RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR RITUALS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the vital roles that religious and secular rituals play in the processes of conflict resolution and reconciliation. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework combining ritual studies, communication theory, and theological perspectives, the study argues that ritual acts function as more than symbolic markers of a resolved conflict. As presentational symbols, rituals have the potential to address the emotional and relational dimensions of conflict. They can serve as active, transformative tools for psychosocial change, initiating healing processes and reframing broken relationships. Furthermore, the study explores the differences between secular and religious – particularly Christian – reconciliation rituals. It emphasizes that Christian rituals are grounded in the reconciliation between God and humanity in Christ, understood both as a gift and a responsibility: to live out God's forgiveness and mercy in interpersonal relationships. The article also examines how rituals contribute to the transformation of worldviews, the humanization of former adversaries, and the formation of new social frameworks. These theoretical insights are illustrated by a brief case study of the long-term process of Czech-German reconciliation following World War II.

Keywords

Rituals; conflict resolution; reconciliation; Christian faith; ritual studies; conflict studies; peace studies; practical theology; liturgics

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Conflicts exist in all spheres of human society, as do mechanisms for resolving conflicts and achieving reconciliation. Experts in the field of peace and conflict studies have explored different ways to resolve conflicts peacefully through verbal negotiation, persuasion,

and the use of pressure or reward as a positive incentive. They study real possibilities for transforming intractable conflicts.[1] However, the search for conflict resolution involves not only rational and logical verbal negotiation, but also non-verbal acts, symbols and rituals. The role played by symbolic and ritual action in the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation is commonly experienced. It is known, for example, that eating together helps people to overcome misunderstandings, establish relationships and become closer. Rituals of reconciliation are also a common part of Christian and church life.

In the last two decades, the role of rituals within the context of conflict resolution and reconciliation has become the subject of theoretical research. This research has also been encouraged by the development of ritual studies, which have emphasised the importance of rituals for interpersonal communication, personal and communal identity, social change, social cohesion and culture. American peace studies scholar Lisa Schirch has attempted to apply some of these insights to traditional approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. She argues that ritual can function as a liminal space that is capable of transforming worldviews, identities and relationships, which is essential for productive peacebuilding.[2] The American political scientist Marc Howard Ross holds a similar viewpoint, but the key framework of his reflections is the concept of reconciliation. In his view, it is not enough merely to make peace, but rather it is essential to seek a real transformation of relations, namely reconciliation. This requires a fundamental psychosocial transformation, which can be supported by symbolic actions and rituals.[3]

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1 See e.g. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998); Louis Kriesberg and Bruce W. Dayton, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, [4]2012); Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System* (London: Sage, [6]2023); Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall and Harmonie Toros, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity, [5]2025); Berghof Foundation, *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* [online], [accessed 25. 10. 2024], available at https://berghof-foundation.org/library/berghof-handbook-for-conflict-transformation.

2 Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005). doi: 10.1515/9781565496187. Lisa Schirch, 'Ritual and Peacebuilding,' in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2022), 255–263. doi: 10.1002/9781119424420.ch21.

3 Marc Howard Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 197–224.

The aim of this article is to further explore the roles that ritual can play in conflict resolution and reconciliation, to reflect on how religious and secular rituals of reconciliation differ and how their differences translate into the process of reconciliation. In seeking answers to these questions, I will combine insights from ritual studies and communication theory with theological and liturgical perspectives. The study consists of six parts. The first part deals with different types of conflicts and conflict resolution strategies. The second part addresses reconciliation as an outcome and as a process. The third part focuses on the symbolic dimension of rituals and their transformative power, which can also be useful in the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation. The fourth part considers the differences between secular and Christian rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. Part Five discusses ritual as a symbolic performance of reconciliation and as a means of psychosocial change that involves a transformation of worldviews, identities, and relationships. Part Six illustrates the role of rituals in the process of reconciliation through the example of relations between Czechs and Germans after World War II.

1. Conflicts and conflict resolution strategies

Conflict (from Latin *confligere* = to clash, to struggle, to interfere) is a situation in which different ideas, opinions, attitudes or interests clash between individuals (*interpersonal conflicts*), within a group (*intragroup conflicts*) or between two or more groups of people (*intergroup conflicts*). There are also internal, intrapersonal conflicts, within a single person who may be at odds with himself or herself.[4] Conflicts exist in every society, in different social systems. They arise between different political, social, ethnic, religious and cultural communities, and ultimately between states and large power blocs. The forms of conflicts range from covert disagreements and tensions, through open disputes and arguments, to violent struggle.

Conflicts introduce instability into the existing social system, which has a number of negative consequences. Conflicts between individuals disrupt family, friendship or partnership relationships and cause psychological problems (stress, anxiety, depression). Conflicts between groups with different interests and worldviews contribute to

[4] Jaro Křivohlavý, *Konflikty mezi lidmi* (Praha: Portál, [2]2008), 17–20.

the polarisation of society and can result in violent behaviour, riots and crime. International conflicts that are resolved by military means cause enormous loss of life, damage to infrastructure, humanitarian and natural disasters.

Taking into account the negative effects of conflict, it is easy to conclude that it is best to avoid conflict altogether. However, there are situations where conflict is inevitable or even desirable, because it is an inherent aspect of social change. Conflicts uncover problems that need to be solved, pointing to the need for transformation and better communication. Through conflict, people can clarify their needs, opinions and attitudes, they have a chance to figure out ways to manage problems, and this can benefit the whole society.[5] Without conflict, social systems such as families, organisations and societies lose their internal dynamism and stagnate.

