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Composting Guilt: An Ecological Critique of Purification of Past Wrongdoing

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Abstract: **A review of the fast growing body of literature on transitional justice (Hayner 2011), political reconciliation (Philpott 2006, Verdejo 2009), forgiveness (Amstutz 2005), apology (Celermajer 2009), guilt (Barkan 2000) repentance (Schimmel 2002), evil (Meister 2011), moral repair (Walker 2006), and cultural memory (Borneman 2011), shows that the concept of purification has so far received little attention. But the language of purification operates in the background of diverse practices such as the exhumation and ceremonial reburial of the dead (Desbois 2009), the call for truth commissions to document wrongdoing, and reparation campaigns that apologize and offer restitution (Diner 2007). At their best, truth and reconciliation commissions create cathartic moments (Greek: *katharos* = pure) and facilitate "performative transformations" that cleanse relations between perpetrators and victims (Cole 2010, 15). My new project, still in its early stages, asks whether the concept and ritual practice of purification can be used to enhance moral repair in individuals and to serve the restoration of social order in the aftermath of atrocity and systemic human rights abuses.**

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Let me begin with Pope John Paul II who, in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, confessed the "Faults of the Past of the Church" on Ash Wednesday 1999, by invoking the concept of the "purification of memory." He described the purification of memory as a form of liberation of "personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults, through a renewed historical and theological evaluation of such events." I want to begin with this Roman Catholic discourse on the purification of memory as liberation from the burden of past oppression and violence. The following year, in 2000, the Vatican asked the International Theological Commission to work on an encyclical titled "Memory and Reconciliation" that clarified the theological reasoning and investigated the biblical, theological, historical, ethical, and pastoral dimensions of the concept of the purification of memory. Interestingly, only the German translation of this encyclical on the Vatican website contains a preface, written by Gerhard Ludwig Müller Ludwig, who cautions against potential misreading of purification as a form of whitewashing. Here is my translation:

What is not meant is a washing-oneself-clean, which aims at repressing and forgetting the guilt and tries to

place a line-of-closure under the past. The goal is the creation of a "reconciled memory" of the wounds which one has inflicted on each other in the past. [1]

It is probably no accident that the German editor and translator felt compelled to add a preface to clarify that purification should not be taken as a form of whitewashing. His remarks use all of the German buzz words associated with Germany's six decades of "coming to terms with the past:" *Sich-Reinwaschen, Verdrängen, Vergessen, Schluss-strich.* More than many other countries, Germany has struggled with the legacy of perpetration, different forms of legal prosecution of Nazi perpetrators, financial restitution and Wiedergutmachungspayments (reparation), commemorations and the construction of memorial sites, as well as dialogue and reconciliation movements.

Persilschein is a well-known trope in Germany's cultural history. Persil is the German equivalent of ***Tide*** detergent or ***Dove*** soap. Persilscheine were letters of reference that were used in post-war denazification proceedings in all four zones of Allied occupation. A ***Persilschein*** offered Nazi perpetrators a pass by vouching for his character. It had the magic power to wash away the stains of criminal complicity and allowed instantaneous rehabilitation and reintegration into post-war society. German readers of the encyclical were prone to react to the concept of purification as a code for "forgiving and forgetting" by removing compromised events in one's biographies.

