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FORUM  
INTERNATIONALE  
WISSENSCHAFT

FIW WORKING PAPER

NO.

**13**

Ariane Kovac

**REDEEMED, REBORN, FORGIVEN**  
LOCAL PROCESSES OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION  
IN POST-CIVIL WAR EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES IN AYACUCHO, PERU

Dezember 2020









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# CONTENTS

Introduction	04
1. The Peruvian internal armed conflict and its effects on Ayacucho	05
2. The expansion of evangelicalism in Ayacucho	06
3. Methodology	08
4. Forgiveness and reconciliation for evangelical victim-survivors in Ayacucho	09
4.1 <i>Forgiveness as a “unique selling point” of evangelical churches</i>	09
4.2 <i>Forgiveness as an alternative to the “tyranny of total recall”</i>	10
4.3 <i>Conversion as a possibility of credible repentance for former perpetrators</i>	11
4.4 <i>Forgiveness as explorations of alternative pathways to justice</i>	12
4.5 <i>Forgiveness and agency</i>	13
5. Conclusions	14
List of interviews	16
References	17
About the author	21
FIW Working Paper	22

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# IMPRINT

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Layout: romeer und höhmann strategisches design

Satz: Jonathan Eisleb

Internet: [www.fiw.uni-bonn.de](http://www.fiw.uni-bonn.de)

ISBN: 978-3-946306-13-9

## ABSTRACT

During the Peruvian civil war in the 1980s and 90s, evangelical and especially pentecostal churches experienced an enormous growth in the Andean regions highly affected by the violence. Drawing on field research, this chapter sheds light on the role these churches played and still play in the aftermath of the conflict in Ayacucho, where survivors until today do not only have to deal with economic devastation and the loss of tens of thousands of human lives, but are also confronted with a complex social landscape where lines between victims, perpetrators and bystanders have often been blurred. Although evangelical churches did not establish any institutional mechanisms regarding the violence and its effects, they provided their adherents with ways to deal with their experiences and to work on local processes of reconciliation: Conversion gave former perpetrators a chance to credibly repent. For victims, evangelical belief and theology and especially the practice of forgiveness gave them a possibility to explore alternative pathways to justice and to manage to cope with daily life in a complex and unsafe environment.

## INTRODUCTION\*

The Peruvian internal armed conflict between 1980 and 2000, caused by the violent Maoist guerilla Sendero Luminoso, and the brutal response of the Peruvian military and police did not only lead to about 70.000 fatalities but also left behind a very complex “charged social landscape” (Theidon 2013: xiii) in the region of Ayacucho, where most of the violence happened: The guerilla as well as the military recruited people by force, and villagers in rural Andean regions founded armed self-defense groups. Particularly in rural regions, everyone was affected by the war, and in many cases the boundaries between victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries, and bystanders got blurred. At the same time, evangelical [1] and especially pentecostal churches experienced an enormous growth. In some cases, whole villages decided to convert, and in many parts of northern Ayacucho, church services became communal assemblies and the reconstruction of evangelical churches at a central place within the village was made a priority while Catholic churches stayed in ruins.

Peru’s political transformation after the violent conflict as well as the growth of evangelical and pentecostal churches in Ayacucho reflect larger transitions in the region: Peru is one of many Latin American countries which have experienced shifts from conflict to post-conflict societies and developed mechanisms of transitional justice to address past violence and to ‘reconcile’ different social actors. The frictions and scars caused by military dictatorships or civil wars continue to play an important part in politics and societal debates throughout the continent. On the other hand, the rise of evangelical Christianity can easily be considered one of the most fundamental cultural transitions that Latin America has been experiencing during the last decades. Massive conversions do not only challenge the authority of the Catholic Church in many parts of the region but also allow evangelicals to enter the political field, to question or even attack existing societal norms and values, and to establish alternatives to formal institutions.

Although political ways of dealing with the past as well as the expansion of evangelical churches have each received a lot of attention from researchers and the public alike, the links between these developments have hardly ever been considered. In this paper, I take a closer look at the role evangelical churches and their adherents played and still play in local processes of dealing with the conflict and its aftermath in Ayacucho, Peru – “stories that are not being told”, as one of my interviewees put it. By making it possible for believers to be ‘born again’ in conversion, setting off to a ‘fresh start’ and leaving behind all their past sins, do these churches offer conflict survivors a chance to live on peacefully without facing complicated issues of guilt and responsibility? How do their practices relate to national efforts (such as trials) and other institutions dealing with the conflict?

Starting with an overview over the historic context, I will give some insights into the violent conflict as well as into church growth in the Andean regions affected by the violence. After a short overview over the methodology of the field research used, selected results will be presented. I will show how evangelical churches and their theological doctrine enabled believers to deal with their conflict experiences and how they provide alternative pathways

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\* An updated version of this paper will be published in *Latin American Transitions*, edited by Daniel S. Leon, Carolina Roza, and Karen Silva Torres (Routledge, forthcoming).

[1] In Peru, non-Catholic Christian churches and movements are usually referred to as *evangélico* or interchangeably as *protestante* or *cristiano*, their adherents as *evangélicos*, *cristianos* or *hermanos*. Usually, also Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons or Seventh-day Adventists are included into this group. The subsumption of ‘traditional’ evangelical and pentecostal churches makes some sense in the Andes, as for example local Presbyterian churches borrowed several features and rituals usually connected to pentecostalism and can hardly be differentiated neither in theology nor in practice. For reasons of practicability, I use ‘evangelical’ or ‘*evangélico*’ for all non-Catholic Christian churches encountered during my research, although a closer look at different denominations and their stances towards reconciliation and forgiveness might also be promising.

to justice and reconciliation, using forgiveness and conversion as their most important ‘tools’. Finally, I will relate my results to existing literature and similar developments in other situations of violence, thereby giving a wider picture of the links between religious and societal or political transitions.