The main problem, as the Czech psychologist Jaro Křivohlavý points out, is not that conflicts exist among us, but *how* we resolve them: 'We can resolve them in various ways… It is possible to resolve them in a friendly or hostile spirit. To put it in psychological terms: conflicts can be resolved through competition or cooperation.'[6] If a mode of conflict resolution degenerates into a process that deepens human suffering and causes environmental destruction, it can hardly be judged as beneficial.

Each society has its own mechanisms and strategies for resolving conflicts in a non-violent way. In addition to the parties to the conflict, other actors are involved in the solution, helping to move towards more constructive ways of resolution and taking into account the many different aspects of the problem. It is often in civil society that original ideas and concepts for alternative and non-violent conflict resolution emerge, which are then adopted by state institutions (e.g., the idea of restorative justice).[7]

Alternative peaceful tools for conflict resolution include mediation, conciliation, restorative circles and restorative conferences.[8] The

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[5] Ute Finckh-Krämer, 'Friedensaufbau und Konfliktbearbeitung in der Zivilgesellschaft,' in *Friedensethik der Zukunft: Zugänge, Perspektiven und aktuelle Herausforderungen*, ed. Alois Halbmayr and Josef P. Mautner (s. l.: transcript Verlag, 2024), 217–234, 218.

[6] Křivohlavý, *Konflikty mezi lidmi*, 12.

[7] Finckh-Krämer, 'Friedensaufbau und Konfliktbearbeitung in der Zivilgesellschaft,' 219.

[8] Martin Leiner and Christine Schliesser, *Alternative Approaches in Conflict Resolution* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018). doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4.

common denominator of these practices is that they all have a certain predefined framework that provides a safe space for their participants to move around in. The established procedures provide a basis for their communication and action. They use strategies of formalisation, standardisation and repetition, which are often used in ritual, and thus resemble ritual in some ways. Their main communication tool, however, is negotiation and bargaining based on rational logic, the aim of which is to reach an agreement acceptable to the opponents or their representatives.

Not all types of conflict can be resolved in any of these ways. There is a great difference between consensual and non-consensual conflicts. As noted by Christopher W. Moore,[9] *consensual conflicts* usually concern different interests and views on the distribution of resources. They presuppose a consensus between the parties with regard to competing for the desired outcome, so that they can be resolved through negotiation, mediation or compromise. In contrast, *non-consensual conflicts* concern different values. They are often rooted in cultural, religious or ideological differences and 'focus on such issues as guilt and innocence, what norms should prevail in a social relationship, what facts should be considered valid, what beliefs are correct, who merits what, and what decisions should guide decision makers.'[10] These conflicts are very difficult to resolve using the above procedures because there is essentially no common framework for finding a compromise.

Non-consensual conflicts are particularly difficult in situations where religious and spiritual beliefs are involved. As Jayne Docherty has pointed out,[11] where values are perceived as sacred and immutable, conventional mediation techniques (used in consensual conflicts) do not work, and alternative modes of dialogue must be sought. Parties with fundamentally different worldviews must first deal with reality, or 'name the world'. Each side must know its own worldview and try to understand the worldview of its counterpart. Only when both sides understand their different value systems can they begin to solve problems. Docherty built her theory on the case of the negotiations between federal authorities and the Davidians in Waco (1993). While the authorities understood

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[9] Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

[10] Moore, *The Mediation Process*, 215.

[11] Jayne Docherty, *Learning Lessons from Waco: When Parties Bring Their Gods to the Negotiation Table* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

the conflict as a legal matter and dismissed the Davidians' efforts at communication as 'biblical mumbo jumbo', the Davidians viewed the conflict as a religious struggle. As each side used a different language of naming, framing and blaming, this lack of a common framework led to the escalation of the conflict.

2. From conflict resolution to reconciliation

Experience from a number of deep group conflicts, such as those in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, shows that official conflict resolution, such as a peace agreement, does not always mean the establishment of truly peaceful relations between the former opponents. The majority of a society that has long lived in fear and hatred of its enemy may not accept the compromises that have been agreed upon, or even if they do, continue to hold the worldviews that fuelled the conflict.[12] Within this context, it becomes apparent that a distinction needs to be made between 'conflict resolution' and 'reconciliation,' although one is closely related to the other. Reconciliation can be said to be a component and logical outcome of conflict resolution.

In general, scholars agree that reconciliation means the 'formation or restoration of a genuine peaceful relationship between societies that have been involved in an intractable conflict, after its formal resolution is achieved.'[13] According to Ross, reconciliation involves transforming the relationship between the former opponents, both instrumentally and emotionally, in a more positive direction so that both sides can more easily envision a shared future.[14] At the same time, however, it does not mean, as Herbert C. Kelman points out, 'that reconciliation comes into play only after an agreement has been reached. … it should ideally be set into motion from the beginning of a peace process and as an integral part of it.'[15]

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[12] Daniel Bar-Tal and Gemma H. Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–38, 13.

[13] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 14.

[14] Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' 200.

[15] Herbert C. Kelman, 'Reconciliation as Identity Change: A Social-Psychological Perspective,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111–124, 112.

Reconciliation can be studied from two perspectives: as an outcome and as a process.[16] The analysis of reconciliation as an *outcome* focuses on how the relationship between the two parties to the conflict has changed and what characterizes it. Analysis of reconciliation as a *process* looks at how reconciliation develops and what specific steps contribute to it. Let us first turn our attention to the question of what elements can be identified as signs of reconciliation as an outcome.

