, however, leads to no constructive repentance, only to a brooding guilt.”⁸⁵ In order to nurture this “constructive repentance,” Rabbi Schulweis opined that it is helpful to use examples of the righteous such as Gräbe. And to preempt the dismissive mantra that “these are but exceptions,” the Rabbi questioned, “Which perverse logic holds that we obliterate the memory of man’s nobility so as to preserve the memory of his degeneracy?”⁸⁶ He justified the numerically disproportionate value of the righteous by Judaic affirmations:

“For the sake of thirty-six righteous, the world is sustained; for the sake of thirty righteous non-Jews, the Talmud declares, the nations of the world continue to exist; for the sake of ten good men, Sodom and Gomorrah would be spared; for the sake of two righteous women, Naomi and Ruth, the rabbis say, the nations of Moab and Ammon were spared. Who measures righteousness by number?”⁸⁷

Due to the untiring efforts of Schulweis to spread the one good name of Gräbe in the United States, the German righteous, honored by Yad Vashem in 1965, occupies a special place in the remembrance of the Holocaust. He figured, for instance, as “Kurt Dorf,” or that unremitting voice of inner-Ger-

81 About Gräbe, see Yad Vashem, *Der Zeuge, der beschloss zu handeln*. Hermann Friedrich Graebe. Deutschland, <www1.yadvashem.org/yv/de/righteous/stories/graebe.asp> (15 September 2015).

82 Harold M. Schulweis, *The Bias against Man*, in: *Journal of Jewish Education* 34 (1963), no. 1, 6–14, here 7.

83 *Ibid.*, 8.

84 *Ibid.*, 9.

85 *Ibid.*, 8.

86 *Ibid.*, 12.

87 *Ibid.*

man conscience, in the miniseries *Holocaust* (1978), written by Gerald Green, who had collaborated with Schulweis in promoting the righteous since 1962.⁸⁸

Whether such examples of the righteous have had the educational effect intended is hard to measure. In any case, direct and perceptible responses to the voice of “turners” like Schulweis and Gollancz, or people who promulgate the teachings of mutual turning, are seldom documented. One of these rare examples is a German-Jewish dialogue crossing generations and identities. During the Eichmann trial, while some Israeli intellectuals were striving against the death penalty of the convicted Nazi, on the ground that only God could take away the “possibility of repentance,”⁸⁹ another turner in Europe deliberated on how he could help Eichmann’s son “turn away” from his father.

In two open letters to Klaus Eichmann, Günther Anders attempted to shed light on the difficult situation of the so-called “second generation,” that is, children with Nazi parents.⁹⁰ Coming from a German-Jewish family, who had left Germany as the National Socialists rose to power, the philosopher endeavored to counter false condemnation on the one hand and point to the necessary transformation on the other. Right from the very beginning, Anders reassured his intended letter recipient that there is no generational guilt in the causal-biological sense: “Herkunft ist keine Schuld, niemand ist seines Ursprungs Schmied, auch Sie nicht.”⁹¹ The name Eichmann was abstracted by Anders as a concept and phenomenon, so that it ceased to be a stigma and began as a point of departure for common repentance:⁹² “Niemand darf er denjenigen bezeichnen, der *von* einem Eichmann abstammt, sondern immer nur denjenigen, der so fühlt, so handelt und so argumentiert *wie* ein Eichmann.”⁹³

Anders diagnosed that the problem was not just “one Eichmann” but many “Eichmen” who had taken part in the institutional and industrial exter-

88 TV Tonight, in: Indiana Evening Gazette, 24 December 1962, 18. See also Gerald Green, *The Legion of Noble Christians, or, The Sweeney Survey*, New York 1965; here Gräbe also appears as Ludwig Helms, a fictive righteous sought after by a Schulweis-like character, Sherman Wettlaufer.