In the worlds' religions, rituals of purification use various detergents, including water and sacrificial blood to wash away the impurities of violation and the stains of guilt. Purification rituals exist in all of the major world religions and are seen as necessary procedures in the recreation of symbolic and sacred orders that have been violated by trespasses against God, sacred order, and the neighbor. Many religious traditions link physical and moral purification. This includes the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament. There are multiple references in the New Testament. For instance, the letter of James (4:8) says: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded". Or Hebrews (9:13-14) explains: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, ***purify our conscience*** from dead works to worship the living God!" The correlation of washing and spiritual or moral purification is well established in the history of religions, including Christianity. Social psychologists have recently retested this hypothesis and found that secular contemporaries feel physically dirty when they are reminded of moral wrongdoing. Called, the *Macbeth Effect* for Shakespeare's gripping portrait of Lady Macbeth's obsessive attempts to wash off the blood of guilt, several studies have confirmed a correlation between a perceived need for physical cleansing and memory of moral wrongdoing (Zong 2006: 1451-52). Traditional religious rituals of purification use water (e.g. baptism, Mikveh, Ganges river), blood (e.g. animal sacrifices, Eucharist), fire and smoke (fire sacrifice, smudge sticks, sweat lodge) to remove impurities caused by transgressions against the sacred order. Rituals remove pollution caused by offenses against the sacred and social order. It is well worth exploring the benefits and shortcomings of rituals of purification for modern secular transitional contexts of post-genocidal conflict and transitional justice.

Let me consider another example from South Africa, where a perpetrator deployed a Christian ritual of puri-

fication, as retold in Catherine Cole's *Performing South African Truth Commission*. Former police minister Adriaan Vlok walked into the office of a survivor of a poison assassination attempt with a bottle of water and a bowl in his hands. He proceeded to wash the man's feet, saying: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me." Catherine Cole, who uses the methods of theatre and performance studies to analyze the history of the TRC, goes on to write: "Vlok's dramatic and performed act of atonement—his symbolic cleansing of a past act of poisoning, his *doing* of an apology rather than merely saying he was sorry—produced a firestorm of controversy" (Cole 2010: 127-128) While some praised his courage and humility others objected to the implied expectation that such an act could cleanse the guilt and thereby create a pure conscience by erasing the past. One former victim of the police commissioners complained: "He can't just wash Frank Chikane's feet and think *this is the end of it*...." (Cole 2010: 128). This commentator opposed the ritual's assumed outcome, namely that this foot washing would constitute "the end of it." Another critic remarked: "Rather than going around washing people's feet...what we really want is information" (Cole 2010: 128). This criticism is related to the first, and suspects that the ritual act of purification aims at closure of the past. The fear is that the ritual intends to serve as a substitute for more meaningful and painful acts of accountability by providing, for instance, full disclosure of personal knowledge and factual information. Both objections are valid and need to be taken seriously. The first objection questions the envisioned outcome of the purification while the second suspects that symbolic acts of purification aim to circumvent and substitute for more meaningful forms of purification by way of judicial retribution, economic restitution, and political restoration of respect for victims.

I. The Goal of Purification

Let me examine the first objection, namely that purification aims for moral purity and/or a pure conscience. Purity, I submit, is a fraught concept that refers to an ephemeral state continuously threatened by the forces of chaos, disorder, and pollution. As Mary Douglas has famously pointed out in her groundbreaking study *Purity and Danger,* dirt constitutes matter that is found to be out of place: "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas 1966: 2). Purification requires continuous effort to arrange and maintain order. It is always perceived as a positive effort, although we may violently disagree over the ultimate symbolic outcome and the particular sacred or social order that is being sought. For instance, most genocides are framed as purification campaigns. Nationalist movements implement "ethnic cleansing" and try to eliminate racial sub-humans, biological degenerates, and political subversives from the national body. Transitional justice movements, on the other hand, claim to purge society of dehumanizing ideologies and political elites responsible for terror and state crimes. The definition of purity as the ultimate goal of such campaigns is variable and dependent on one's ethical values and political commitments.

An ecofeminist approach to purity would differentiate biophilic notions of purity understood as increased interdependence and diversification from necrophilic visions that strive for monocultures, hierarchies of

being, and borders that are defended against intrusive species, subversive hybrids, and wild admixtures. "Monophilia" argues philosopher Lugones (1994: 464) is at the heart of genocidal cleansings and the oppression of "others." The distinction between biophilia and necrophilia should not be taken literally or be used to romanticize nature. But this definition of purity provides criteria to distinguish between different goals in purification.

