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The Guilt of Others and the Guilt of One's own People: How can Churches Contribute to Reconciliation through the Plea for Forgiveness?

Looking back at the role of the German protestant mainline churches and their attempts to deal with their guilt in the Second World War and the Third Reich might help one to understand the role churches can play in reconciliation efforts today.

This is especially true because the wounds made by the Second World War have not yet completely healed and the quest for an appropriate remembrance has still not reached its conclusion.

While today it seems that the integration process of the European Union (EU) overcomes the frictions of the past, it is uncertain if the endeavours to give a soul to Europe can be successful if the question of reconciled memories of the past is not taken seriously.

This is especially the case for unified Germany, in which the reference to the imperative, to never to let the Third Reich happen again, forms something of an ultimate moral foundation for Germany's public self-understanding.

Thus, looking at the debates about guilt and the confession of guilt during the early years after the Second World War in Germany might serve as a case study for dealing with political and moral guilt in one's own people from the point of view of the churches.

I. The Long History of Dealing with the Past

During the Second World War, quite a few church-people felt the need to confess guilt about what Germany had done; Dietrich BONHOEFFER, for example, included a confession of guilt (*Schuldbekentnis*) into his Ethics.¹

But after the liberation of Germany, there was little willingness to do so. It became clear very soon, however, that there was a need for a statement of this kind in order to build bridges to the churches of different nations who were trying to reintegrate the German churches into the newly developing ecumenical movement.

Thus at the meeting of the newly founded Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (*Rat der Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*) in Stuttgart in 1945, a declaration of guilt concerning the war towards the other churches was formulated.

The Stuttgart Confession of Guilt (*Stuttgarter Schuldbekentnis*) was followed by the so-called Darmstadt Declaration (*Darmstädter Wort*) of the Confessing Church, both reflecting the political attitude of the German churches in 1947.

Later, in 1961, the EKD Synod in Berlin Weißensee dealt with guilt in regard to the Jews, and, finally, the famous Memorandum concerning the Eastern Neighbours (*Ostdenkschrift*) followed in 1965. This was a breakthrough for the policy of de-escalation from Western Germany towards Poland and the Eastern Block by the social-democratic government in the sixties and seventies.

It took, however, until 1989 for the churches to formulate a declaration concerning the people of the Soviet Union, which did not come to an official adoption due to the breakdown of the Iron Curtain in the same year.

The fact that it took such long time for the mainline Protestant churches to deal with the Nazi past shows evidence of the difficulties involved. If one also considers the huge public debate caused by the exhibition on the war crimes of the German *Wehrmacht*, one can see that there is still no common view of German past today.

1. Stuttgart, 1945

At its meeting in Stuttgart in October 1945, the Council of the EKD had eight visitors from the ecumenical movement. The church had been previously asked for a statement recognising the guilt of the German people in order to have a better basis for the ecumenical support and relief efforts, and this was the time to formulate one.

1 BONHOEFFER Dietrich, *Ethik*. München, 1992. 129–132.



In doing so, the church leaders hoped for some kind of confidentiality in order to avoid inner German debates regarding the question of guilt. This was due to the long lasting problems the issue of guilt—and its ascription to Germany, Austria and Hungary by the peace treaty of Versailles—caused after the First World War in the twenties and thirties, contributing to the rise of Nazism in Germany.

Also, moods were already shifting in Germany; the country faced heavy food shortages and growing resentment against the *de-Nazification measures* applied by the Allied Forces.

Thus somehow the Council of the EKD hoped that the ecumenical guests would take this statement directly to their churches without making it public, at least in Germany. The strong opposition the Council faced after the leak-out of the text proved their fears correct. The key phrases of the declaration were as follows:

“With great pain we declare: Through us unending sorrow has been brought over many people and countries. That, which we have often born witness to in our congregations, we now openly express in the name of the whole church:

Although we have fought over long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit, which found its terrible expression in the National Socialist dictatorship; but we accuse ourselves for that we have not

confessed more bravely, not prayed more truly, not believed more happily and not loved more fervently.