Louis Kriesberg identifies four dimensions of reconciliation that are essential for conflict transformation and peacebuilding in post-war societies: common truth, justice, respect, and security.[17] Firstly, reconciliation requires a *new perspective on the past*. The past usually includes two narratives about the conflict. The complexity of truths tends to vary in different phases and contexts of conflict transformation. In addition, the truth is often far more clear with regard to the transgressions of one party than the transgressions of the other. Reconciliation requires a transformation of these social representations of the past. Each group must learn about the collective memory of the opposing group, acknowledge the suffering of the other side, admit its own mistakes, and take its share of responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict. A new, shared narrative needs to be created.[18]

Achieving *justice* is the second important aspect of reconciliation. Kriesberg notes that the parties to a conflict are often driven by a sense of suffering injustice, and therefore recommends the following: 'Reducing the sense of injustice is essential, then, to removing the basis for many conflicts.'[19] It can be done by punishing the guilty or correcting the original unjust conditions. If the principle of collective guilt is applied, there is a risk of a new conflict.

The third necessary element of reconciliation is *respect*, i.e. the recognition of the humanity and identity of other people. It is this element that is often expressed not only verbally, but also in a non-verbal way, by means of a symbolic act, a gesture, a ritual, such as in the case of the

[16] E.g. Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 11–38; Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' 204.

[17] Louis Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 81–110. See also Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

[18] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 18.

[19] Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' 83.

mutual recognition between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel, which was expressed in the 'Declaration of Principles' signed on 13 September 1993 and in the handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat.[20] This handshake had a strong impact on creating an understanding of a new stage in the relationship.

The fourth major dimension of reconciliation is *security*, which can range from refuge from physical violence, through the absence of structural violence and the achievement of positive peace, to a high degree of security where members of previously antagonistic parties can live in co-operation and a high degree of harmony.[21] All these dimensions of reconciliation, as Kriesberg remarks, may not be fully realised simultaneously. The reconciliation actions relating to each of them sometimes reinforce each other, but at other times are contradictory.[22]

The need for reconciliation applies not so much to short-term conflicts that take place between political leaders and are barely noticed by society, but especially to long, deep conflicts when the society involved in the conflict shares beliefs, attitudes, motivations and emotions that negate the possibility of a peaceful resolution and peaceful relations.[23] These widely shared societal beliefs, such as fear, anger, and hatred of the enemy have been formed during the conflict and have spread among the members of the society. They are supported by social institutions, mass media and collective memory. So while the leadership takes steps towards reconciliation, many people on one or both sides may remain in a position of irreconciliation. Some may passively oppose the new arrangement, while others may not only reject it but also actively seek to continue the struggle or undermine the peace agreements.

For stable and lasting peace, it is necessary to change the various manifestations of conflict by addressing its root causes and by targeting not only structural changes but also behavioural and attitudinal changes. Structural changes alone are usually not enough to establish peaceful relationships. Reconciliation is needed. For true reconciliation to take place between the two sides of a conflict, both must undergo a profound *psychosocial change*. As Bar-Tal and Bennink claim: 'The essence of reconciliation is a psychological process that involves changes in the

[20] Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' 84.
[21] Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' 85.
[22] Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' 85–86.
[23] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 13.

motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of most members of society.'[24] This transformation is a process that does not occur naturally but requires active effort in order to overcome obstacles and is very time-consuming. Bar-Tal describes five key areas in which psychological transformation is required in the reconciliation process: societal beliefs about the group's goals, about the rival group, about one's own group, about relations with the past opponent, and about peace.[25]

The process of reconciliation – especially in the case of deep ethnopolitical and religious conflicts – tends to take a very long time to achieve. In some cases, even after the conflict has been resolved, reconciliation is emotionally rejected by some groups in society.[26] One of the tools that can help in the process of reconciliation is ritual. Rituals have special qualities and functions, which can promote the psychosocial changes that are a necessary part of reconciliation.

3. Ritual as symbolic action, formation and transformation

Ritual is an action that is outside of ordinary life. Although it uses activities from everyday life, it uses them within a ritual context that gives them a new, symbolic meaning. Ritual should therefore be defined primarily as a symbolic action.[27]

Symbolic action in ritual is physical action that communicates mainly through so-called *presentational* symbols. This concept was developed by the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer, who distinguished between discursive and presentational symbols in her theory of symbolic thought.[28] While discursive symbolism refers to logical-rational, predominantly linguistic expressions of meaning, presentational symbolism refers primarily to non-linguistic, sense-capturable ways

[24] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 17.

[25] Daniel Bar-Tal, 'From Intractable Conflict Through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: A Psychological Analysis,' *Political Psychology* 21 (2000): 351–365. Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 20–22.

[26] Dan Bar-On, 'Will the Parties Conciliate or Refuse? The Triangle of Jews, Germans, and Palestinians,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 239–254, 239 points to two profound conflicts: 'the German-Jewish situation after the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.'

[27] Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: University Press 2014), 5.

[28] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophie auf neuem Wege – das Symbol im Denken, im Ritus und in der Kunst* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1965), 86ff, 102–105.

of expression, e.g. through space, light, colour, images, objects, clothing, movements, gestures, sounds, music, smell, or even the language of poetry or myth. It is characteristic of presentational symbols that the perception of their meanings does not take place in partial sequences and successive steps, but rather all at once, comprehensively and holistically (for example, the perception of a photograph). Thus, presentational symbolism usually involves multiple senses and produces an experience that cannot be fully expressed by means of discursive language. It stimulates meaning-making in the realm of emotions.

