

JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION? ACCOUNTING FOR “DIRTY WARS” IN LIGHT OF THE SHOAH

Roberto Cabrera

When I was in Jerusalem, I paid a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. That single event really marked my life. I didn't know it at that time, but I do know it now. I went to the Museum and... after half a day I was out. My first reaction was “It didn't happen.” The Jews are lying. It can't be in anybody's mind to do such a brutal action to a human being. And let's forget about it. So, I went home.

And [then I had] another thought, “If that did happen it is good that it happened in Europe, but not in my country.” Another thought: how could children be laughing in the streets here in Jerusalem, having had their parents go through that experience? So, I went back to Guatemala.

That was in 1988. I wasn't aware that only six years before, in my own country, something similar happened, with the media and all the international community accomplices to such a horror. The media could create two virtual worlds in one geographic space: metropolitan, medium size cities, no war; rural areas, war as hell. I wasn't aware of it, living a very happy life, working with some communities, playing God while curing people. [But] when I had to go to the Northwestern Highlands, I found my medicine to be useless, powerless. Then I realized that something had happened in my people.

For almost four years, myself and a team of two more idealistic people tried to figure out the effect of the war on the Mayan population, [and] how we could help these people. The area where I was working was 95% indigenous; they speak 10 different Mayan languages. So even my willingness to help was useless. But they told me, “Don't try to learn our language. We know what is in your heart. That is enough. Many people have learned our language to mistreat us.”

So, this work started and we could see how effective memory was to heal, but how dangerous it could be also. Dangerous for those who make profit out of the war, who got status because of people's death. Then, I had a close encounter with the aftermath of the Dirty Wars, namely fear, silence, anger, grieving, psychosomatic illnesses, along with a lot of social expressions of violence.

What has to be shown in terms of the Guatemalan experience? That has been one of my questions since I was invited to come. I don't know if what I said before about my reactions when I was in the Yad Vashen Museum has insulted any of the Holocaust survivors here. Well, that's exactly how our people were left in Guatemala. People do not believe it. People were criminalizing the victims. People were indifferent. People were even accomplices to such atrocities. And nobody did anything about that. Fortunately the Cold War ended in 1991. There was a movement, and there was a peace process that has as a passion, a Truth Commission. A Truth Commission that would take six months to investigate fourteen years of war; a Truth Commission that would come from the outside and not speak the people's

language; and a Truth Commission that couldn't name any name, couldn't address any individual responsibility, and had none [or] little funding. This was a United Nation's sponsored Truth Commission.

How can truth free people? How can truth bring reconciliation? What kind of truth we were going to have in Guatemala? Let me tell you, I think Guatemala is closer to Boston than Boston is to Los Angeles. And I can almost assure you that none of you knew about Guatemala back in 1990, when there were thousands of people killed.

The Catholic Church [sponsored a project] called "The Recovery of Historical Memory" which documented 55,000 human rights violations, and gave back the voice to the people. It was the first step for healing, for breaking the silence. This [*Dr. Cabrera shows the report*] is an abridged version of the 1500-page Report. This project was not intended to merely present a report, but to use the report as a raw material for teaching, for lobbying, for discussing at the community level what should be done in order to prevent such things from happening again.

This project reinforced our Truth Commission, called the Commission for Historical Clarification. Their report acknowledged that genocide was committed in Guatemala. (Not "ethnic cleansing," this nice term that has arisen lately to give a public health [connotation] to a political problem.) It has 145 conclusions and 84 recommendations. None of them have been heard either by the previous government or the current one, as our current president of Congress is one of the generals [found to be responsible for] the genocide. To let [common] people know what was going on, a popular version of this report has been printed. It [complements] a handbook used at the community level, so people can start talking, can start discussing, about their past, about their own experience so as to find out ways to overcome their effects. Many people that came to give their statements were very categorical when they said, "I'm going to give you my testimony, but please, believe me." And I know from other experiences that denial is the easiest way to avoid the problem. It is up to academics to try to buttress what people have said, so the memory can become truth.