## 1. THE PERUVIAN INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT AND ITS EFFECTS ON AYCUCUCHO

05

Whereas many Latin American guerilla movements fought against military dictatorships, the Maoist Sendero Luminoso took up arms in the very moment when Peruvian citizens had just been called to vote after twelve years without free elections in 1980. By attacking police stations and murdering or intimidating communal authorities, the guerilla fighters were able to gradually set up their own governmental structures in rural Ayacucho (Kent 1993: 442). Peruvian authorities ignored the situation until the violence escalated massively. In 1982, Marine soldiers from the coast were sent to Ayacucho. Not being able to identify the *senderistas*, they suspected the whole rural indigenous population of engaging in subversive activities, or at least of sympathizing with them. At the same time, a state of emergency was declared, suspending constitutional rights in the region and giving way to massive human rights violations by military and police forces (Ramirez Castillo 2014: 117).

*Sendero Luminoso* had in fact won considerable support in rural regions. However, as the guerilla’s actions became more violent and turned against local peasants, people’s approval decreased (Isbell 1994: 90). To protect themselves from attacks, many villages formed self-defense committees. Sendero, as well as the military and the *comités de autodefensa* or *rondas campesinas*, as the rural committees became known, recruited men (and women) by force. In rural Ayacucho, it became almost impossible to maintain neutrality between zones marked as ‘red’ and villages controlled by the military. All conflict parties were responsible for human rights violations. A common way of describing how villagers in Ayacucho felt during this time was “entre la espada y la pared” (Österlund 2002: 187), between the sword and the wall: For those unable to flee to the relative safety of Andean cities or to the quickly expanding outskirts of Lima, there was no escape.

In 1992, the hard hand strategy of the newly elected Alberto Fujimori came into effect and Sendero Luminoso’s leader was caught. Although parts of the guerilla exist until today, it promptly lost power and importance. However, Peruvians paid a massive price for this success: Fujimori’s strategy resulted in thousands of long prison sentences for mostly innocent people (Theidon 2013: 234), in a mostly government-controlled media landscape (Laplante/Phenicie 2010: 211) and in the establishment of a ‘culture of fear’, where criticizing Fujimori’s regime or the military, or supporting human rights organizations could be interpreted as ‘terrorism’ and penalized accordingly (Burt 2006: 46).

Ending violence and oppression became possible when Fujimori fled Peru in 2000 because of a corruption scandal. His narrative of having ‘saved’ the country by himself, supported by the military and secret service, was particularly questioned by human rights organizations and the oppositional press (Degregori 2004). In 2001, a Truth Commission was installed as the main element of political transformation. It was able to act independently of the state, had a broad mandate and later received the addendum “reconciliation”. The work of this Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR) was mainly based on victims’ testimonies which were recorded in indigenous languages as well as in Spanish, and it was the first commission in Latin America to use public hearings in several regions of the country, broadcasted via radio and television (Pfeil 2006: 179; Yezer 2008: 267, 287). The final report, published in 2003, received a lot of praise from politicians and the general public but was also heavily and polemically criticized not only by the perpetrators who found their names in the report but also by victims’ organizations (Huhle 2004: 131, 136-37). Other key pillars of Peru’s dealing with the conflict are human rights trials, although these have been rather slow and tedious so far (Macedo Bravo 2006), symbolic retributions like memorial sites and museums, and reparation politics.

To understand the conflict's development as well as the difficulties in dealing with its aftermath, it is important to consider the inequalities between the Peruvian coast, especially the capital Lima, and the southern central Andes, where Ayacucho is located. The centralism characterizing Peru since colonial times and the racist discrimination against the 'indigenous' regions in the Andes and the Amazon rainforest, which were fittingly described as "orientalism in one country" by Stern (2012: 7) or as "andeanism" by Degregori (2013: 60), intertwined with conflict dynamics on various levels. Ayacucho and the other heavily conflict-hit regions do not only have a strong indigenous influence but also count as some of the poorest regions of the country, which might have been one of the most important reasons for the emergence of *Sendero Luminoso*. About 75% of the almost 70.000 fatalities (CVR 2003c: 315) were indigenous, most of them Quechua-speaking peasants without documents, who are considered as 'second-class citizens' by most of the white and mestizo coast population. The lack of interest in the conflict and the brutal, uncoordinated actions of the military specifically against indigenous people can be traced back to these imbalances. To the *limeños* [2], it seemed like the violence had taken place in a different country (Ramirez Castillo 2014: 116). Until the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, even the highest estimates had expected only around 20.000 fatalities.

Racist stigmatization and the overall low interest in Ayacucho and other Andean regions might also explain why local ways of dealing with the legacies of the conflict have received so little attention: Although many communities in Ayacucho performed reconciliation rituals and received former *senderistas* into their villages as *arrepentidos* ("repentants") (Gamarra 2002: 22; Theidon 2013: 269), the CVR phrased their proposals to reform as if there had been no societal efforts of reconciliation and coping before the publication of their report.

06

## 2. THE EXPANSION OF EVANGELICALISM IN AYACUCHO

Since colonial times, Ayacucho is said to be especially 'pious'. The capital of the region, Huamanga [3], became a religious center early on: Until today, there are 33 Catholic colonial churches in the city center and the *Semana Santa* processions draw in visitors from the whole country. At the same time, the Catholic Church has been outstandingly conservative: Until the land reforms in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church had been tightly connected to the *hacienda* system, and even after the large landowners lost power, it did not manage to connect to the rural population, keeping a focus on the urban middle and upper classes. Other than in the rest of Peru, liberation theology could not take root in Ayacucho (Österlund 2002: 94, 171).