Furthermore, communication within the context of ritual can be described as *analogue*. This term is taken from Paul Watzlawick's distinction between analogue and digital communication. Whereas digital communication is communication using symbolic systems that have well-defined meanings and thus allow for the unambiguous transmission of information, analogue communication includes non-verbal elements such as tone of voice, gestures or spatial proximity. Its meaning is interpreted intuitively, depending on the situational context, and conveys mainly meanings within the realm of emotions and relationships.[29] Every communication to a greater or lesser extent includes both digital and analogue components, which complement each other.

In terms of its pragmatics, ritual is directed towards the *formation* of the human worldview, identity and relationships. Ritual can thus be a tool for building and affirming identity and the current worldview, as noted by Theodore Jennings: 'Ritual action is a means by which its participants discover who they are in the world and "how it is" with the world.'[30] However, some scholars, following Victor Turner, also emphasise the *transformative* function of ritual. Robbie Davis-Floyd defines ritual in this sense, arguing that ritual is 'a structured, repetitive, and symbolic representation of a cultural belief or value; its primary purpose is transformation.'[31] Or as Lisa Schirch states: 'Some rituals reinforce the status quo by affirming people's worldviews, identities, and

[29] Werner Jetter, *Symbol und Ritual: Anthropologische Elemente im Gottesdienst* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), 168–169. See also Paul Watzlawick, *Pragmatika lidské komunikace: Interakční vzroce, patologie a paradoxy* (Praha: Portál, 2024), 59–66.

[30] Theodore Jennings, 'On Ritual Knowledge,' *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 2 (Apr., 1982): 111–127, 113.

[31] Robbie E. Davis-Floyd, 'The Technological Model of Birth,' *The Journal of American Folklore* 100, no. 398, Folklore and Feminism (Oct.–Dec., 1987): 479–495, 480.

relationships. Other rituals mark and support the process of change. In the course of a ritual, people's worldviews, identities, and relationships may be transformed.'[32]

All of these qualities and aspects of ritual – its ability not only to communicate content but to evoke emotions and shape relationships, and its ability to affirm or transform worldview and identity, also play an important role in rituals used for conflict resolution and reconciliation.

4. Religious and secular rituals of reconciliation

Lisa Schirch points out that many Native American communities use symbols and rituals rather than verbal negotiation to resolve conflict: 'The rituals of smoking, passing the peace pipe, sweat lodges and other ceremonies were a kind of "negotiation without words." Indigenous societies seem to prefer symbols and rituals as a means of communication, in contrast to Western industrial societies, which prefer more direct means of communication.'[33] However, even in Western societies, symbolic actions and rituals can have their place in conflict resolution and reconciliation processes, not as a substitute for political negotiation but as a valuable complement to it. Ritual does not solve problems by negotiating the best solution, but by creating a new framework for interpreting problems.[34] This makes rituals a useful complement to traditional models of negotiation. It is an approach that attempts to reframe conflict by focusing on common ground and harmony between people. Ritual shifts the focus from 'conflict' to 'opportunities for peace'.[35]

The results of ritual studies show that symbolic actions and rituals help to communicate meanings especially within the realm of relationships and emotions. 'Symbolic acts can penetrate the impenetrable, overcome defensiveness, and convey complex messages without a single word being spoken.'[36] Thus, they can help in the search for conflict resolution, peacemaking and reconciliation, for example, in situations where it is difficult to express a direct apology, when words are perceived as too easy to utter while symbolic action appears more sincere, or when a more emotional expression than a verbal apology

[32] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 17.
[33] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 6.
[34] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 104.
[35] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 64.
[36] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 4.

is needed.[37] Victor Turner pointed out in his theory of social drama that the performance of a public ritual can help to effectively remedy social conflict.[38] This direction is also followed by the proposals of psychoculturally oriented theorists such as Herbert C. Kelman, Joseph V. Montville and Vamik D. Volkan. According to them, ritual mobilises deep-seated cultural understanding, emphasises what groups in conflict have in common, and provides reassurance that future relationships will be less threatening than past ones. As Ross points out: 'Ritual, therefore, is an important mechanism for redefining ethnic conflict away from incompatible differences and threatened identities to agreed-upon relations, or to separation as the best solution.'[39]

Reconciliation rituals can be divided into individual rituals, concerning conflicts between individuals, and supra-individual or communal rituals, concerning reconciliation between communities, ethnic groups or states. Rituals of reconciliation take both religious and secular forms. Distinguishing between religious and secular rituals is sometimes difficult, since all rituals reflect certain social beliefs, worldviews, attitudes and values. Some authors even insist that ritual itself is inherently religious or cosmological in nature, that it refers to supernatural, transcendent forces.[40] Nevertheless, it can be argued that some rituals are explicitly linked to religious beliefs, to how people understand their place in the cosmos, and to their ideas of God or a higher power (e.g. Christian services, baptisms, Buddhist meditations, Muslim prayers), while others express certain worldviews and values without explicitly referring to religious beliefs (e.g. celebrations of national holidays, political inaugurations or university graduations). Thus, a distinction can also be made between religious and secular rituals of reconciliation.

