

*The Political Dimension of Reconciliation: A Theological Analysis of Ways of Dealing with Guilt during the Transitions to Democracy in South-Africa and Germany* by Ralf K. Wüstenberg (trans. Randi H Lundell). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, 434 pages.

As more and more countries experience transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, the role reconciliation plays in such political processes has become an issue of great debate. Indeed, over the past decade there has been an emergence in research into the role religion and theology play in shaping concepts of reconciliation in politics Ralf K. Wüstenberg's recent work, *The Political Dimension of Reconciliation: A Theological Analysis of Ways of Dealing with Guilt during the Transitions to Democracy in South-Africa and Germany*, contributes to this burgeoning field of study.

Wüstenberg is a Germany Protestant theologian. He is the Director of the Institute for Protestant Theology and Visiting Professor for Systematic Theology at the Freie Universität Berlin. *The Political Dimension of Reconciliation* is an English translation of his German habilitation treatise that he completed at Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg. This book combines an empirical study with a systematic theological study. The systematic theological aspect focuses on the role of guilt and reconciliation in political transitional processes, and the empirical case study compares South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which dealt with the legacy of apartheid, and East Germany's Investigation Commission of the German Parliament (EK), which dealt with fall of Berlin wall. These were two official mechanisms established by the government, yet theological conceptions related to reconciliation were deeply embedded in both processes. These case studies were chosen because they challenge the traditional Western separation of theology and politics, and they provide Wüstenberg a forum to examine theological reconciliation in a political arena. He summarizes his guiding premise of this book in the format of a question, and asks, "do words like forgiveness, guilt animosity, friendship, also occupy common ground with politics and theology when it comes to categories of reconciliation?" (p. xviii) In other words, the focus of this book is to examine theological concepts related to reconciliation, like forgiveness, guilty, animosity, and examine their meaning in political processes, such as the TRC and the EK, to determine whether there is any commonality between theological reconciliation and political reconciliation.

Wüstenberg structures this discussion by dividing his book into three distinct parts. Part One, entitled "Conditions for Reading the 'Signs of the Times': Methodological Foundations," focuses on the methodological aspects of his study. He outlines the case study approach, which sets the stage for his discussion on theology in political reality, and outlines his methods for interpreting theology and political reconciliation, namely the hermeneutic circle. Part Two of this book is entitled "Recognizing the 'Signs of the Times': An Empirical Analysis." This section of the book deals with each case study in turn, with the explicit focus on examining the political language used to express reconciliation (p.1). The first case study is the TRC, followed by theological observations of the TRC, or as Wüstenberg calls it, "Theological Interlude." He then examines EK, but does not provide the same detailed theological analysis. The third and final part of the book is entitled, "Interpreting the 'Signs of the Times': A Theological Commentary." Here he provides his analysis of the theological

implications of using political language, like reconciliation, in a political arena, and the subsequent consequences for the life of the Church.

To answer the question of whether concepts related to reconciliation take on the same meaning in the political realm and the theological, Wüstenberg focuses on concepts such as truth-telling, forgiveness and making amends, and contrasts them with biblical concepts of reconciliation. As a German Protestant Theologian it is not surprising that he draws on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, particularly his work on justice, and makes theological reconciliation as a point of entry for a concept of justice.

Wüstenberg conclusions distinguish between political reconciliation and spiritual reconciliation. He ultimately concludes that political reconciliation for nations experiencing transitions is distinct from theological reconciliation. However, he claims that it is in interpersonal reconciliation that both national and theological reconciliation can come together. He states, “it can be asserted that political reconciliation as the growing together of a nation does not appear to have a basic connection to theological reconciliation.” (p. 262). This leads into a discussion on how to reconstruct reconciliation in the political arena. For Wüstenberg, theology needs to make room for politics when it comes to atonement, guilt and reconciliation. However, he does not discuss politics making room for theology or theological understandings of reconciliation, and what this would mean for future transitional processes. This study remains rooted in the discipline of theology. And I am left wondering what the political implications would be for creating space for theological understanding of reconciliation in the political realm?

As someone who works in the area of religion and conflict resolution I found this an interesting and thought-provoking book. It is a well researched, detailed, and systematic study. This book provides a very sophisticated discussion on the interaction of theological and political concepts, such as guilt and reconciliation. And it provides a very unique analysis in terms of the comparison of the well-known TRC, with the little-known EK.

However, this is an academic book. It is not a simple read. At times the writing is unnecessarily complex and the arguments unnecessarily convoluted. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that this is an English translation from German, or to the fact that this is a PhD thesis. In any case, this is an academic book and as a professor who teaches courses on religion and conflict resolution to undergraduate students, I would not recommend this to my student. It truly remains in the realm of academia. Nonetheless, it is an important contribution to the debate about the role theology, and specifically theological conceptions of reconciliation, can play in countries experiencing transitions to democracy.

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