While conservative branches of the Catholic Church had a tight grip on Huamanga, Huanta, Ayacucho's second largest city, was more open towards new cultural or religious ideas and welcomed the first evangelical denominations founding churches in the region in the 1930s (Ramírez Pinchi 2011: xxviii; Österlund 2002: 94; del Pino 1996: 129). Some first 'growth spurts' can be traced back to social movements arising during Peru's military dictatorship in the 1970s (Gamarra 2000: 274). At the same time, a large part of the religious work so far performed by foreign, English-speaking missionaries was taken over by locals, as the government's nationalization efforts made it difficult for non-Peruvians to work in the country. Local pastors made efforts to adjust the evangelical message, which until then had often been rejected as 'alien', to local customs and language (Aguilar de la Cruz 2016: 6-7; Pérez Guadalupe 2017: 118-19).

The adaptation of evangelical Christianity and the expansion of 'home-grown' churches laid the ground for the profound religious change many parts of Ayacucho and the southern central Andes experienced during the political violence: In the highly affected regions in northern

[2] The inhabitants of Lima.

[3] Officially, the capital of the department of Ayacucho is also called Ayacucho. However, it is most often referred to by its local name Huamanga, which I will also be using here for reasons of clarity.

Huanta, whole villages converted from Catholicism to evangelicalism. During the war years, it was not uncommon to find communities with an evangelical majority of 60% or more all over Ayacucho (López Rodríguez, quoted from CVR 2003a: 464; Gamarra 2000: 279; Österlund 2002: 98; Theidon 2013: 68). At the same time, a process of ‘pentecostalization’ took place: Pentecostal churches like the Iglesia Evangélica Pentecostal (IEP) grew a lot stronger than for example Presbyterian churches, which so far had been the largest and most renowned denomination (del Pino 1996: 118). Some churches which had been Presbyterian until then also changed their denomination and became pentecostal (del Pino 1996: 165; Österlund 2002: 250). Moreover, Presbyterian church members began to speak in tongues or to demand for prophecies – to the immense displeasure of church officials (Österlund 2002: 249-50; Rivera Sulca 2014: 39).

The enormous growth of evangelical and especially pentecostal churches in Ayacucho can be traced back to the lack of presence of the Catholic Church in rural areas during the conflict years. When the violence started, Catholic priests fled to the cities and almost completely ceased their visits to rural communities. Sendero Luminoso was hardly confronted with any resistance from the Catholic Church in Ayacucho, and in twenty years of conflict, only one Catholic priest was killed by the guerilla (Gamarra 2002: 279-80). Even though protestant missionaries and pastors fled to Cusco or Lima as well, they passed their powers on to local (lay) pastors who had already assumed an important role within their churches since the 1970s and who stood their ground. Whereas Catholics in rural Ayacucho were left in a religious ‘vacuum’, evangelicals could still take part in services or get baptized even during the worst war years. The rooting of evangelical church authorities in the communities further contributed to church growth (Österlund 2002: 216-17; Theidon 2013: 79). Furthermore, the *evangelio* encouraged people to read the Bible themselves and emphasized a personal connection between God and believers, with pentecostal theologies even rendering unnecessary any ‘mediator’ between humans and God or the Holy Ghost (Österlund 2002: 220, 250-51; Theidon 2013: 71-73; del Pino 1996: 164-66).

07

The rapid growth of evangelical churches should not obscure the fact that it was extremely dangerous to be a *hermano* in rural Ayacucho in the 1980s: To Sendero Luminoso, *evangélicos* were not only an obstacle to their revolutionary fight as religion was regarded as an “opium of the people” but even more so because they openly opposed the guerilla (CVR 2003a: 468; del Pino 1996: 157). The military apparently did not have a specific political agenda against protestants but perceived services as meetings of potentially subversive groups (CVR 2003a: 472). Despite the risk, many of the church representatives did not flee but stayed and made human rights violations public – no matter which conflict party was to blame. Churches were closed but this usually affected only the building and people continued to meet in secrecy (ibid.: 465, 471). According to del Pino (1996: 158), there was hardly any evangelical church in Ayacucho that did not experience acts of violence. Confronted with these, the churches changed their strategy: Instead of praying for the *senderistas*’ souls and preaching a message of peace, at least in northern Huanta and in the VRAEM rainforest region, believers founded their own self-defense committees or got involved in existing groups to defend themselves by force of arms (del Pino 1996; Theidon 2013: 95; CVR 2003a: 465). According to López Rodríguez (1999: 6), as much as 80% of people involved in self-defense committees were evangelicals.

Evangelicals believed their religion would protect them from Sendero Luminoso. Stories about the magical powers of the Bible, e.g. stopping bullets, did not only circulate but were used systematically for proselytizing (Gamarra 2000: 284). To a God-fearing, pious evangelical, martyrdom was a victory (Österlund 2002: 196-97; del Pino 1996: 156). Evangelical churches also offered shelter (Ramírez Pinchi 2011: xlvi) and messages of hope and consolation (Rivera Sulca 2014: 44), particularly for people who had to seek refuge in the cities (Gamarra 2000: 281). Evangelical churches were also able to provide people with new cultural identities where old traditions had been lost, strengthening cohesion inside communities and giving stability (Theidon 2013: 91).

