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Racism as a Violent Structure which Shapes Everyday Life: How do we Continually Cope?

With the experience of increased violence against Muslims and people of colour in the U.S., after Sept. 11, 2001, a young man from Northern Africa wrote to me asking for advice on immigration to Europe. Originally, he and his American wife had planned to move to the US, but now they are feeling insecure, fearing racist and xenophobic attacks. My answer resembled that of a letter of pastoral counselling, encouraging him to stand up and confront the situation. He would find racism in Europe as well and I could tell a long story of my own experiences, having shared my life with my Afro-German husband for 20 years.

BLACK GERMANS

When we moved from my German village parish to the multicultural city of Geneva, we were relieved from a burden we have suffered from for a long time. I recognized we had been living with an overall feeling of fear in our own home country. Fear had crept underneath our skin.

It began when my husband had a job in a large city and was only able to come home on weekends. On a Friday afternoon, while sitting in a packed full tram on his way to the train station, he was attacked and beaten by a drunken man. The other passengers only reacted when my husband proved stronger and had knocked his attacker down to the floor. He was still shivering from shock when he reached home. Not much later, through the media, we became witnesses to the deadly burning of asylum seekers' and foreign citizens' homes. The reactions from the German onlookers: foreigners, go home. Germany for Germans.

During this time, we seriously considered buying a rope ladder to get out of the house just in case someone would set it on fire. Moreover, once a year, in our village, the youth would commit jokes in the village. But it was not a joke when someone painted Nazi crosses in front of the asylum seekers' buildings. No one reacted and I was looked at with wonder when, with a young man, I was seen on the street with a bucket of grey paint, painting over the crosses and the xenophobic words and symbols.

After finishing their studies, black Germans see their fellow students readily begin their first jobs, whereas they would write over 150 job applications in vain. An Afro-German worked for a short time in a development agency of the churches and was constantly challenged by the personnel, because he was African, that his employment was against their principles and ideology of how to better the world. Most of them had belonged to the 1968 student generation. They accused him of having been so stupid as to marry a white German whom he could not take back to Africa. It was there where he belonged after having studied at a German university. Staying in Germany meant to be guilty of brain drain. "Development work means handling money," someone said to him, "and money you give

only to your own people." Finally, he changed to a sales job. His new boss trusted him but had to fight against others who feared that a black salesman would create a loss of clients.

Another frequent experience in Germany is to be verbally harassed on the street by people with hostile and degrading remarks. You constantly attract looks of contempt and hate. My husband finally bought his own car and would not use public transportation any longer.

MYTH OF WHITE SUPREMACY

This year in Barcelona, I listened to a lecture titled *Körperpolitik – feministisch-antirassistische Reflexionen zu Weissein als Mythos und Terror* (Body Policy – Feminist-Antiracist Reflections on Being White as a Myth and Terror) by Eske WOLLRAD, a German-Dutch theologian. She named the *structural violence* behind such experiences of racism: constant feeling of danger, of being menaced, violation of a person's integrity and dignity.

The quantity of violent acts adds up and reveals behind them violent structures which "shape every day life, mark our thinking and influence our acting." "From childhood onward, we learn what is to be seen as 'normal' and what not. We learn to differentiate between the 'ones' and the 'special-inferior-others'. This separation often happens within a split second, by a gaze onto that which, supposedly, hosts all narratives and reasoning: the body."

Racism is a structure of violence assuming that there are biological differences between groups of humans. WOLLRAD speaks of the "*myth of white supremacy*" as cementing a racist anthropology into eternal, universal and undestroyable truths. "Myths are not abstract ideas or the simple expression of individual outlooks – they shape the whole society, they attack physically, they write themselves into bodies. The fairy tale of being white corresponds to a powerful reality: white terror."

Part of this myth is also the notion that Europe has always been white. Thus, black Germans cannot be accepted as Germans. They are constantly asked when they will return where they come from. They are refused the right of being Germans, of participating responsibly in society and consequently having a share of its wealth. This, too, is violence.

On the other hand, there is an aggressive attitude against foreigners assuming they do not want to integrate into German society: they do not make enough efforts to learn the language and to adopt "German values". But, what do we expect of people who are confronted with such a racist attitude? In our society, over the past 20 years of growing economic and social insecurity, racist or ethnic purism has been revived.

In a European Diaconal Forum consultation in 2001 in *Järvenpää*, Finland, Tony ADDY stated: "It is easy to put all the blame for such insecurity on the alleged defence of a 'white community identity' against foreigners and people



of colour. It is not unusual in political discussions to find the ‘war against crime’ mixed into a discussion about migration. It is only a short step to infer a two faced threat of a foreign influx and rising crime.”

COLONIAL HISTORY

One of the roots for degrading and mistrusting people of a different origin is in *colonial history*. During the “discovery” of other continents, Europeans refused to accept that so differently looking and living people belonged to the same human family and were created in God’s image. WOLLRAD remembers: “Since the early times of colonialism, white human beings have set themselves at the top of humanity. They spoke of freedom, equality and brotherhood, and, at the same time, they have caught millions of



human beings – women, children and men – and have enslaved and killed them. Racism served to justify this violence. This heritage of oppression and mass murder is a heritage of Europe – it is (we may want it or not) our heritage, too.”