In Western culture, individual rituals of reconciliation usually include expressing regret with an apology, or mutual acknowledgement of shared guilt, and a handshake. This is a gesture that is taught to children from a young age. Sometimes reconciliation is also accompanied by the presentation of a flower or gift, or a hug and a meal

[37] Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' 211.
[38] Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37–41.
[39] Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' 214.
[40] See e.g. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1915), who described ritual in religious terms.

together.[41] In the case of community reconciliation, e.g., after a war, reconciliation rituals include assemblies at which a public apology is made or forgiveness is asked, the suffering of the victims is acknowledged and the victims are remembered, and the prospect of a shared future is opened up. These ceremonies are often accompanied by symbolic gestures, such as a handshake or the presentation of a gift, or the installation of a joint memorial. For example, in 1994, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising against the German occupiers, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Herzog acknowledged his country's guilt with the words: 'I ask forgiveness for that which has been done to you by the Germans.' The Polish writer Szczypiorski replied: 'The Polish people have been waiting forty years for those words.'[42]

Even if reconciliation rituals are conceived in secular terms, a certain spiritual dimension can be seen in them precisely because of the forgiveness and reconciliation that take place or are symbolically represented in them. 'Spiritual for me signifies moving beyond the issues and toward an encounter. It is a journey toward an encounter with self and the other. The purpose of the journey of reconciliation is healing.'[43] In reconciliation, individuals, groups, and societies that have been in conflict rebuild or establish at least a neutral relationship that is not burdened by mutual hatred. Reconciliation thus brings collective healing.

There are also rituals of reconciliation that are explicitly linked to a particular religious tradition. In Christian churches, a distinction can be made between individual rituals of reconciliation, which for example include personal confession, and collective rituals, which may include a communal confession of guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation as part of a worship service. The laying aside of all the grievances that one has against the other, forgiveness and the restoration of mutual relations is often symbolically represented by a greeting of peace with a handshake. Reconciliation is also closely associated with the communal participation in the Lord's Supper, a ritual that makes present the core of the Christian message of reconciliation between God and

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[41] Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form, and Identity of Christian Ritual in our Culture* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 420.

[42] Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance*, 420.

[43] John Paul Lederach, 'Beyond Violence: Building Sustainable Peace,' in *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. E. Weiner (New York: Continuum, 1998), 236–245, 244.

man through Jesus Christ. The eating of one bread and drinking from one cup visibly embodies the union of believers with Christ, as well as their union with one another.

In contrast to secular rituals, Christian rituals of reconciliation presuppose the framework of Christian doctrine in which reconciliation of humanity with God is one of the central ideas. Although, according to Wilfried Härle, the Christian doctrine of reconciliation belongs to the most demanding parts of Christian dogmatics, its essence can be summarized in the words: 'God himself, whose very being is love, in Jesus Christ takes upon himself the sin of the world, bears it, endures it, and thus forgives.'[44] From the perspective of biblical testimony, the initiative for reconciliation comes from God – from his act of forgiving human sin, which consists in humanity's separation from God's love. The goal of reconciliation is the 'restoration of the sin-broken fellowship of humanity with its Creator, the source of its life',[45] or, in the words of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'healing and bringing together broken relationships'.[46] God's forgiveness is a prerequisite for reconciliation. However, reconciliation with God as the healing of a broken relationship requires a human response. As the apostle Paul urges: 'We plead with you on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God!"' (2 Cor 5:20, NET). A fitting human response to God's open arms is remorse, repentance, and faith (cf. Luke 15:11–32).

God's forgiveness and reconciliation with God, as experienced in the life of Christians and churches, is both a gift and a responsibility. This dual nature is exemplified in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23–35), which shows that the only appropriate response to the master's forgiveness is to act according to the same logic of grace. This theological dynamic is further affirmed by the apostle Paul, who explicitly states that God 'reconciled us to himself through Christ' and 'has given us the ministry of reconciliation', namely 'the message of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18–19 NET). Christians are thus gifted with reconciliation with God and called to proclaim it and invite others into reconciliation with Him. At the same time, they are not to receive God's grace in vain (2 Cor 6:1), but reflect it in their daily lives and

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[44] Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 331.

[45] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 449–50.

[46] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation* (A Constructive Theology for the Pluralistic World; vol. 1) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), 364.

interpersonal relationships. Reconciliation with God serves both as an impetus for acknowledging one's own guilt, when one is guilty, and as a foundation for the willingness to forgive when one has been wronged by others. The gift of God's unconditional forgiveness and acceptance provides the motivation and strength for these actions.

Christian reconciliation ceremonies therefore always take into account the vertical dimension of human existence and the fact that conflicts disturb not only relationships between people but also the relationship between Man and God. In the Christian perspective, guilt has a transcendent dimension. This distinguishes Christian recognition and confession of guilt, whether in the form of individual confession or communal confession of guilt in worship, from its secular counterparts. It is not only a conflict between human parties, but it also concerns Man's standing before God. Reconciliation with one's neighbour and reconciliation with God are closely intertwined.

Christian rituals of reconciliation proclaim God's forgiveness and the possibility of a new beginning, and this message serves as an important spiritual and motivational resource for confessing guilt, forgiving 'our trespassers', and pursuing reconciliation. At the same time, these rituals remind believers who live as justified sinners to pass on what they themselves have received. They affirm that each person is responsible before God for their relationships with others and encourage to seek ways of reparation, mutual forgiveness, and reconciliation. The connection between divine and interpersonal forgiveness is clearly expressed in the Lord's Prayer: 'And forgive us our debts, as we ourselves have forgiven our debtors' (Mat 6:12, NET). In the Christian tradition, forgiveness is not seen as a sign of weakness but rather as an expression of faith, gratitude for God's mercy, and authentic Christian identity. For this reason, every Christian worship service includes – more or less formally – a confession of guilt and a request for forgiveness. To live as a Christian is to live out of God's forgiveness and to forgive others, to rejoice in reconciliation with God and to seek reconciliation with people.