In Huanta, where there had been massive conversions, the new beliefs also influenced rituals to re-integrate *arrepentidos* and survivors’ ideas of reconciliation, forgiveness, or repentance. Theidon (2013: 242) explains how religious narratives shaped rituals of indigenous jurisdiction, even though they were not explicitly articulated: „People did not refer to the Bible to explain what happened – villagers did not speak *about* religion but rather spoke *with* religion.“ She adds that villagers used the same word to describe repenting *senderistas* asking for re-entry into their communities that they used for people converting to evangelical churches: “The *terrucukuna* are said to have ‘delivered themselves’ (*entregarse*) to the community. The same



term is used for those who have entered *el Evangelio* or have delivered themselves to the Lord” (Theidon 2013: 251). Gamarra (2002: 28) reports that evangelical communities, which had referred to the Bible to demonize the perpetrators and to justify the violent fight against them, started to preach theologies of humaneness, forgiveness, and reconciliation when confronted with social reconstruction. Many former *senderistas* proved their peacefulness and loyalty by converting to evangelical churches. Rivera Sulca (2014) notes that evangelical churches enabled a way of life based on forgiveness for former perpetrators. By codifying the act of forgiveness as a commandment, they create spaces where emotional health and moral order can be restored. Although the conflict is not referred to explicitly inside the churches, the forgiveness practiced there can contribute to a societal project of reconciliation (Rivera Sulca 2014: 62).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The results presented below are based on a total of 16 interviews conducted between September and December 2018 in Lima, Ayacucho, and Huanta. Observation protocols from two church services and impressions from ‘unofficial’ conversations add to the information extracted from the interviews. The interviews with evangelical victim-survivors [4] from Callqui and Putis turned out to be most fruitful. These interviews were facilitated by the evangelical human rights organization Paz y Esperanza. Furthermore, I was able to conduct interviews with pastors and church members from various denominations, one former soldier, employees of government institutions addressing conflict reparations and reconciliation, and staff members of a Jesuit human rights organization. Moreover, staff of Paz y Esperanza gave access to the transcriptions of 14 interviews the organization has conducted with several evangelical pastors in January and February of 2012 concerning the role of evangelical churches during the conflict. By using the qualitative analysis software application RQDA a qualitative content analysis was carried out, with the codes being developed inductively and constantly revised.

08

As the results are mostly based on interviews with victim-survivors of Callqui and Putis, it seems useful to give an overview over these places here. In Callqui, a district or *anexo* on the outskirts of the city of Huanta, the local Presbyterian community met for a church service on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984. A group of soldiers entered the church violently, chose six men from the gathered, led them outside and murdered them. Until today, the exact progression of events and the reasons for the crime could not be reconstructed. After a first trial against the captain on duty was lost because of pressure by the military (CVR 2003b: 93-95), the case was reopened thirty years later. While it was impossible to locate the captain, an informant to the military was sentenced to four years in prison (Paz y Esperanza 2014). He filed an appeal and has therefore not started his sentence to this day.

Putis is a community of nine villages in the district of San José de Santillana, about six hours north of Huamanga, which in 1981/82 was left to Sendero Luminoso after the withdrawal of the local police. After difficult years during which villagers had to hide in the surrounding mountains, soldiers entered the community in 1984, convincing the residents to return to their houses. But instead of protecting them from Sendero, the military opened fire. Overall, 123 people were killed, many of them minors (CVR 2003b: 143-45; Paz y Esperanza 2009). The extent of the crime was only revealed by the CVR. Before, there had been only a news report on at least 22 fatalities in a misnamed “Yutis” (CVR 2003b: 145-46). The Truth Commission was able to identify the military division responsible for the crime as well as its commander (ibid.: 153). Since 2012, the case is being juridically investigated (Paz y Esperanza 2012).

In Callqui as well as in Putis, almost all survivors are practicing members of evangelical churches. In Callqui, the murdered were Presbyterians. Most of their relatives and descendants have remained evangelicals until today, even though some of them changed denomination. In Putis, almost all survivors converted to pentecostal churches after the massacre. The numbers found in the last census of 2017 give insights into the presence of evangelical churches in the region: Santillana, the district in which Putis is located, has an evangelical majority of 53,2% (INEI 2017).

[4] I use the terms ‘victims’, ‘survivors’, ‘victim-survivors’ or ‘affected’ synonymously. None of these terms shall ascribe a passive role to people affected by the conflict nor construct an in-existent clear-cut division between ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’. On constructions of victimhood in Peru, see Waardt (2016).

## 4. FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION FOR EVANGELICAL VICTIM-SURVIVORS IN AYACUCHO

### 4.1 FORGIVENESS AS A “UNIQUE SELLING POINT” OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

Evangelical churches in Ayacucho have not developed any institutional mechanisms of dealing with the violence and its heritage. Still, forgiveness is central to their belief, with pastors and other church authorities preaching these ideas regarding marital or neighborhood disputes. Although generally no ‘official’ connection is made between theological concepts and the conflict, the interviewed victim-survivors consider forgiveness essential to them in every part of their lives, including their traumatic experiences.

09

To the respondents, to reconcile and to forgive implies first and foremost dropping any negative sentiments toward the other person. It is closely intertwined with forgetting and oriented towards the future: By forgiving, something positive can be achieved for oneself as well as for the other person.

[...] maybe in our heart we have some resentment, no. So, by forgiving, well, we let that go. So that way you lose this resentment. So, you treat [them] like a family already. [5] (Interview 6, Putis, October 18, 2018)

Forgiveness is, for me it's forgetting everything that has hurt me. Never to remember. [...] When I forgive, I am, how can I tell you, for the other person as well as for me it will be something good. We will both be in peace and we will both be healed. [...] I'm not concerned that this, that the other, that he didn't do it, no, no, this doesn't exist anymore. There is no guilt. That's how it is. [6] (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018)

Forgiveness is presented as an individual act or decision which cannot be forced onto anyone. For evangelicals, however, forgiveness is desirable: People do not *have* to forgive, but they *should*, at least everyone who wishes to live according to God's word. All respondents talked about “God's mandate” or that “Christ says we have to forgive them” – no matter what the perpetrator did. The believers explain this by the fact that all humans sin. On the one hand, this idea allows them to identify with the person they are forgiving, on the other hand, it has very ‘practical’ implications: If you want your own inevitable sins to be forgiven, you need to forgive those who have harmed you.

