

Plenary Session

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Towards Responsible Citizenship: On Leaving the "Victim-Mentality" Behind in the Context of Central (and Eastern) Europe

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Some reflections for the ICCJ conference

The title of this session as presented to us looks like an encapsulated medication, prescribed by Dr. Bargár with the hope that it will help minds and hearts be cured from 'victim-mentality'; a capsule that needs to be opened before one swallows it, and once opened, one can see that it is full of little **globules of relationality**. The nouns and modifiers of the title are all relational concepts – it is common sense – yet, I wish to underline the role of relationality when addressing 'victim-mentality' and advocating for responsible citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)¹. Put in other words, our discussions today address the question of how the notion of society in different CEE countries is being presupposed in unproblematic ways by their citizens, how societies are imagined by favoring certain historiographies, presupposing collectively shared values based on which inclusion and exclusion of people, as well as ordering the degree of exclusion and inclusion through actual power relations, can be negotiated. For me as a theologian, the question about faith and citizenship, asked first of all in a self-reflective way, lies at the heart of this inquiry. What is the relationship between faith (beliefs, practices, sources) and forms of imagining and enacting citizenship?

To start with, present conceptions of citizenship are captured in processes of **personalization and depersonalization**. By this I mean the tension between acknowledging a human being as a person in his/her complex embeddedness in human relationships and at the same time, reducing each human being to an individual, independent from any interpersonal ties, with individual rights, obligations and identity. (Szakolczi et al. 2017)² Personalization and depersonalization linked to citizenship as a political category are subject to the ideologies of political actors; faith communities are such actors.

In Central and Eastern Europe citizenship is basically defined within the framework of the nation-state; In many cases the nation-state is elevated into the status of a person (personification)³ having ties with

¹ And beyond CEE since victim mentality is not something present only in CEE.

² Szakolczi et al. talk about "Individualization as Depersonalization" in explaining the processes of "rising individualism and fake personalization. " In dialogue with, and by learning much from, Szakolczi (see also his *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, 2000) and his colleagues, I prefer to place the notion of "person" speak about personalization and depersonalization in inter-human relationships, and as such also touch upon questions of humanization and dehumanization.

³ Poetry and music have good tools to do that. A good example of it, we have witnessed at the opening of this conference- when the much favored and well-known 19th century aria text based on József Któna's drama and written for Ferenc Erkel's opera titled *Bánk Bán* (by Béni Egressy and later modified by Kálmán Nádasdy this latter changes the simple "my home-country" into "my holy home-country"- this latter version we have heard yesterday) was sung. A text which begins with the

other nation-states (personalization) yet meanwhile being the one, unique, irreplaceable single body (depersonalization) that negotiates its identity⁴. When talking about responsible citizenship, we (people conversing here) evoke a complex set of inter-human interactions with their multiple forms (e.g. individual, collective, top down). Citizenship in its conceptions as we encounter it today is closely linked to the emergence of nation states through narcissistic, self-elevating practices; such practices cause **disorder in relationality**⁵. The desire of creating nation-states, narcissistic practices and citizenship constructed through personalization and depersonalization have **a direct link to the land, the possession of land** (a topic still under-researched when it comes to theology) and territorialization. Put it simply: much of the victim mentality developed in CEE has its origins in experiences of violence related to the issue of whose nation-building project does a certain territory belong to; what kind of flag(s) marks a territory?⁶

Experiences of violence however should not necessarily result in victim-mentality, yet experiences of violence when made into **historiographies in which only victims and wrong doers are the actors, leave no space for self-reflection**. Depersonalization continues on the narcissistic line with no space for that which in a theological language one could call conversion, a critical reflection on one's own aggression and violence towards others; such historiographies leave no space to see how fluid the categories of victim and wrong doers are. The lack of this critical reflection on relationality leads to the pathological disorder of victim mentality.