5. Ritual as a symbolic performance of reconciliation and a means of psychosocial change

Reflecting on the role of rituals in the reconciliation process, we find that the role of rituals depends on the stage of the reconciliation process that the parties to the conflict are currently in. Reconciliation

can be conceived, as Kriesberg and Ross propose, as a continuum, meaning that there may be different degrees of reconciliation, not just its presence or absence. Ross distinguishes between instrumental and moral (emotional) reconciliation, or between weak and strong versions of reconciliation: 'The strong version involves a total transformation in the relationship between former opponents; in the weak version there is sufficient change so that interactions between the groups are increasingly constructive and violence comes to an end.'[47]

Following this distinction, the role of reconciliation rituals can be characterized as follows: If a 'strong version' of reconciliation has been achieved, the ritual is a symbolic *representation* of reconciliation that has been reached. Such a ritual can also be described as a rite of passage, symbolically representing the transition from a state of conflict to a state of reconciliation. This transition can be intensely experienced by the participants, even though the key steps leading to reconciliation have already occurred prior to the ritual. In the case of the 'weak form' of reconciliation, the ritual functions as a tool that sets the process of reconciliation in motion, supports its continuation, deepens its impact, and expands its reach. It contributes to a reframing of the conflict, a transformation of one's worldview, one's view of the adversary, one's own self-understanding, and the development of a vision of a peaceful relationship. Even after the ritual is over, the process of reconciliation is not finished but continues.

We have already stated that rituals of reconciliation have not only a representative function, but also a transformative one. Ritual can be an effective promoter of the psychosocial transformation that both parties to a conflict need in terms of their worldview, self-understanding and understanding of the other in order to ensure that the reconciliation process is successful. In the text that follows, we focus on three key functions of rituals in the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

5.1 Transformation of worldviews

As the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have shown, rituals have an important place in the process of creating symbolic worlds that participate in the secondary legitimation of an already

[47] Ross, 'Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation,' 200.

formed social reality.[48] Symbolic worlds are particularly important in liminal situations that go beyond the reality of everyday life. They help to integrate the experiences of these situations, which often appear incomprehensible and frightening, into a meaningful framework, thus helping us to cope with fear and to alleviate the threat of disintegration of the reality of everyday life. The symbolic world 'puts everything in its place' and allows the person who has experienced a liminal situation to 'return to reality'.[49] Rituals have the function of re-constructing and reaffirming reality.

Rituals can also perform this function in the case of the reconciliation process. Reconciliation is the process by which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future. To do this, it is necessary to rebuild the existing symbolic world marked by conflict and to gain a new perspective on both sides of this conflict. It is necessary to open up a view of commonly shared values. The task of disseminating a new, jointly shared narrative about the past is not only for official joint statements. As Kriesberg noted, 'for the truths to be widely shared, official statements do not suffice. Novels, songs, films, textbooks, sermons, and many other media of popular communication must convey the information about what injuries were inflicted by whom and against whom.'[50] Ritual also presents an opportunity to evaluate the past in terms of shared suffering and collective responsibility, while offering space for visions of a shared future in realigned relationships.

5.2 Transformation of identities

Another important transformation must take place in the image of the former adversary and the social perception of one's own group. Bar-Tal notes:

> In times of conflict, the opposing group is delegitimized in order to explain its aberrant behavior, the outbreak and continuation of the conflict, and to justify actions taken against the adversary… It is important to legitimize and personalize its members; legitimization grants humanity to members of the adversary group, after years of its denial. It allows viewing the

[48] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966). Czech transl.: *Sociální konstrukce reality: Pojednání o sociologii vědění* (Brno: CDK, 1999), 9.
[49] Berger and Luckmann, *Sociální konstrukce reality*, 99.
[50] Kriesberg, 'Comparing Reconciliation Actions within and between Countries,' 83.

> opponent as belonging to the category of acceptable groups, with which it is desired to maintain peaceful relations.[51]

The observation that each side of a conflict tends to attribute positive characteristics to itself and consider itself moral, just, and peaceful, while it attributes negative characteristics to the adversary and considers it immoral, unjust, and aggressive, is also supported by empirical studies. Ifat Maoz refers to studies on US-Soviet relations that found a consistent bias involving the use of a double standard, with American students rating the same actions as more negative when attributed to the Soviets and less negative when attributed to the United States.[52] Similar biases are also found in studies of Arab-Israeli relations, which have shown that both sides are more likely to mention and emphasize hostile and extreme behaviour by their adversaries while downplaying the value of positive indications and moderate actions by their opponents.

Rituals open up a space in which the former adversary can be legitimized, humanized and personalized, i.e., members of the former enemy group can be approached as individuals who have their own roles in everyday life, their own legitimate needs and goals, with whom they can establish relationships and be trusted. The new image of the former adversary can then differentiate between people with positive and negative characteristics, not least by recognizing that the other side has also been a victim of the conflict and has suffered as a result. Similarly, there is room in the ritual for correcting the group's self-image:

> During the conflict, groups tend to view themselves in a one-sided way involving self-glorification and self-praise, ignoring and censoring any information that might shed negative light on the group. But in the reconciliation process, the group must take responsibility for its involvement in the outbreak of the conflict, if that was the case, as well as its contribution to the violence, including immoral acts, and refusal to engage in a peaceful resolution.[53]

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[51] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 21.

[52] Ifat Maoz, 'Social-Cognitive Mechanisms in Reconciliation,' in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 225–238, 230.

[53] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 21.