So, in that case, if someone commits, not only if someone, we all commit this error, we all sin, there is not one just, as our lord Jesus Christ says. We all have sin. [7] (Interview 4, Callqui, October 18, 2018)

So, on that side, we understand, no matter how guilty they are. Mhm. They are humans as well, like us. They feel. They think. And so on, no. [8] (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018)

[5] “[...] de repente en nuestro corazón tenemos algún rencor, no. Entonces, al perdonarse lo despojamos, pues. Entonces y así pierde ese rencor. Entonces ya te tratas como una familia ya.”

[6] “Perdón es este, para mí es olvidar todo lo que me ha hecho daño. Nunca más recordar. [...] [A]l perdonar estoy, como te puedo decir, tanto para la persona y para mí va a ser algo bueno. Ambos vamos a estar en paz y ambos estaremos sanos. [...] No estoy con ese inquietud que este, que el otro, que no lo hice, no, no, ya no hay. No hay. Ya no hay deuda. Así es.”

[7] “Entonces, en este caso, si alguien comete, no solamente si alguien, todos cometemos ese error, todos pecamos, no hay ni un justo, como dice nuestro señor Jesucristo. Todos tenemos pecado.”

[8] “Entonces, por ese lado, nosotros entendemos por más culpable que sea. Mhm. Son seres humanos también como nosotros. Sienten. Piensan. Y et cetera, no.”

God's mandate is however not the only reason to forgive. Forgiveness reduces suffering and prevents thoughts of revenge leading to negative feelings. The respondents who practice forgiveness refer to themselves as "calm", "in peace", or "free of everything". Thoughts of revenge harm oneself as much as the other person and those who do not let go of resentment might even become sick.

Even though victim-survivors from Callqui and Putis imply that theoretically everyone can (and should) forgive, there is one important condition: All respondents, evangelicals as well as Catholics, assumed that evangelicals were able to forgive more easily – or that Catholics were not able to forgive at all. In a Catholic-majority society, forgiveness as practice and theology gives *hermanos* another differentiating characteristic against Catholic 'norms'. Furthermore, all respondents agreed that forgiveness contributes to reconciliation and that reconciliation – however defined – is crucial for Ayacucho's and Peru's future. Thus, evangelicals and Catholics alike view evangelical Christians not only as more reliable and more industrious (Magny 2009) but also as more peaceful, more emotionally stable and more 'suitable' for reconciliation, ascribing them a positive role.

## 4.2 FORGIVENESS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE "TYRANNY OF TOTAL RECALL"

Anthropologist Kimberly Theidon (2015: 456-57) notes that methods of transitional justice and evangelical churches share one crucial characteristic: They construct a "before" and "after", and continually emphasize this rupture. In the churches, the moment of rupture can be found in the individual moment of conversion; in Peru's dealing with the conflict, it can be determined as the publication of the Truth Commission's final report. The difference between the two logics, however, is that trials and truth commissions always focus on the past, on the "before", whereas evangelical churches are oriented towards the future and stress the "after".

Although in international scientific literature and policy recommendations on transitional justice the idea that 'truth' is per se a form of justice and relief for victims is almost uncontested nowadays, Theidon (2015: 466) is not completely convinced. In her opinion, truth commissions might lead to a "tyranny of total recall" in which victims are forced to remember and tell their stories over and over again for only a slight hope for recognition and justice. In rural Ayacucho, the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission was advertised with radio spots and flyers in a comic book style. These presented testimonies by victims as individual acts of psychological self-help, but at the same time as patriotic deeds for the whole nation (Yezer 2008: 279). The first sentence that can be read on the website of the CVR follows the rhetoric tradition of other truth commissions by declaring remembering as a necessity for a peaceful future: "A country that forgets its history is condemned to repeat it" (CVR 2003d). With messages like this, their own testimony does not only offer relief for victims but becomes an obligation – if they do not remember, the violence might repeat itself.

In transitional justice and memory studies it is broadly acknowledged that remembering and re-telling past trauma involves a difficult and unpleasant process of "memory works" before healing can be achieved (Jelin 2002). Looking at Peru, however, anthropologist Caroline Yezer (2008: 280) criticizes that the idea of a painful but finally fruitful memory work ignores existing power structures. In Peru, the question "who is being invited to do the work and who is the intended audience for the final product of the effort" (Yezer 2008: 280) becomes problematic: About 75% of the victims are indigenous, but while they have to shoulder the "work", it is unclear to what extent they benefit from truth commissions, trials or memorial sites that rather address an urban, Spanish-speaking middle class. Besides that, for many victims it might be an almost impossible task to explain their suffering to others. Adding to this difficulty, in Peru, most conflict survivors had to achieve at least some kind of cultural translation even when they were able to testify in their indigenous mother tongues (Bueno-Hansen 2015: 87). Yezer (2008: 282) summarizes it this way: "From this perspective, testifying in national memory projects might be experienced as liberation, or as coercion, depending on one's placement in the division of labor of national memory."

The survivors of the Callqui massacre deal with their memories in a way that might seem odd to outsiders: The majority still lives directly behind the church where the murders took place in 1984. Some of them are even building new houses there. At the church, nothing commemorates the crime, apart from a hardly visible plaque naming the victims. When I

visited Callqui with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza, some of the victims led us to a newly built part of the *anexo*. As we suggested they could name the new pathways after their lost ones or construct a memorial at the church, they started laughing and shrugging their shoulders (Interview 4, October 18, 2018). Instead, they would like to remember their dead *hermanos* with a *fiesta evangélica*, a religious festival – if they managed to, as they told us jokingly: The year before, they had gathered for a regular church service on August 1<sup>st</sup>. Only after half of the service did they notice it was the anniversary of the massacre.

These anecdotes may be funny, but they nonetheless show that not all conflict victims always and exclusively aspire the omnipresence of memory. Evangelical churches instead offer a focus on a positive and successful present and a hopeful view to the future, or, as a pastor in Colombia expressed it in an interview with Theidon: “We tell them, ‘You are people with a future. Let’s keep looking ahead’” (Theidon 2015: 466). The forgiveness practiced by evangelical victims in Callqui and Putis, which is supposed to imply a positive transformation for both victim and perpetrator and is directed towards the future, fits this idea very well.