89 See Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust*, New York 1993, 362.

90 On the problematic usage of this term, see Henryk M. Broder, *Die Opfer der Opfer*, in: *Die Zeit*, 14 July 1989.

91 Günther Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne. Offener Brief an Klaus Eichmann*, Munich 1964, 5.

92 Comparable abstraction was also performed by other turners such as Max Picard in his book *Hitler in uns selbst* (Erlenbach-Zürich 1946) and André Glucksmann in his essay *Hitler bin ich* (*Der Spiegel*, 1 February 1989).

93 Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne*, 5 (emphasis in the original).

mination of millions of human lives.⁹⁴ With this *phenomenal* Eichmann, the letter writer fraternized with his addressee as “Eichmann’s sons”:

“Merken Sie, daß das sogenannte ‘Eichmann-Problem’ kein gestriges Problem ist? [...] Daß für uns [...] gar kein Anlaß dazu besteht, dem Gestern gegenüber hochmütig zu sein? [...] Daß *wir alle* also *ebenfalls Eichmannsöhne* sind? Mindestens Söhne der *Eichmannwelt*?”⁹⁵

Anders even went further to identify Klaus as a “relative” of the victims, as among the “six million and one,” for they all belonged to the same “mother,” as “children of the same epoch.”⁹⁶

From this viewpoint of stigma-breaking identification possibilities, the philosopher pointed to the “poison” and the “roots,” from which one must be courageous enough to see if he hopes for “healing” and “salvation.”⁹⁷ This courage is likened to that of the sick, who are willing to undergo a necessary operation. Turning away from one’s own father is like

“Operationssituationen, in denen auch Kranke den Mut aufbringen müssen, sich mit der Operation einverstanden zu erklären. Und in einer solchen Situation befinden Sie sich. Bitte bringen Sie den Mut auf [...] von Ihrem Ursprung abzurücken. [...] Lassen Sie ab davon, die alten Wege zu wiederholen.”⁹⁸

Repentance as turning away from those “old ways” of one’s own father is the essential advice offered by Anders. Its demand is nothing more and nothing less than the willingness on the part of the later generation to fundamentally change and to allow others to help change their own “heart” (i. e. loyalty and piety, sense of pride and honor, etc.) and “spirit” (i. e. ways of thinking, lifestyle, perceptions, etc.). A new bond and a new community await this essential act of turning, “Denn ‘ein Eichmann weniger’ würde für uns ja nicht bedeuten: ein Mensch weniger, sondern: ein Mensch mehr; und nicht, daß ein Mensch nun liquidiert sei, sondern daß ein Mensch nun *zurückgekehrt* sei.”⁹⁹

According to the letter writer himself, the efforts were spent in vain, for no response came from the intended addressee.¹⁰⁰ But Anders could have

94 Ibid., 17f.

95 Ibid., 56 (emphasis in the original).

96 Ibid., 44.

97 Ibid., 19–21.

98 Ibid., 15. – See Eugen Kogon’s formulation in 1946: “Wir möchten [...] den Leser [...] zu notwendigen Scheidungen und Entscheidungen bringen, ihm Mut zum Nein geben und noch mehr Mut zum Ja. [...] [W]ir möchten die Kraft des Herzens und des Geistes, die dazu gehört, mit Einsicht nähren.” See idem, *An unsere Leser!*, in: *Frankfurter Hefte* 1 (1946), no. 1, 1f.

99 Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne*, 70 (emphasis added).

100 Idem, *Zweiter Brief an Klaus Eichmann. Gegen die Gleichgültigkeit*, in: idem, *Wir Eichmannsöhne. Offener Brief an Klaus Eichmann*, 2nd edition with an additional letter, Munich 1988, 76–97, here 78f.