Rituals are an opportunity to express a more critical self-view, to admit wrongdoing in past behaviour, to express regret and to apologize.

5.3 Transformation of relationships

Last but not least, ritual is a tool for transforming the relationship between the parties to a conflict. Whereas during the conflict an attitude of confrontation and animosity was encouraged on both sides, ritual is an opportunity to adopt an attitude of recognition of the other side, cooperation and at least neutral, if not outright friendly relations. Joint processing of the past is important for establishing newly framed joint relations, but it sometimes proves more expedient to start with the present or the future, i.e. addressing people's current needs and developing a vision of living in peace, and to proceed to joint processing of the past only after peaceful relations have been established.[54]

The multi-layered role of ritual in the reconciliation process can be illustrated by the ritual described in detail by Lisa Schirch. She depicts the joint dinner and dance held between the opposing sides in Cyprus, namely Greek and Turkish Cypriots, which accompanied a series of ten-day workshops in 1994 organised by a group of American conflict resolution trainers. The joint eating and dancing taking place in the company of enemies became symbolic and took on new meanings. It helped to set up a situation in which a transformation of the understanding of oneself, of one's 'enemies' and of the conflict as a whole took place: 'Instead of viewing each other by their ethnic identity as "Turkish Cypriot" or "Greek Cypriot," as they primarily did during the daytime training, during the evenings the participants seemed to view each other by other identities: mother, father, fellow victim of the war, teacher, musician, dancer, man, woman.'[55] In other words, the enemy's image was reshaped, the enemy was humanised, and his human qualities were uncovered. The mutual contact defined by the framework of a common meal and dance opened up the opportunity for establishing relationships within a completely different framework than that of conflict. Beyond this, dance requires individuals to play male and female roles, so that in this atmosphere gender identity became more important than ethnic identity. Not only that, but one trainer reportedly

[54] Bar-Tal and Bennink, 'The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process,' 22.

[55] Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, 5.

noticed that Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots sang the same songs and danced the same way. Singing and dancing together brought them back to the old days when they lived in the same village and did the same things, thus helping to uncover their common past, shared culture and values. It highlighted their similarities rather than their differences, namely the identity of Mediterranean islanders who have lived side by side for centuries.

This example illustrates the transformative power of ritual action as pointed out by Victor Turner.[56] Building on Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, he identified the important role of ritual in bringing about social change. According to him, rituals are antithetical to the existing social structure and encourage new relational possibilities. In ritual, people experience communitas, a community of equals, which deepens the perception of the value of community and leads to greater sensitivity to others, to a reassessment of attitudes and relationships. Shared ritual promotes conflict resolution and reconciliation between conflicting parties by encouraging personal transformation – namely, a more sensitive view of the nature of humanity, critical self-reflection of one's own thinking and actions, a new view of the world as a space for living in healthy relationships, and values such as forgiveness, belonging, solidarity and cooperation that are conducive to human coexistence. Shared rituals can thus help to heal relationships and motivate work on them.

6. Rituals in Czech-German Reconciliation

Reconciliation is usually a difficult and long-term process. In the case of major military conflicts, the process of reconciliation takes decades after the conflict has ended and requires active support and stimulation. Ritual is one of the tools that offers a space for expressing a self-critical view of one's own past and a transformed view of one's former adversary. In this last part, I would like to reflect on the role of rituals in the reconciliation between the Czechs and the Germans after World War II. Although the open conflict ended 80 years ago, the feelings of injustice and hurt to people on both sides, negative

[56] Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Transaction Publishers, 1969).

perceptions and stereotypes have been passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, the process of admitting guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation has taken a very long time.

When the independent Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918, its population also included some three million Germans, living mainly in the borderlands. The economic crisis of the 1930s hit the German minority hardest, which is why, after the political rise of Adolf Hitler, some Czechoslovak Germans succumbed to his propaganda. In the elections in the mid-1930s, sixty per cent of them voted for Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German Party, which sought autonomy for the Sudetenland and later annexation to the German Reich. This finally took place in 1938 with the signing of the Munich Agreement and the subsequent conversion of the remainder of Czechoslovak territory into a Protectorate. At the end of the Second World War, this resulted in a wave of Germanophobia among Czechoslovaks. Many applied the principle of collective guilt to the German population, excluding and abusing them. Later came the state-controlled expulsion of Germans and the seizure of their movable and immovable property. This resulted in a situation wherein the Germans also felt like victims after World War II, and demanded apologies and reparations.

In socialist Czechoslovakia, the tragic post-war history remained a taboo for several decades. It was only after November 1989 that the question of whether and for what Czechs should apologise to the expelled Germans who had lived within the Czech territory in the past was revived. Some sympathetic steps were taken by Václav Havel, who, as a dissident before 17 November 1989, expressed his regret for the expulsion in a letter to the German president and repeated his apology before his election to the post of Czech president. However, the representatives of the Sudeten German Landsmannschaft interpreted his words as an admission of guilt and correspondingly demanded compensation for the expelled Germans and the annulment of the Beneš Decrees.[57] Havel refused any compensation.