When someone must retell their own conflict experience over and over again, the story itself might become their identity, leading to very limited emancipatory potential (Theidon 2015: 466). Evangelicalism, however, gives victims another identity: They are not (only) victims but also members of a local, national, and even global community of Christians who practice forgiveness openly and thus fight to improve their own lives and their surroundings.

11

## 4.3 CONVERSION AS A POSSIBILITY OF CREDIBLE REPENTANCE FOR FORMER PERPETRATORS

For former perpetrators, evangelical churches offered and still offer a possibility to believably repent and to leave their past behind by conversion, at least in communities where there is an evangelical majority. They are not perceived as guilty for any of their deeds committed before conversion because “practically, we don’t know what we are doing when we aren’t in the *evangelio* yet” (interview 6, Putis, October 18, 2018). Conversion to evangelical churches in Ayacucho is “like a school” (interview 1, pastor, October 11, 2018), as “they don’t baptize you just like that” (interview 7, pastor, October 22, 2018): Those who wish to deliver themselves to the *evangelio* need to prove a profound change in their lives. Members of the congregation who for the most part have had this experience of conversion themselves as well can thus make sure the former perpetrator enters as a ‘new person’. The evangelical respondents sense a change in the repentant perpetrators’ hearts: No one criticized those conversions as not credible or as a ‘simple solution’. Instead, the experience that even former perpetrators can be changed by God seems to strengthen their belief:

[...] for some works, maybe, as they say, God’s miracles in their life, in their material carnal life, what has happened showed the terrorists [something] and because of that he touched their heart, no, God, and they have become evangelicals, they are pastors, good leaders, and God forgives and changes them. [9] (Interview 12, former soldier, November 13, 2018)

This experience, this experience with God is what transformed Paul. And that’s what we are looking for as Christians. [10] (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018)

This way, forgiveness becomes possible when former perpetrators convert to evangelicalism, no matter which church or denomination: “Maybe [if] these men converted themselves to God they’d be different” (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018).

Two stories I encountered during my interviews shall illustrate this point. About 15 years ago, the victims in Callqui received a visit from one of the marines who had taken part in the shooting in 1984. With all congregation members gathered, he explained that he himself had

[9] “[...] por algunas obras de repente, como dicen, milagros de dios en su vida, en su vida material carnal, lo que han pasado los terroristas les ha enseñado y producto ello también tal vez les ha tocado el corazón, no, dios, y se han vuelto evangélicos, son pastores, buenos líderes y dios perdona y les cambia.”

[10] “Esa experiencia, esa experiencia con dios es lo que a Pablo pues lo transformó. Y eso es lo que nosotros buscamos como cristianos.”

become *cristiano*, and asked for forgiveness. Although one of the victims reacted negatively, the others forgave him. Still, after this day people in Callqui lost contact with the soldier. When they were looking for witnesses to help with the trial against one of the informants to the military, they could not locate him.

One of the victims has lost almost all his family in the Putis massacre. Afterwards, he converted to an evangelical church and even became pastor. One of the informants who collaborated with the military is a relative of his wife. This person converted to an evangelical church some time ago and asked for reconciliation during the process. The victim agreed, because “if you’re also from the *evangelio*, well, sure” (interview 6, October 18, 2018). However, this intent to reconciliation failed when the relative cut off contact. In my interview with him, the victim expressed his ongoing willingness to forgive and reconcile – but only if the other man takes the first step.

## 4.4 FORGIVENESS AS EXPLORATIONS OF ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO JUSTICE

Whenever a perpetrator does not convert to evangelicalism, the victims are convinced that an omniscient and just God will finally judge him, either in this world or in the hereafter. The perpetrators simply cannot live well and in peace, as God most probably works in their conscience already. Entrusting God with revenge for what happened gives people a chance to let go of their anger.

12

No, I don’t feel any resentment anymore. Because, you know why? Because with them, God will deal with them. And God knows that they killed him, who killed him, how they killed him. God knows and God will deal with it. [11] (Interview 6, Putis, October 18, 2018)

And if he did it, well, he did it, but it’s about letting the things, well, letting justice do its part and not be involved so much in this, no, because if I myself had this resentment, I don’t know how I would feel. [12] (Interview 5, Callqui, October 18, 2018)

This statement that ‘justice should do its part’ represents the victims’ opinion on ‘worldly’ justice well: They do not oppose it but do not feel much enthusiasm about it either. This is hardly surprising: All interviewed victims have survived state despotism and therefore probably do not trust government institutions too much. In addition, they experience the slow procedures of human rights trials. And finally, the national judicial system is hardly accessible to them and might even exclude them because of open or structural racism.

Looking at these findings, one could jump to the conclusion that where court decisions are not possible, humans simply put their trust in God. But is forgiveness combined with an “eschatological hope” (Biggar 2001: 19) in God’s final justice only the ‘lesser evil’ for evangelical conflict victims facing the impossibility of pursuing perpetrators legally? The stories I came across during my field research show that this interpretation falls short of the complexities of post-war Ayacucho. In the interviews it became obvious that ‘worldly’ justice sparks little enthusiasm among the victims. Even though they fight for reparations and wish for justice, it is not their major goal to put all perpetrators on trial or to send them to prison. The survivors of Callqui witnessed how an informant to the military was sentenced to jail but did not perceive this as satisfactory – contrary to their experience of forgiveness. They lamented that there was no possibility of speaking with the perpetrator or of confronting him. As he also refused to confess, victims were left behind with a lot of open questions, above all why he did it (Interview 5, Callqui, October 18, 2018). Answers would have been more important to the victims than the sentence, especially as they, like many people in the Andes, rather oppose imprisonment. One of the respondents even expressed her joy about the perpetrator who has appealed the sentence still being free:

[11] “Na, yo no tengo rencor nada ya. Porque sabes por qué? Porque con ellos ya dios se encarga. Y dios sabe de que lo han matado, quien lo ha matado, como lo han matado. Dios sabe y dios se encarga.”