found solace in the “belated harvest” of his sowing in a daughter of a Nazi family, who sought to expose and analyze the “nurturing grounds” in her family roots for anti-Semitism and for the expectation of a “redemptive” figure like Hitler.¹⁰¹ Born in 1943, Dörte von Westernhagen employed Anders’ concept of *Mutterepoche* in her own investigation of *Die Kinder der Täter*, especially the role of the mothers during the National Socialist era and their influence on their children. “Nicht nur die mehr oder minder belasteten Väter,” she wrote in 1986, “sondern auch die Mütter trugen zu Fehlentwicklungen der Kinder bei.”¹⁰² Her research on these mothers also included her own, to whom she remained “inwardly hopelessly bound.”¹⁰³ Regarding the cross-generational influence from the Nazi mothers (or parents), she spoke of an almost mystical “contact” with the “incarnation of evil,” from which none was spared, not even those born late.¹⁰⁴ She described her own conflicting image of her father, who remained “infinitely influential” on her, and the “unrecognized identification” with the parents, of which she accused the student movement of the sixties as a participant.¹⁰⁵

With this self-diagnosis, Westernhagen lamented the seemingly inextricable entanglement of guilt as children of perpetrators:

“Wir sind Kinder dieser Eltern [...]. Ob wir wollen oder nicht, wir sind mit ihnen identifiziert und sei es auch nur in der Negation, im wütenden Einschlagen auf sie. ‘Schuldübernahme’, das ist offenbar nicht nur eine juristische Konstruktion des Zivilrechts.”¹⁰⁶

She saw, however, real hope of disentanglement in the unreserved recognition of the guilt of the former generations as well as the equally unreserved “takeover” of that guilt. After applying Jaspers’ guilt concepts on her own father to discern his wrongdoing and failure on different levels, she came to the remarkable, even enigmatic conclusion: “Hier beginnt jedoch die Tradition, die Nicht-Entbindung. Daß ich noch lebe, wenn solches geschehen ist, legt sich als untilgbare Schuld auf mich. *Wir übernehmen die Schuld der Väter.*”¹⁰⁷

101 Dörte von Westernhagen, *Die Kinder der Täter. Das Dritte Reich und die Generation danach*, Munich 1987, 36.

102 Idem, *Die Kinder der Täter*, in: *Die Zeit*, 28 March 1986.

103 Idem, *Die Kinder der Täter. Das Dritte Reich und die Generation danach*, 216.

104 *Ibid.*, 91.

105 *Ibid.*, 219; idem., *Die Kinder der Täter*.

106 Idem, *Die Kinder der Täter. Das Dritte Reich und die Generation danach*, 224.

107 *Ibid.*, 68 (emphasis added). This quote from Jaspers’ *Die Schuldfrage* (The Question of Guilt) refers in the original context to the author himself and all the able Germans who had survived the war. I doubt Jaspers would have agreed with this extension of “metaphysical guilt” to cover even those not yet born when the atrocities took place. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, Heidelberg 1946, 32. See also an alternative way of arriving at the conclusion of cross-generational *Mithaftung* by Jürgen Habermas, *Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie*, in: *Die Zeit*, 7 November 1986.

This courageous takeover – despite all the risks of imperiling the most personal relationships as well as one’s own sense of self – would have hardly been imaginable without the optimism offered by turners such as Günther Anders and Ralph Giordano,¹⁰⁸ whose advice of “turning away from your father”¹⁰⁹ was at once incisive and solidary. This invitation to mutual-turning and co-repentance was perhaps by and large ignored or rejected, yet also responded to by some who had the “courage of the sick seeking healing.”

Conclusion: Translating *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

The biblical conception of repentance is a collaborative work involving both God and the sinner. It is not conceived as a task to be performed by the latter alone. The asymmetric nature of this mutuality can be gleaned from the various acts of turning encapsulated in the *Bußpsalmen* and related biblical texts. This essay shows that the process of asymmetric mutual turning is also observable in the phenomenon of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – in expressions by and communication between perpetrators, victims, survivors, and their later generations. It was no exaggeration or presumption but factual description when the preeminent Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer proclaimed in the Bundestag in 1998,