Surprisingly this **victim-mentality is powerful**. Faith communities, political governments while appealing to 'victim-wrong doers' types of historiographies claim power and enter into inter-human relationships with that claimed power – and this power seems to be given to them due to a well-established practice of citizenship which works with the same logic of narcissism. René Girard writing on "scapegoat mechanism" argues that 'the scapegoat is only effective when human relations have broken down in crisis'. (Girard 1986: 43).⁷ If we look at some of the socio-political processes in CEE of the last hundred years or so, I tend to say that there were longer periods of political systems and perhaps inappropriate theological attitudes, which caused erosion in human relationships in different sectors of the society. In that sense the crisis does not break down but shows the **brokenness of human relationships, the brokenness of relationality**.

lament of a disoriented patriot/leader who is searching for future after disaster and who during his (the song is hardly every performed by female artists) lament hears the voice of the home-land (home country) who is equally in a state of disorientation and very much in need that patriots give their life, commit themselves to the homeland/country. The nation-state in this case becomes the one *whom* one faithfully serves, even dies for, when that is requested. A sort of deification of the nation-state can be observed. Of course such texts were equally present in the nation-building period throughout Europe (and elsewhere- just carefully study the national anthems worldwide), the question however remains: with what kind of purposes, by whom, for whom and when are they used today?

⁴ The parallel between how human beings are subject to processes of personalization and depersonalization and how nation-states become personalized and depersonalized could be also helpful in discussing issues of individual and collective involvement in processes which shape, transform the societal living together. Questions about collective and individual sin might be meaningfully discussed through such a parallel.

⁵ It's important to be reminded by the primary meaning of the term "relationality", namely the "state/condition of being relational" ; so it is about the ability of entering into or maintaining relations.

⁶ Such questions dominate tensioned discourses on e.g. minorities – a loaded concept when it comes to discussing the issue of citizenship in CEE.

⁷ One should not forget that according to Girard's analysis scapegoating usually does not result in healing; an aspect which should be given more attention when we (theologians-missiologists) discuss victim mentality-scapegoating and restoring relationships.

In my view, the years following the political changes of 89/90 or the years following the inclusion of CEE states into the EU could be identified as such times when human relationships once again broke down⁸; lack of trust and fear among citizens⁹ are obvious signs of the broken relationality. Disappointment in governments or leadership, disappointment in faith-communities, in politics, in the European Union seem to lead back large groups of people in CEE-societies to simple historiographies that advocate for personification of nationhood. Nationhood is abstract and imaginary, and its scape-goats – although pointing at flesh-blood people – are abstract and imaginary too. Think of such categories as ‘ethnic minorities’ (Roma, Hungarians, Jews) and ‘migrants’. What I see and hear at this moment are powerful victims (be it governments or faith communities), which exists because wrong-doers, scapegoats are procreated (by citizens at all levels and dimensions of the societies). This (the observations made above) might be recognized as pathological change in society, as a disorder.

A victim mentality results in rebellious, reactionary citizenship, a bondage mentality – you hear how much violence, aggression these terms carry, and we hear how much violence and aggression we speak. Today we talk about **responsible citizenship** – an attitude of political belonging which starts with, continues in and is committed to personalization of human beings living together in and as a society-acknowledging all human beings in their relationality, also in political terms.

In my view, it is important but it does not suffice to speak about the healing of memories – by healing of memories one aims at writing a more nuanced historiography with space for ambivalence and complexity; it is about going back and questioning the premises on which the notion of citizenship has been built. From my position as a theologian I cannot say less today than what I have said yet I can plead **for the healing of the broken relationality**. This is a call for responsible citizenship from a faith perspective, acknowledging the complexity of human relationships and warning against personification of any forms of state, let alone that of the nation-state. Leaving behind a victim mentality advocates for responsible, neither reactionary nor rebellious citizenship. Violence, due to ego-centrism, will still happen time and again, but a commitment to relationality might create the conditions for self-reflection, conversion if you like, for space to be set free¹⁰.

⁸ By making such an observation I wish to take distance by those arguments which only make the “forty years of the Communist regime” responsible for the present situation and the state of relationality in it. Yes, the communist period is still there in the experiences and memories and it still has direct link to the present but meanwhile almost thirty years passed, new generations grew up; processes which define relationality became even more complex.

⁹ While focusing on the citizens, we should never forget that this category is always shadowed over by its counter term “the non-citizen”.

¹⁰ While writing this, I must underline that the metaphor of victim mentality, pathological state, disorder may underscore the necessity for communities to admit that they cannot become their own healers. Yet, that is a further dimension of the questions raised here; one which I cannot address in a footnote.