Now a fresh start shall be made in our churches. Based on the Holy Scriptures, in all sincerity oriented on the sole Lord of the Church, they are going to cleanse themselves from the influences alien to faith and give themselves a new order.”²

At that time, the ecumenical friends were grateful for this declaration, acknowledging the great difficulties associated with stating such truth. Their impression was also formed by the statements of Martin NIEMÖLLER—who phrased the sentence about the unending sorrow—and of Hans ASMUSSEN, both of whom spoke about their *own* guilt in a personal way. In order to understand the rationale behind these words, however, three things have to be born in mind:

A. Somehow the statement differentiates between the actions of the church and the spirit of the world, which found its expression in the Nazi dictatorship. Statements of prominent church leaders, such as Hans ASMUSSEN, made it clear that this spirit was the so-called spirit of *secularisation*. Thus the church itself is not guilty of what was happening; its only guilt lies in its inability to oppose the ways of the world.

B. Furthermore, the church is not guilty as such, it was only weak. The church had opposed the spirit that was behind the Nazi dictatorship, but it did not do it strongly enough. This statement reveals only a limited extent of guilt in this case.

C. After these statements, a new start was made by the German churches. Thus it seems that the question of the misgivings of the past shall no longer burden the present situation.

The strong line regarding the great pain brought over other people and nations was introduced very late in this text, so that there was at least one statement of real sorrow.

If one bears in mind that the majority of the church members—even in the Confessing Church—did not object to National Socialism as such, but only to its interference in church affairs, the differentiation between the church on the one hand and the world on the other shows that this declaration did not intend to deal with the crimes or the war, but rather somehow tried to limit it all to a failure by the world. In these circumstances, a line referring to an unending sorrow gives the whole text a different tone, but is not really integrated into the whole.

The main question remains: Who is the “we” confessing here,

² Die Stuttgarter Schulderklärung. In GRESCHAT Martin (ed.), *Im Zeichen der Schuld: Vierzig Jahre Stuttgarter Schuldbekennntnis: Eine Dokumentation*. Neukirchen-Vlyun, 1985. 45. [Translation mine – S.A.]

and to what extent does the church—or at least the church leaders speaking—identify with this “we?” And secondly, the main theological problem behind this statement is the following: is it possible to confess collective guilt or should the individuals speak for themselves? Can the Church as a whole confess guilt?

2. The Darmstadt Declaration

In August 1947 the Council of the Confessing Church, which still existed and was striving for a completely new structure in the German churches, issued a statement regarding the “political path of our people.”

Here the statement of wrongdoings is formulated in a much more detailed and specific way, mentioning the national conservative attitude of the churches, the dream of a special vocation of Germany, the dualistic worldview and ignorance regarding the necessary political changes in Germany.³

Here the tone is quite different; in several points it states: “We went astray...”

“1. We have been taught the word of reconciliation of the world with God in Christ. This word we are supposed to hear, to accept, to do and to pass on. This word is not heard, not accepted, not done and not passed on if we are not absolved from our complete guilt, from the guilt of our Fathers as well as our own and if we do not allow Jesus Christ, the good Shepard, to call us home from all of our wrong and evil ways in which we as Germans in our political wishes and deeds went astray.”

“4. We went astray as we thought we would build the frontline of Good against Evil, Light against Darkness, Just against Unjust in political life and with political means. Thereby we have falsified the free offer of God’s Grace to all by political, social and worldview frontlines and left the world to its self-justification.”⁴

This is just one example of the way this statement of confessing guilt is phrased. Also its theological reflection on the need for forgiveness is much deeper than in the Stuttgart Declaration. In order to see the difference between the two statements, it is important to draw attention to the following points:

³ Interestingly enough, it took the EKD well into the eighties to publish a statement accepting democracy as a political order in line with the Gospel. I am not sure, however, which other European Churches have done so officially.

⁴ *Ein Wort des Bruderrates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland zum politischen Weg unseres Volkes*. In GRESCHAT 85.

A. In the whole text, it is quite clear who is speaking. Representatives of the Church speak about the German people (so it states in the headline), but this statement speaks of the church leaders and the Church as a whole. “We went astray,” meaning the Church is part of the political situation; the political path of the German people is also the political path of the Church.

B. In its different points, specific problems are named. Thus the statement is not only referring to suffering or wrongdoing, but it explicitly states the wrongs the Church has to face. In naming the wrongs of the Church—and not just its insufficient attempts to prevent evil—it has a clear picture of what it criticises.

C. The final part of the Darmstadt Declaration speaks about the need for a new beginning in Germany, but it also speaks about the responsibility of the Church to contribute to the new political and social order in the country, and not just to the new structure of the Church. Here the outcome is perceived as open.