In the last year we have dug up over a thousand illegal cemeteries in Guatemala. We have recovered more than 5000 human remains with shots: men, women, children. Fifty-one percent of the remains are those of children. No one can say that they died because they had typhoid. Justice is still a task in Guatemala, but we know that justice is not going to come if the international community does not have the willingness to help.

Many people have said that in Rwanda they set up a criminal court because they knew they were not going to get anybody in jail. Guatemala has not even been mentioned with respect to a criminal court. [Even though] one commission from the United Nations said that genocide was committed, the international community is not willing [to help]. We have small victories, like Pinochet in Chile, Milosevic now in Yugoslavia. We can see that there is hope for justice. But we also know if that the big economic powers are not willing, we won't have justice in our territories.

Last year I was privileged to go back to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. There is a link between the Holocaust and the Guatemala genocide, it is there. I could smell death, fear, and pain. But I could also see life coming from death, and I understand now how children in Jerusalem, and any descendant of Holocaust survivors, can laugh, can hope, can live. Because

I have seen that back in my [own] country. There should also be a link, not because it makes us equal in suffering from the Holocaust and the genocide in Guatemala, but because it links us in hope and in life coming from death.

Discussion

Panelists

Edward Kissi: I would like to use this moment of privilege to clarify and reaffirm one and a half things. The half thing is that, as you very well know, the United Nations genocide convention that was caused into being by the Jewish lawyer Rafael Lemkin did not include political groups as protected groups as a result of the inability of the United States and the Soviet Union to agree on whether “political groups” are indeed groups. So what happened in Ethiopia, what happened in Rwanda, causes us to rethink our definition of genocide in international law. Because genocide these days has become a very subtle process. Very often real ethnic groups are converted into political enemies to be destroyed by perpetrators.

The other issue that I want to reaffirm is to try and answer Professor Edmondson’s question to Gahima from another perspective: the origins of the Rwandan genocide. It seems to me that a variety of issues can be teased out, namely racism. The European racism and Christian anti-Semitic ideologies that were introduced into Rwanda from 1895 to 1900. Anti-Semitic images of the Tutsi, which the Tutsi considered as a privilege. Now, when Christian missionaries were thinking about the Tutsi as lovers of money, as deceitful people, these were the stereotypical images that existed in Europe that were transported to Rwanda. Tutsi intellectuals thought that it was a good thing. They used these racial explanations of social relations as points of privilege. Hutu extremism and Hutu nationalism. Radio broadcasting propaganda. International aloofness. The United States, for instance, did not want to mention the word genocide because the State Department felt that by considering what was happening in Rwanda as genocide that imposed a moral obligation upon the United States to intervene. And it did not want to intervene because it felt that Somalia provided a clear case for doing nothing.

Social and economic despair: when genocide becomes an instrument for unemployed young men and women in Rwanda to acquire property. To kill their fellow human beings in order to seize their wealth. We are in dangerous territory.

“Third World Views of the Holocaust”: Is there a view? Yes there is! The view is that what happened in Rwanda, what happened in Ethiopia, what happened in Guatemala, what we are going to hear about Cambodia tells all of us how little we have learned since 1939. It is an indictment on all of us that we have not fulfilled the claim that *never again* shall we allow these things to happen. These are the lessons that I think that I and my colleagues are trying to articulate with firmness from this part of the space.

Locksley Edmondson: You mentioned that assistance from the international community would be helpful. But in the development of the genocidal factor itself, was there either any outside involvement or encouragement or constraint? To what extent were external parties,

shall we say, governmental groups involved, if at all, in what transpired leading to and through the genocide?... Is there a restitution/reparations component being considered?

Kinue Tokudome: As always, facing one's own dark history is very difficult for any country, for any people. I was very impressed that your group engaged in this Truth Commission and produced the report.