The official reconciliation of the two countries was brought about by a joint Czech-German declaration on mutual relations and their future development, adopted on 21 January 1997, more than 50 years after

[57] The Sudeten German Association 'Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft' did not remove the obligation to seek the restoration of civil rights and property in the Czech Republic from its statutes until 2015.

the end of the war, and signed by then Czech President Václav Klaus and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In the Declaration, both former parties to the conflict confess:

> The German side acknowledges Germany's responsibility for its role in a historical development, which led to the 1938 Munich Agreement, the flight and forcible expulsion of people from the Czech border area, and the forcible breakup and occupation of the Czechoslovak Republic. It regrets the suffering and injustice inflicted upon the Czech people by the National Socialist crimes committed by Germans…
> The Czech side regrets that, by the forcible expulsion and forced resettlement of Sudeten Germans from the former Czechoslovakia after the war as well as by the expropriation and deprivation of citizenship, much suffering and injustice was inflicted upon innocent people, also in view of the fact that guilt was attributed collectively. It particularly regrets the excesses which were contrary to elementary humanitarian principles as well as legal norms existing at that time, and it furthermore regrets that Law No 115 of 8 May 1946 made it possible to regard these excesses as not being illegal and that in consequence these acts were not punished.[58]

The Declaration therefore contains a mutual acknowledgement of responsibility and a confession of regret for the wrongs done, which is one of the key elements of reconciliation. It also describes a vision of a common future and plans support in a number of areas to promote mutual peaceful relations and cooperation. In addition to this official declaration, rituals and symbolic events held at local levels also had – and still have – a role to play in dealing with the past and realigning Czech-German relations. These include mainly civilian activities, such as the construction of memorials and the installation of commemorative plaques on the sites of displaced German populations, joint commemoration of the past in the form of exhibitions, but also events organised by churches. In 1995, joint Czech-German services were held in Dresden, which included a confession of guilt for past wrongs. Since then, joint services promoting mutual reconciliation have been held in various places and churches in the border areas. Sometimes the

[58] 'Czech-German Declaration on mutual relations and their future development,' accessed 26 February 2025, available at https://mzv.gov.cz/berlin/cz/vzajemne_vztahy/cesko_nemecka_deklarace_o_vzajemnych.html.

reconciliation process also incorporates former local customs, as in the case of the Easter horse rides held in the Czech village of Mikulášovice near the border with Germany and Poland, connecting three nations, different generations and members and non-members of churches.[59]

Conclusion

Rituals and symbolic actions constitute an integral part of interpersonal communication. They are important for the formation of worldviews, identities and relationships in society. Thanks to the strong interplay between verbal and non-verbal means of expression, they have a strong impact on emotions, self-understanding and the view of others. These qualities also make rituals and symbolic elements powerful communication tools in situations of conflict. It is true that ritual can be not only constructive but also destructive, i.e. ritual and symbolic action can help to resolve and reconcile conflicts, but they can also provoke, deepen and escalate conflict, or, after the conflict has ended, reinforce the former parties' irreconcilable positions and reinforce their sense of victimhood.[60] Ritual is an effective neutral tool, and its effect depends on the strategic intentions with which it is used.

Within the context of attempts to achieve conflict resolution and reconciliation, rituals can recognise reconciliation as a state that has been achieved, but they can also serve as tools for enabling the gradual psychosocial transformation of the conflicting parties within a long-term reconciliation process, which begins, in essence, with the search for a solution to the conflict. Rituals can help to achieve progress in the search for solutions to complex, deep-seated conflicts, such as ethnopolitical or religious conflicts in particular, where both parties to the conflict need to undergo a certain psychosocial transformation of their own worldview, their view of themselves and of their former adversary, and thus arrive at an emotional and moral reconciliation.

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[59] 'Mikulášovice,' Wikipedia, https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikulášovice (accessed 28 February 2025).

[60] See Martin J. M. Hoondert, 'Srebrenica: Conflict and Ritual Complexities,' in M. Hoondert, P. Mutsaers and W. Arfman (eds.), *Cultural Practices of Victimhood*, Victims, Culture and Society (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 20–38. The study examines how rituals and counter-rituals related to the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide shape the collective identities of the involved ethnic groups and raises the question of how Bosnia and Herzegovina can overcome these divisive memory practices on the path toward post-war reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation between population groups in national conflicts or between nations in international conflicts requires long-term and targeted support. This must come from above, through mechanisms such as state institutions, the mass media, educational and cultural institutions, as well as from below, through civil society and non-governmental initiatives. Unfortunately, it is often the media and social networks that reinforce sections of society in their entrenched positions against others, contributing to polarisation and deepening conflicts.

Helping resolve conflicts and bring about reconciliation between persons, people groups, and nations represents a major challenge, even a mission and task for Christian churches. It is a practical consequence of the gospel of reconciliation, which the churches have accepted and which they continue to proclaim to the world. Since efforts to resolve conflicts and achieve reconciliation belong to the very essence of Christian existence, churches should work actively in this direction also in relation to the society in which they find themselves and the conflicts that affect it. Within the context of contemporary Czech society, which is experiencing strong divisions in terms of worldviews, this especially means striving to overcome antagonisms and polarisation, to humanise those whose image is dehumanised in society, and to develop a vision of relationships based on mutual respect, forgiveness, recognition, and solidarity. The Bible offers Christians a wealth of resources for these visions, and public worship is the most common ritual that can express, embody and pass them on.

Rituals as communication tools for conflict resolution and reconciliation also have their clear limits. Some people lack the sensitivity to perceive communication that takes place on a non-verbal and symbolic level and in which all the senses and emotions are intensely involved. Above all, ritual cannot adequately address issues of inequity in the distribution of resources or power imbalances between groups. Therefore, rituals are of significance primarily within the symbolic dimension of conflict. They represent a complement to conflict resolution through dialogue, negotiation or mediation. However, they can also prepare the right conditions for this solution by reframing the conflict, expressing shared values and creating a bridge within the emotional dimension.

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