Therefore the questions, which have been raised in connection with the Stuttgart confession of guilt, are largely answered in this case. Still it remains open to debate if the collective of church leaders can confess guilt.

This has been done at least in the tone of an *identifying* “we,” meaning those who speak, they speak about themselves. The open question here remains: to whom is this confession directed? And does it lead to a deeper understanding of the role which the Church and its members played?

In order to understand the difference between Stuttgart and Darmstadt fully, it might be helpful to turn to another level of dealing with the question of guilt, to the THIELECKE–DIEM controversy which also took place in 1947.

3. Preaching about Guilt

In 1947 a book was published entitled *The Guilt of the Others*. It contained a controversy between the theologians Helmut THIELECKE and Hermann DIEM, which was triggered by a Good Friday sermon given by Helmut THIELECKE.

In this sermon, he claimed that due to the sufferings of the German people caused by the expulsion of Germans from the countries in the

East where they had been a minority with poor living conditions (for which he held the Allied Forces responsible), there was no way of speaking about the guilt of Germany without naming the guilt of the others, that of the victorious nations.

Hermann DIEM challenged this approach and suggested that a part of this discourse was not a topic for a sermon but for political actions, and that the Allied Forces were suffering from bad conditions in 1947 also.

He asked if the listeners to Helmut THIELECKE's sermon were led to the denial of their own guilt if the preacher speaks of the guilt of the others. Helmut THIELECKE did not intend this, but claimed it would be easier for the German people to face their guilt if they saw that there were others too who were guilty.

Hermann DIEM, however, was afraid that the way Helmut THIELECKE spoke about guilt would lead to a relativist approach to one's own guilt. An important issue came to light through this debate, revealing how the majority of the Germans viewed their situation.

While not yet being ready to acknowledge themselves as perpetrators of the past, they felt that they were victims of the present. How should they deal with the denial of involvement in the Nazi system while facing the experience of being a victim of the post-war developments?

II. Learning from the Past: Theological Implications

We should now address some of the underlying questions from a theological perspective. One has to be clear about the problems involved in a confession of guilt, which were posed to the participants of the post-war churches. These give hints to how the questions of confessing guilt, reconciliation and the role of the churches in the history of conflict and wrong-doings can be tackled today.

1. Whose Guilt, and which Confession?

In the traditional theological terms of the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, it was unusual to speak about collective errors and claim that political mistakes were a question of theological concern. While those of the Reformed tradition had fewer problems including the issues of social action and structure into theological considerations, this was not common for the Evangelical-Lutheran approach.

The main reason was the double insight of Evangelical-Lutheran

theology, that on the one hand humans cannot avoid the tendency to err and become sinners, and, therefore, on the other hand, they should refrain from attempts at self-justification through any suggestion that a given or aspired social or political order is “blessed” by God.

Also, there was the important question of to whom any confession of guilt by the churches should be directed. Theologically it only made sense if the confession was directed to God. In this sense, Hans ASMUSSEN explained in Stuttgart to the ecumenical guest: “We say this to you, because we have said it God.”

The central point of understanding was that because we are with others facing a third party—God—we are able to confess our guilt. Theologically there is no use for confessing sins or guilt to others in the first place—as this would be nothing other than an attempt at self-justification.

It is only theologically relevant if we address God and speak of guilt against God, instead of trying to appease others. The question remains, however, if there is a correspondence between the confession to God and the confession to others.

If the confession is directed only to those against whom we have transgressed, we become hostages to their reaction. This, however, would contradict the Gospel's promise of freedom. Therefore, a theologically correct approach is to ask for forgiveness from God, which ultimately frees us to face the reaction of the others.

In an Evangelical-Lutheran understanding, I, as a sinner, am not reduced by God to being a sinner, but am freed from my guilt in relation to God only through God's mercy. I, then, should be able to stand the positive or negative reaction of those against whom I have made myself guilty, because it is not necessary that those I have hurt or violated will be able to forgive. I will have to stand their reaction whatever it is, but I am not dependent on their reaction in a theological sense.

Still it is an open question whether a collective can confess guilt. It is even more open if the Church as such can do so. We do find solutions to this question in the statements of Stuttgart and Darmstadt.