A pure conscience is not cleansed of scruples, regrets, pangs of remorse, and the memory of wrongdoing. Rather it has learned to integrate, to bear its weight, and to accept its consequences. A reconciled memory of wrongdoing need no longer be denied, dodged, and evaded. The goal of purification is not undisturbed peace of a pure conscience. On the contrary, a biophilic vision of purity presupposes the robust presence of troublesome voices and unmanageable memories. Such purity does not pursue a monolithic order in which the vulnerable and queer, the deviant and misfits, disturb the peace but rather empowers the voices of victims and enhances the plurality of perspectives.

We should not conceive of purification as an act of removal, which erases and makes the impurity of guilt disappear down some hypothetical sewage drain. Instead, purification entails the heightening of awareness and critical analysis of the causes and justifications of wrongdoing. Without such discernment, there can be no change of perspective. In the words of the Vatican:

Purifying the memory means eliminating from personal and collective conscience all forms of resentment or violence left by the inheritance of the past, on the basis of a new and rigorous historical-theological judgment (sic), which becomes the foundation for a renewed moral way of acting. This occurs whenever it becomes possible to attribute to past historical deeds a different quality, having a new and different effect on the present, in view of progress in reconciliation in truth, justice, and charity among human beings and, in particular, between the Church and the different religious, cultural, and civil communities with whom she is related. ... The memory of division and opposition is purified and substituted by a reconciled memory, to which everyone in the Church is invited to be open and to become educated. (www. vatican.va)

The encyclical does not spell out how one can substitute one kind of memory with another, i.e. reconciled memory.

I suggest the adoption of an ecological paradigm of transformation. In his magisterial *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity,* Roy Rappaport suggests that our postmodern, secular cosmology is best articulated by the concept of the ecosystem:

The ecosystem concept is neither pure discovery nor pure fabrication. It may well be fair to say that it bears as much resemblance to religious conceptions as it does to the descriptive statements of modern science. Indeed, it may, as it were, mediate between them, and as such serve well as the ground for a revitalized Logos, a feature of which is integration, wholeness, or holiness (Rappaport 1999: 459).

For Rappaport, a cosmology based upon the concept of ecosystem entails a "commitment to realize, participate in, maintain, correct, transform, and not merely observe orders grounded in the world's ecological order" (459). The environmental crisis has confronted human civilization with the limits of human-controlled orders that are built upon the elimination of waste,

weeds, and dirt. By contrast, ecological thinking conceptualizes purity as dynamic cooperation of living organisms that recycle, compost, and reintegrate waste products into larger systems of life.

Purification on the basis of ecologically informed sanitization policies implement recycling technologies that digest and convert garbage, including toxins and contaminants, into less harmful substances through a sequence of mechanical, biological, and chemical steps. Biophilic definitions of purity aim to heighten diversity and intensify interrelationships within an integrated web of being. Purification by way of composting depends on diversity and the admixture of materials and microorganisms that feed on detritus. By taking seriously the afterlife and reality of garbage, sewage, and toxic detritus of any act of purification, composting refutes the possibility of closure by cutting off and washing away "the dirt" of individual and collective shameful pasts. Instead, the framework of composting validates the presence of remainders as not only inevitable but generative of new being.

II. Purification as Composting

Composting is repetitive and cyclic. It involves the intentional layering and addition of energy, heat, pressure, oxygen, microbes, and bacteria. Like all forms of purification, composting degrades, dissolves, and disintegrates previous structures that have lost their usefulness and become disposable. Composting intends to destroy previously held ideological systems and economic arrangements, which allocate unjust political privileges and benefits and deprive minorities of dignity, livelihood, and lives. But it does so in a slow and organic manner.