As you heard, in my country, about ten years ago the former mayor of Nagaskai just mentioned that the Emperor might have borne some responsibility for the War and then he was shot by a right-wing extremist. So it is a very, very sensitive issue even after 55 years to talk about our own past. I was very curious to know what kind of reaction you received from the government and from the general population. Is there any threat or harassment to your job and report and its influence?

Audience

Adam Strom: Part of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has a psychological dimension to it. People were able to see grievance counselors and talk to therapists afterwards. I know there wasn't a whole lot of backing for the Truth Commission in Guatemala but has anybody begun to try to have people communicate in that way and work with therapists to discuss this and break the cycle of trauma that you're talking about? You're starting to talk about people with physical manifestations of psychological illness.

Dr. Cabrera Responds

External involvement: Conclusion number 13 from the Commission of Historical Clarification mentions USA as a supporter of the dictatorships that caused genocide in Guatemala, through military aid. Troops were trained in the United States in the School of the Americas, but there was something else that I couldn't believe when I was reading it -it was that Israel did the dirty work when there was a Congressional ban on helping the army of Guatemala. So Israel and Taiwan gave weapons and training for many officers who were responsible for the genocide in Guatemala.

So did Argentina. They trained our secret police to be torturers. The Chilean police gave a lot of support in intelligence for counterinsurgency in this National Security Doctrine Policy that was going on throughout Latin America.

Yes, memory is a sensitive issue. Our co-ordinator, Monsignor Juan Gerardi, was killed two days after we published the report. That was almost exactly three years ago. We were threatened as his colleagues, but it was too important task that we had to do. So we were all willing to take the risks, because we cannot answer only for ourselves. We encouraged people to come and give their statements. Just closing our office and going home would be like betraying them once again. The government reaction – well, we cannot just say that the government killed the bishop. What we could say is that was some cover-up by the government for the killers.

The population has realized these efforts from the Catholic Church to be the most radical pastoral work that the Church has done in the last century. For the first time in many years, people felt that the Catholic Church was on their side and that it was willing to take the risk.

Regarding the work that has been done, on the psychosocial consequences of the war - I was a practitioner who had to deal with the psychosocial outcomes of the war. With a lot of help from the Lord, and from some friends, and many indigenous people we designed and implemented a mental health program for survivors. Work that started with three persons is now reaching seven regions in Guatemala with over two thousand people engaged in letting people talk about what happened. [It is done with] the aid of that material and also with a lot of support from Catholic Church grassroots forces. The credit is not mine, nor the team's, but should go to the people willing to listen to their peers even when they are survivors as well. It takes a lot of courage. It takes a lot of heart to be empathetic enough to listen to somebody else's pain when your heart is also broken. But that is the only way we can do that with a lot of the rural population, people speaking twenty-two Mayan languages throughout the country. So we rely on non-professional people.

This model has been used now in Zimbabwe. In East Timor a program like that is just about to start. We will use local resources and give the people some training. Maybe not so much in knowledge, but in inspiration, to go and do this work for their own people.

Regarding reparations, guess what? The message in Guatemala is that if you want to do something bad, do it massively, so you don't have to pay. In Argentina where they have around five thousand disappeared people, it was easy to pay money; with 200,000 people, things get worse. And I don't just want to think about Rwanda. That is the message. So, we are trying to get some moral recognition. The state has not stood up in front of the people and said "What we did was wrong." Even President Clinton came to Guatemala and apologized. But our president, the one in charge to receive the Truth Commission Report, didn't even dare to come in front to get the report in his hands. People feel that the truth, the whole truth, has not been reached. There is no one to give forgiveness, because nobody is asking for forgiveness.

Reparation measures have been mistaken with governmental duties. For example, the government comes to any community and says: "Because you suffered the war, here is a school." But building schools is the government's duty, constitutionally. By so, we are opening the way to our communities to demand [the government do its job] as compensation. [But] this is not compensation. These measures have still a long way to go and we are supporting people in their demands with the government.