“Bei diesem Unterfangen sind wir, Deutsche und Juden, aufeinander angewiesen. Sie können die Erinnerungsarbeit nicht ohne uns bewältigen [...]. Zusammen haben wir eine ganz besondere Verantwortung gegenüber der gesamten Menschheit.”¹¹⁰

It thus belongs perhaps to one of the greatest ironies of the twentieth century, in which Nazi Germany had sought to eliminate each and every single Jew within its reach, that postwar Germans have depended on the Jewish solution of repentance as a feasible way out of their unparalleled “national catastrophe.”¹¹¹ The meaning of this extraordinary collaborative experience goes indeed beyond the German-Jewish relationship, for it raises new questions about collective reconciliation as a common problem among peoples.

108 Giordano’s concept of the “second guilt” is first and foremost in defense of the “second generation,” the “innocently burdened” ones, against the “organized impenitence” of the generations of parents and grandparents. It is, however, also a challenge for the second generation not to bring this guilt forward to the third. See Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu sein*, Köln 2000, 13, 17 and 22.

109 Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne*, 73.

110 Yehuda Bauer, *Die dunkle Seite der Geschichte. Die Shoah in historischer Sicht. Interpretationen und Re-Interpretationen*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001, 327.

111 Thomas Mann, *Deutschland und die Deutschen 1945*, with an essay by Hans Mayer, Hamburg 1992, 36.

Observed from the Asiatic periphery, German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* cannot but encounter problems of comparability and utility: Is this “German example” applicable in other cultural contexts with other historical traumata? What can this Jewish-German experience of mutual turning offer other wounded collective relationships? Many Chinese commentators have in fact affirmed implicitly the applicability of this experience, when they are only too eager to use Germany as “Moralkeule” to beat an allegedly “impenitent” Japan. At the same time, many Germans feel uneasy about praising their own “exemplarity.” “The Holocaust is unique,” they are inclined to say. Read: The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is also unique; there is nothing in it for the Japanese – demanded by the Chinese or not – to “imitate.”

In order to answer this question concerning the transferability of the phenomenon of coming to terms with the past, it is suggested here to move away from the polemic approach and see historically if in the area of cultural exchange attempts of transference have already been made by social actors, and what difficulties and possibilities they have encountered and discovered. In this way one can at the least acquire some factual basis for deliberation. To conclude this essay, I will cite one such example in which the importance of intellectual resources for coming to terms with the past is highlighted.

After Emperor Hirohito (posthumously Showa) had passed away in 1989, the question of war guilt revived in Japan, culminating in the “Murayama Statement” of 1995.¹¹² One of the social actors in this intra-Japanese debate was the distinguished Germanist Tatsuji Iwabuchi, who held a lecture in Tokyo shortly after the controversial statement with the title “Die Vergangenheitsbewältigung und die japanische Literatur.” In this short exposition, he documented some of the early attempts by Japanese writers to grapple with the theme. One of the earliest was Tatsuzo Ishikawa, who had written on the Nanking Massacre and suffered persecution for that.¹¹³ Iwabuchi’s goal, however, was not to defend Japan’s record of coming to terms with the past, but to show, in comparison with Germany, how much “weaker and smaller” the Japanese phenomenon had been.¹¹⁴ He bemoaned the lack of tenacity in Japan to come to terms with its past, not the least with the problem of bystanders.¹¹⁵ It is obvious what Iwabuchi was trying to do: to use the German mirror in shedding light on his own national inadequacies in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

112 For more about the legacy of this historic statement by the then Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, see Kazuhiko Togo (ed.), *Japan and Reconciliation in Post-War Asia. The Murayama Statement and Its Implications*, New York 2013.

113 See a translation of this text in Tatsuzo Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, Honolulu 2003.

114 Tatsuji Iwabuchi, *Die Vergangenheitsbewältigung und die japanische Literatur*, Tokio 1997, 3.

115 *Ibid.*, 19–21.