[12] “Y si lo hizo, ya pues, lo hizo, pero solamente es dejar que las cosas este hagan la su parte la justicia y ya no involucrarme tanto en eso, no, porque si personalmente estaría con ese rencor no sé cómo estaré yo.”



To us, sure, I personally in this moment thought, no, sentence, but I didn't want them to put him in jail, there. No, where does that lead to. [...] But it makes me happy that they haven't [laughing] gone to jail. [13] (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018)

This coincides with the findings of several scientists in transitional justice studies that official legal proceedings are “woefully inadequate” (Boesenecker/Vinjamuri 2008: 159) to addressing victims' needs. The high civil involvement in the conflict and the blurred boundaries between victims and perpetrators also raise the question as to how these issues can be confronted by state justice in the first place. In Colombia, Theidon (2015: 458) asked a group of women how politics should react to the violence. The answer describes the difficulties of dealing with the aftermath of civil war: “Well, if they come here and round up all the men who've ever held a gun and put them in jail – *bueno*, there'd be no men left around here” (Theidon 2015: 458). If a perpetrator is related to the victim or lives next door, he might also just be ‘too close’ to even consider legal proceedings, or victims are scared this might reopen old sores or even put them into danger.

The acts of forgiveness and reconciliation evangelical communities practice as well as their belief in justice eventually performed by God are practical explorations of alternative pathways to justice considering the unimaginable horrors of civil war. Just as indigenous communities re-integrated former perpetrators by making them repent, the survivors of Callqui and Putis try to achieve this by conversion to evangelical churches. The trust they put into a divine judge acting either in the hereafter or already today ensures a stable coexistence, minimizes thoughts of revenge, and gives victims hope.

However, it is obviously difficult to expand these conceptions of justice to the whole society: The solutions evangelical Christians offer for a peaceful post-conflict society only work if everyone converts to their belief (Tankink 2007: 225).

## 4.5 FORGIVENESS AND AGENCY

To the respondents from Callqui and Putis, an ‘ideal’ forgiveness is connected to conversion of the perpetrator. In this act, communication and credible repentance play substantial roles. Besides, the perpetrator should show initiative. Victims absolutely insist on this whenever perpetrators come from the same communities as themselves, live nearby and have a similar sociocultural background. However, to some extent they also forgive perpetrators they have never spoken to and who do not show any signs of remorse or interest in converting to evangelicalism, mainly those living in faraway Lima and coming from very different social and cultural backgrounds, like high-ranking members of the armed forces.

This ‘unidirectional’ forgiveness – of which the perpetrator is unaware and will probably continue to be – is not necessarily a social but instead, in a sense, an ‘egoistic’ act. It happens only for the sake of the victim, who willingly decided to forgive and to let go of negative emotions and does not imply any change for the perpetrator. In the practical use of forgiveness in psychology as well as in philosophical explorations of the term, there is no general agreement on unidirectional acts like this. Can they even be called forgiveness, or must ‘full’ forgiveness always include a repenting response by the perpetrator and a restored relationship between victim and perpetrator (Kristeva/Rice 2002: 283)? Philosopher Holmgren (1993) instead considers unidirectional forgiveness a powerful act – inasmuch as the victim is aware of the deed, their own self-respect, and their own needs. At least in the Callqui case, unidirectional forgiveness does indeed seem to empower victims: It makes them morally superior to the perpetrator, not only on a personal but also on a communal or congregational level, thus strengthening their evangelical belief.

A lot of research on evangelical churches in Latin America has focused on the agency and the ‘options of action’ these provide their adherents with, for example regarding gender roles (eg. Flora 1976; Brusco 1995; Steigenga/Smilde 1999; Smilde 2007). Many researchers were surprised to notice how consciously people use religion to achieve personal goals and to change their lives for the better, for example Smilde (2007: 7): “[...] time and again people unabashedly said they had converted because of the perceived economic, social, and personal gains”.

[13] “Para nosotros, claro, para mí personalmente pensaba en ese momento, no, sentencia, pero no quería que lo metieran a la cárcel, ahí. No, adónde nos lleva [...] [P]ero eso me hace feliz que no hayan [riendo] ido a la cárcel.”

Likewise, forgiveness provides evangelical Christians with additional possibilities to act within a comparably narrow cultural framework. In their churches and by self-studying the Bible, they find new ways to process the violence they experienced, to locate themselves outside of the “charged social landscape” (Theidon 2013: xiii) of post-conflict Ayacucho and to avoid resentment and thoughts of revenge. Their own moral superiority empowers them to mediate in conflicts that might break out in their neighborhood and to stay away from existing or outbreaking local ‘post-conflict conflicts’. In a similar way, Stoll (1993: 179) described how evangelical Christians during the Guatemalan civil war managed to “transcend an impossible situation by declaring their neutrality and sanctifying it with an appeal to divine will”.