Composting occurs on multiple levels and in different stages. It involves deliberate interventions in the lives of individuals, the critique of ideologies, changes in politics and economics, the cultural and social life of societies. On the individual level, the criminal justice system determines culpability and imposes sentences as a form of expiation. By definition, justice systems adjudicate individual guilt although atrocities and political crimes are never committed by individuals in isolation. Therefore, any punishment imposed by criminal justice leaves moral remainders, as the majority of those who became complicit remain unprosecuted and unpunished. Furthermore no punishment can correspond to the severity of suffering caused by genocidal crimes. Neither *retributive* nor *restorative justice* has to power to generate a sense of purification. Neither prison sentences nor executions can provide a sense of closure for the survivors. Therefore we need additional ritual approaches to the purification of individuals in the form of sustained moral and spiritual practices that address the moral remainders of personal involvement and complicity.

On the level of ideology and culture, it is the work of historians, journalists, artists, educators, therapists, and pastoral care providers who turn the raw experience of traumatic destruction into cultural memory. The factual documentation of atrocity serves as a form of ritual composting. Truth commissions, for instance, authorize the testimony of victims, validate their dignity and demand respect for their suffering. Such efforts at historical and testimonial documentation serve as rituals of decontamination that detoxify the cultural frameworks of legalized mass violence. Such cultural work challenges the credibility of toxic ideologies of

racism, antisemitism, and nationalism that dehumanize and justify mass violence.

In the realm of politics and the economy, rituals of purification occur in campaigns for monetary restitution and economic reparations. Attempts at recompense allow societies to ritually divest of unjust profits and unearned privileges. They often remain symbolic and are rarely commensurate to the damages sustained. But the willingness to engage in redress sends signals to survivors and perpetrators alike. While the "redistribution of resources around the globe as a result of restitution is likely to be minimal" concedes Barkan, "the rhetoric of restitution profoundly changes the relationship between rich and poor, between powerful and weak nations, and between states and minorities"(Barkan 2001:343). For instance, despite the many flaws of Germany's reparations payments, these policies acknowledged moral and material debt for the Holocaust and thereby contributed to cultural shifts in post-war Germany. As sociologist Natan Sznaider maintains, "the transformation of horrible ethnic wars into mundane peace is exactly the moral alchemy that restitution is supposed to accomplish." Money, he argues, "is the transformation of the strong (but opposed, and divisive) collective passions of ethnic and nationalistic war into the weak (but numerous, and unifying) forces of cosmopolitan peace" (Sznaider 2007: 62). Monetary reparations are a form of alchemy that comes close to my ideas about composting.

Rituals of purification also occur in dialogue and cultural exchange programs, arranged by organizations that set up service projects to reconstruct destroyed cultural and religious sites. Such activities aim to dissolve identities and exclusive ethnic, national, and political loyalties. The establishment of rites of commemoration, the construction of memorial sites, and the issuance of formal statements of apology constitute ritual acts of purification that generate new relationships and identities. Apology movements rewrite national, ethnic, political historical narratives and inscribe renewed respect for victims of the slave trade, colonial displacement, and genocide. None of these activities undo the trauma of the past, but taken together such initiatives bridge communities and dissolve collective identities.

III. Conclusion

In the aftermath of systemic human rights abuses, political crimes, and genocidal violence, "coming to terms with the guilt" occurs on multiple levels and in different stages. Its multiplicity and longevity is a necessary feature of the integrity and ultimate success of any purification. No one step can generate catharsis or impose closure. Purification must be viewed as a transformational *process.* A ritual perspective on post-conflict purification and reconciliation is committed to "airing out" the uncanny buried deeply in the collective and individual unconscious. Purification patterned on composting aims for regenerative action that repairs relations between perpetrator and victim communities. The metaphor of composting adjusts expectations and avoids frustrations that attend promises of cathartic solutions. Instead, composting rituals call for repetitive cycles that implement cultural transformation. Such purification rituals do not to eliminate the waste of guilt and suffering but turn into an enriched foundation for pluralist communities of respect.

ENDNOTES

[1] www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_ge.html" \l VORWORT_DES_ HERAUSGEBERS

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