In his observation, religious traditions also seemed to have played a role in this phenomenon, for “Japan lacks terms such as guilt and atonement, which stem from a Christian background.” (“daß es in Japan an Begriffen wie Schuld und Sühne mangelt, die eigentlich von einem christlichen Hintergrund kommen”).¹¹⁶ He further opined that coming to terms with the past cannot go far where there is only fear of public punishment but not fear of one’s own conscience.¹¹⁷ Here is not the place to argue with Iwabuchi whether one could take for granted that Christian ideas have currency for all victim groups of National Socialism,¹¹⁸ or whether one could neglect the Jewish roots of these concepts. In any case, his instinct for the connection between intellectual resources and social coming to terms with the past deserves a closer look.

One of the intellectual-structural difficulties within intra-Japanese debates about the German example of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is precisely the content of repentance. One of Iwabuchi’s opponents, fellow Germanist Satoshi Tanaka, rejected the comparison with Germany because the *past* in question refers to the genocide of the Jews, which is unprecedented in history, therefore, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is only a problem for Germany, not for Japan.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the German postwar experience is not so exemplary at all, for according to Kanji Nishio, another Germanist, the famous 1985 speech of Weizsäcker was but a lie. Tanaka quoted Nishio’s essay, originally published in Japanese, with the title *Der Betrug um die Abbitte-Rede von Bundespräsident Weizsäcker*:

“Wenn die Deutschen es so sähen, daß dieses in der Geschichte beispiellose Verbrechen ein vom deutschen Volk begangenes Verbrechen ist, müßten sie – nach Nishio – auch *die Ausrottung des deutschen Volks hinnehmen* [...]. Nishio sagt, daß er in der Rede von Weizsäcker mehr Furcht als Gebet findet.”¹²⁰

What is astonishing is not so much Nishio’s distorted interpretation of Weizsäcker’s speech, but the idea that collective repentance means the acceptance of collective death penalty, i. e. collective suicide. Such a notion, though perhaps “self-explanatory” in some moral universes, is entirely alien in Jewish-German mutual-turning, for in the biblical conception, repentance does not require death, rather, it is conceived as a life-saving device (Ez 18:32). The

116 Ibid., 3.

117 Ibid., 12.

118 I would like to thank Prof. Manfred Henningsen for this critique of my earlier work on the topic.

119 Cit. in Martin Kaneko, Über japanische Geschichtslügner. Professoren-Ignoranz oder ist Vergangenheitsbewältigung nur ein Problem der Deutschen?, in: Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens 165/166 (1999), 19.

120 Ibid., 20 (emphasis added).

claim of death as collective repentance is also rejected by Maimonides, for whom the difference between the “children of Israel” and the Gibeonites was demonstrated when the latter demanded the execution of Saul’s sons as Israel’s atonement.¹²¹ If collective repentance meant collective suicide, the concept would have been unusable in coming to terms with the past, and hence – in this qualified sense – its justified rejection. It is therefore highly questionable whether the request from some in China and Korea for *shazai* (or apology) from present-day Japan in fact contributes to “constructive repentance” (Schulweis), when *shazai* (or *xiezui* in Mandarin) is linked to a suicidal notion of repentance.¹²²

Aside from death as repentance, the abuse of the “perpetrators’ children” also counts among the concerns of Japanese opponents of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Iwabuchi quoted someone criticizing it as “masochistic historiography,” who resented that Japanese children were “always teased by Korean children” because of the history of the so-called “comfort women”, i. e. sexual slavery during militarist Japan.¹²³ It is clear that the source of resentment, which has developed into a general rejection of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, was the use of shaming as a social-educational method. One wonders how things would have turned out differently had there been voices like Anders’ and Giordano’s in Korea and China defending the dignity of these children and guiding them towards healthy and feasible – though still always painful – “turning away” from the old ways of their former generations.