This reference to divine will has interesting implications for the believers’ agency. In face of God’s almighty powers, their own actions become an ‘interaction’ with him: God chose them and ‘saved’ them, the believers just had to open themselves up to him. Although conversion is a conscious decision the devout makes with certain goals in mind, the evangelical narrative minimizes this by centering a superior divine plan (Smilde 2003: 322-24) which in turn works to legitimize the believers’ intentions (Baron 2004: 272). To the respondents from Callqui and Putis, forgiveness is an act of interaction between humans and God as well: “speaking to the Lord, I tell him, free me, I want to forgive” (Interview 8, Callqui, October 24, 2018). The own will to forgive, to a certain extent an ‘egoistic’ decision, receives external validation as it is presented as divine will or even divine mandate, while reducing the victims’ own responsibility.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Going back to the research question on which roles evangelical churches played and still play in local mechanisms of dealing with the aftermath of the violent conflict, it can be stated that the churches did not establish any institutional mechanisms addressing the consequences of the violence. Still, evangelical churches offer concepts and theologies of reconciliation and forgiveness which evangelical conflict victims use and develop further. These ideas provide them with ways to deal with their experiences – even though this was not intended by churches or church authorities. Local processes of reconciliation within communities and families mainly work by conversion of former perpetrators, by which they can credibly repent. Evangelical theologies and practices of forgiveness can be described as ‘tools’ with which evangelical survivors explore alternative pathways to justice and manage to cope with daily life in a complex and unsafe environment. Forgiveness does not only offer them a chance to distance themselves from Catholics but also empowers them by providing them with moral superiority. By drawing on God’s omnipotence, their desire for forgiveness and reconciliation does not only become legitimate but even ‘holy’.

Going beyond interesting anecdotes and “stories not being told”, what can be taken away from this particular case study? The growth of evangelical churches and their presence in conflict and post-conflict situations is not a phenomenon limited to Peru. During the Guatemalan civil war, conversion to evangelical churches gave affected people at least some minimal hope for protection (Stoll 1993). In Colombia, evangelical churches grew during the conflict despite repression. Now, many former *guerilleros* convert to evangelical churches, encountering spaces of non-violence and alternative concepts of masculinity (Brusco 1995: 39; Repnik 2018; Theidon 2015). Tankink (2007: 212) and Shaw (2007: 88-89) explore how pentecostal churches offered conflict victims in Uganda and Sierra Leone cognitive strategies for confronting and transforming traumatic memories.

At the same time, pentecostal churches seem to not only offer convincing theologies and practices to confront the aftermath of violent conflicts but also provide ‘exit strategies’ in situations of ongoing violence: In the outskirts of central American cities, conversion to evangelical churches seems to be the only possibility to safely exit violent gangs (Thornton 2018: 624; Brenneman 2014: 116; Wolseth 2011). Churches do not only offer peace but also powerful narratives of individual transformation “from zeroes to heroes” (Thornton 2018: 622), as *evangélicos* believe “that God has a particular affinity for ‘raising up’ lowly and despised individuals” (Brenneman 2014: 118). For Costa Rica, Kurzewitz (2020) finds that practices of forgiveness and inner healing are a main reason of the appeal pentecostal churches have for women, who often suffer from violence in partnerships and families.



In all cases, evangelical churches seem to offer people something they cannot find in the Catholic Church or in other existing institutions – such as official institutions dealing with the aftermath of the conflict. Forgiveness seems to be one central concept these churches offer their adherents in situations of violence and post-violence, setting them apart from Catholicism. Local rituals and theologies of forgiveness across different denominations and how these are connected to other concepts such as healing or conversion thus might be a promising subject of research. At the same time, as the lived realities of evangelical conflict victims of Callqui and Putis examined in this paper point out the limits of state institutions in dealing with a conflict, my findings can be connected to the ongoing debate on transitional justice: On the one hand, trials or truth commissions proceed slowly and victims might sometimes find it hard to follow what is going on, on the other hand, even well-working institutions might not address all victims' desires and needs. Many authors in the transitional justice field oppose forgiveness because it might feel like an obligation for victims and place the burden of 're-humanizing' perpetrators solely on their shoulders. However, memory can also become a moral duty putting victims under pressure and possibly harming them.

If research on transitional justice focuses too narrowly on mechanisms installed by the state or international actors, it risks seeing 'victims' as a homogenous mass, whereas people, especially those who find themselves in extreme situations, might react in ways researchers do not expect or even approve. The alternative, local processes of dealing with the aftermath of a conflict that victims develop and practice themselves, local ideas and theologies, and their encounters with national strategies and ideas should therefore receive more attention in research as well as in public policies. Moreover, the people looking for those different pathways to justice and peace should be met with respect, from a neutral stance and on equal terms.

## LIST OF INTERVIEWS

	Date	Place	Interviewee(s)
1	10/11/18	Huamanga	Pastor (male) at a Pentecostal church in Ayacucho
2	10/13/18	Huanta	Representative (male) of a Christian church in Huanta
3	10/15/18	Huamanga	Staff member (male) of evangelical human rights organization Paz y Esperanza
4	10/18/18	Huanta	Several victim-survivors (male and female) from Callqui, with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza present
5	10/18/18	Huanta	Victim-survivor (male) from Callqui, with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza present
6	10/18/18	Huanta	Victim-survivor (male) from Putis, with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza present
7	10/22/18	Huamanga	Two staff members of Paz y Esperanza and one pastor at a Pentecostal church in Ayacucho (all male)
8	10/24/18	Huanta	Victim-survivor (female) from Callqui, with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza present
9	10/24/18	Huanta	Victim-survivor (male) from Putis
10	11/7/18	Huamanga	Staff member (female) of Jesuit human rights organization Centro Loyola
11	11/9/18	Huamanga	Pastor at a Presbyterian church, one staff member of the same church, and one staff member of Paz y Esperanza (all male)
12	11/13/18	Huamanga	Former soldier (male), with a staff member of Paz y Esperanza present
13	11/13/18	Huamanga	Member of a victims' organization (male)
14	11/14/18	Huamanga	Member of a victims' organization (male)
15	10/2/18	Huamanga	Two staff members (both female) of Centro Loyola, no audio recording
16	12/13/18	Lima	Staff member (female) of Centro Loyola, no audio recording

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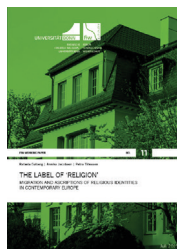
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**ISBN:** 978-3-946306-13-9