During the 1996 World Mission Conference in Salvador/Bahia in Brazil, we celebrated a memorial worship on the dock where, for over 200 years, millions of slaves from West Africa were disembarked. We stood in front of the warehouses where they were kept; we looked up to the church tower from which buckets of water were



poured down to baptize them before they were sold like cattle. We learned about their history of struggle. Finally the abolition of slavery left the coming generations at the margins of society, with gravely wounded identities, in extreme poverty.

Deeply touched, we had before us the youngest generation: girls and boys of the percussion band “Olodum”. I looked into their faces, so open and awake, curious and longing for a sustainable life, self-confident of their blossoming energy as they beat their drums. The powerful rhythms, speaking of the power of hope and decisiveness, filled the air and resonated in our own bodies.

Then I attended a local service. In front of me was a small parish band. A little boy, maybe two years old, stood with his toy guitar beside his father and accompanied the band. Watching him, I thought of my own two little sons who had just begun to explore life and long suppressed feelings came bursting out. I was in floods of tears and could not stop them throughout the service.

I was crying out all the misery which racist discrimination was imposing on my own small family, the denial of life by others, the struggles, trying to keep one’s head held high with dignity, despairing and raising up again in resistance. Maybe it was here at this moment that I got a real feeling for the empowering spirit of the American Negro Spirituals and their spirituality, which gave slaves their dignity in God and the strength to resist and to survive.

After the service a Brazilian woman smiled to me, stunned at my wet face, and she said: “And I always thought that you white Europeans don’t have feelings!” My tears took away the distance she felt in front of white people: my tears created community!

LAMENTATION

This again gave me pause to think. I myself had been ashamed in this situation. In my white Western culture it is not seen as appropriate to show feelings of suffering and despair, let alone tears. There is a German expression given as a model to “maintain one’s face” or “to remain collected”. With this attitude, people often remain alone with their suffering. And, if they dare to speak out, they might be met with too simple forms of consolation, or their problems may even be belittled.

Germans not directly affected by racism tend to say: “But it has become much better in the meantime.” “Your fears do not correspond with reality.” “There has never been any incident in our place.” Such reactions make people affected by violent racism even more vulnerable and lonely. They are denied the compassion and the solidarity of the community, which they so desperately need. The Swiss theologian Lytta BASSET in the book *Moi, je ne juge personne* (I do not Judge Anyone), brings such experience of denial to the point: “the falsification of human words does menace us daily in our identity as speaking subjects.” It creates the loss of contact with oneself in the annihilation of one’s own experiences and authenticity. “The authenticity of human words and God’s Word are the solid rock on which one can ground one’s existence.”

When persons meet in authentic communication, there is God with the Word in their midst, affirming their lives and supporting them in love. Also, the encounter through the shed tears can lead into community with the God of life. In a conference in Strasbourg in 2003, the Austrian Roman Catholic theologian, Veronika PRÜLLER-JAGENTEUFEL in her lecture *Verantwortung der Frauen im Leben Europas. Oder: Vom Begehren, sich selbst und die*



Welt zu bewegen (The Responsibility of Women in the Life of Europe. Or: On the Desire to Move Oneself and the World) shared a story from a committed American Christian, Dorothy DAY, who throughout her life worked for workers and for migrants of different groups at the margins of society. She also had been a peace activist and was imprisoned even when she was an old woman. From time to time, she withdrew from active life into times of loneliness and she wept much over this world. What an encouragement for us to stand up for our feelings of suffering!

“To preserve one’s face” often leads to inner despair and may have paralysing effects, whereas tears carry a liberating, empowering energy, as PRÜLLER-JAGENTEUFEL says: “When we want to withstand despair which can sometimes sneak in where we feel responsibility, then this being able to weep over the world seems to me really a good way. Tears cleanse the heart. And they can be a prayer in the very old form of *lamentation* in which, already in biblical times, human beings brought in front of God the wrong and their despair over it. Who weeps over the world instead of despairing over it remains in the love for the world, shares God’s love for this world and maybe also God’s tears over this world.”

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Weeping over wrongs leads into communion with God’s passion and compassion; and to renewed community with our fellow human beings. It is in community that we gain our authenticity and the truth of our lives. And this is the ground on which we can join together and commit ourselves to overcoming injustice, violence, white terror, and discrimination within our societies and churches.

Churches have the advantage of reaching out to the grass roots of society. Consciousness raising, repentance and renewal must start there. ADDY said: “The local is important.

It is the place where we see the values of the society in operation, where we can also test the commitment to an inclusive society.”

Ina KOEMAN, pastor in Antwerp (Belgium), says in her contribution to the European Diaconal Forum in 2001 on *Building Sustainable Communities*: “White people must listen very well to the painful racist experiences of black people in our society. Black people can help white people to find ways to join in the struggle against racism. The building up of sustainable communities starts with people’s needs, strengths, and beliefs, and with public discussion. The place to hold these may not be the church itself, but there where people are who know about suffering and getting up again! To build such communities we need all the gifts and qualities that people and traditions have. We need old people because of their long-suffering patience, children because of their cheerfulness, migrants because of their solidarity and hospitality, refugees and outlaws because of the strong survival systems they have developed. We need to learn conviviality, living together where people are. Then we shall find together the solidarity that we need for sustainable communities, in which we can resist difficulties, fight against injustice and racism, and experience a really inclusive, diverse society. And I believe that this will bring a lot of joy and thankfulness back into our European churches.”

Let us hope and pray for the young couple I mentioned in the beginning – and many others like them – that they may find such a sustainable community, wherever they have decided to live, be it in the United States or in Europe.

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