Despite all the intellectual-structural difficulties, the German experience of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* does offer ample possibilities in East Asia. Iwabuchi himself frontally challenged Japan’s victim-identification by recalling his own war experiences as a child and by way of contrafactual reflection on atomic weapons.¹²⁴ Other Germany experts like Yuji Ishida made use of Daniel Goldhagen’s concept of “ordinary Germans” to analyze the militarist criminals in the Nanking Massacre as “ordinary Japanese.”¹²⁵ Finally, there are also a few individuals in China who uphold the German mirror of coming to terms with the past to raise new questions about China’s own

121 Maimonides, *Die Lehre von der Buße*, 427. See 2 Sam 21:1–14.

122 See Alexis Dudden, *Troubled Apologies among Japan, Korea, and the United States*, New York 2008, 58. *Yisi xiezui* (literally: using death to give thanks to guilt) is one of the common Chinese expressions signifying the proper attitude of the guilty towards the emperor.

123 Cit. in Iwabuchi, *Die Vergangenheitsbewältigung und die japanische Literatur*, 31.

124 In Iwabuchi’s words: “Wenn die Japaner die Atombomben früher als die Amerikaner entwickelt und damit einen Sieg davongetragen hätten, hätten die meisten kein Schuldgefühl wegen der Benutzung dieser Waffe.” *Ibid.*, 15 f.

125 Yuji Ishida, *Das Massaker von Nanking und die japanische Öffentlichkeit*, in: Christoph Cornelißen/Lutz Klinkhammer/Wolfgang Schwentker (eds.), *Erinnerungskulturen. Deutschland, Italien und Japan seit 1945*, Frankfurt a. M. 2004, 233–242.

undemocratic history and ways of dealing with historical wounds.¹²⁶ All these attempts have contributed, with different degrees of success and short-coming, to making German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* “usable.”¹²⁷ In one way or another, these East Asian turners have tried to “translate” the German word and phenomenon: putting the words of turning into their own relational context. It is not so much about finding the fitting definition of the word in one’s own language, but more about finding the corresponding expression of its spirit in one’s own speech; it is never mere copying and transferring, but always a process of creating new expressions in, as Martin Buber put it, the “given historical and biographical situations,” where there are opportunities for the reconstruction of the “order of being” injured by wrongdoing in the past.¹²⁸

According to Rabbeinu Yonah, the repentant ones are duty-bound to help others repent.¹²⁹ Herein lies the challenge for the German-Jewish relationship seventy years after the end of the Holocaust: How can one practically fulfill this task despite all the dangers of hidden arrogance on the one side and genuine misunderstanding on the other?¹³⁰ In support of this *Lernprozess* at the service of coming to terms with the past in East Asia, the author would like to take part in Iwabuchi’s declaration:

“Ich möchte gern auch weiterhin von der deutschen Vergangenheitsbewältigung lernen und das Gelernte für meine weitere Beschäftigung mit der japanischen [oder chinesischen] Vergangenheitsbewältigung anwenden.”¹³¹

126 See for example Jie Yu, *Cong bo lin wei qiang dao tian an men. Cong de guo kan zhong guo de xian dai hua zhi lu* [From Berlin Wall to Tiananmen. Reviewing China’s Road to Modernization from the German Experience], Taipei 2009; Man-Tao Leung, *Wei shen me ri ben bu xiang de guo?* [Why Japan Is Not Like Germany?], 2 pts., in: *Ming Pao*, 4 and 11 May 2005.

127 Alfred Grosser, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Rede an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena*, gehalten am 18.5.1994, Jena 1994, 7.

128 Martin Buber, *Schuld und Schuldgefühle*, Heidelberg 1958, 41.

129 “Turning others away from sin as much as you can” is the twentieth principle of *tshuva*. Yonah, *The Gates of Repentance*, 70.

130 See Lily Gardner-Feldman’s clarion call: idem, *Ihr seid Vorbild*, in: *Die Zeit*, 12 April 2014.

131 Iwabuchi, *Die Vergangenheitsbewältigung und die japanische Literatur*, 23.