Stuttgart does not make a direct connection between the guilt of the German people and the Church. Rather the Church—as an entity vis-à-vis the society—is talking about the failure of the world, governed by the spirit of secularisation, which ultimately led to the Nazi dictatorship.

In this context, the Church failed as well, but it is not responsible for the guilt. Does it theologically make sense to confess this guilt

to God? Not in the connection of the unending sorrow which was “brought about by us over the nations.”

In the final text, it seems as if the Church confesses someone else’s guilt, and only later determines its own failure. Here the Darmstadt attitude is more appropriate, as it solely speaks about the collective guilt of the Church, not talking about guilt associated with others.

In this case, it is less important if the Church is perceived as a part of the society or something outside. Darmstadt was right, however, in understanding that the Protestant churches are part of the world, thus needing forgiveness like the rest of human structures. This is a main difference in the ecclesiological understanding between the Protestant churches on the one hand and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches on the other.

Thus in regards to the question of who confesses the guilt (first to God and only in a second step to the others), the answer lies in the *identifying “we”*—only if I or we speak for ourselves, we can confess.

Only in this case does one get liberated to change and become open to *metanoia*, to the reversal of one’s own actions and attitudes, because the promise of not being reduced to one’s past opens one up to face the reaction of the others without making one’s own confession dependent on their reaction.

2. Reconciling Memories: What is Involved?

The reaction of others is important for our existence in this world. Even if thorough theological thinking leads to insight of the need for forgiveness from God in the first place, the ambiguity of one’s own experiences leads to an urge for inner-worldly “justice.”

This was especially obvious in the THIELECKE–DIEM controversy. How is it possible to name one’s own guilt, while feeling mistreated in the present situations? In looking at Stuttgart and the THIELECKE–DIEM controversy two things become obvious:

In the reaction to the Stuttgart Statement, after its leak-out to the German press, the main focus was on the perspective that the statement appeared to say it was only the German people who inflicted pain and sorrow upon other nations.

Besides the historical memory of having been made responsible for the First World War, what angered the political actors was the reality that, in this declaration, nothing was said explicitly about the suffering of the German people.

Many cities were completely destroyed; there were millions of German refugees from the former Eastern territories of the German

Reich; food and homes were short; many people felt unfairly accused of being responsible for the Nazi crimes—in this situation it felt wrong not to name the victim experience of the occupied country.

Furthermore, the confessed guilt was too general to relate to. While it was true that German military, German politics and German people had brought unending sorrow and pain to other people and nations, there were also experiences of war crimes from the other side, of suffering and sorrow on the German side. How could this be tackled?

The aim of Helmut THIELECKE was to do justice to this experience, freeing his listeners to the insight that there was guilt on both sides in order to help them accept their own involvement in the suffering of others.

Thus his approach was pastoral rather than theological. Hermann DIEM criticised this approach, as it did not lead to any admittance of one's own guilt, but “just” served the need for recognition of the present feelings.

What is theologically at stake here is again the question of the addressee—should it be God or the political powers?—and the appropriate way of speaking. It would seem that Helmut THIELECKE blurred the mode of confessing guilt and of lamenting at one's own fate to God.

While it is theological nonsense to combine the confession of personal guilt with calls for the confession of others at the same time, it is quite appropriate from a biblical perspective to lament about one's own pain to God, as many of the Psalms show.

Both ways of speaking to God help in regard to the promise of the Gospel: I am free to cry out and ask for deliverance from pain and suffering. This might lead to a new openness for the situation I find myself in as I realise that there is an appropriate place for my sorrow.

The political question of responsibility for the present situation, however, is not something I can handle with God—here political action is needed. On the other hand, the confession of guilt is not something aimed theologically at one's own destruction or burdening, but the aim of confessing guilt to God is for liberation and forgiveness.

The impression the Stuttgart text raised was that of an unspecific general responsibility for all that happened. Maybe in a way this was true—had the German people not followed their government into the war, their cities would not have been bombed. This was not the subject of the confession, however; the Church named an abstract sort of responsibility belonging to someone else.

One of the consequences of such an abstract approach can be seen in the current situation of memories concerning the responsibility for the Third Reich and its crimes in Germany. In the nineties a sociological study found that some sort of double memory exists in the minds of the Germans.

While it is generally accepted that the German Reich was responsible for the crimes against the Jews, the Socialists and many other people within the country and against other nations due to the war, family memory is completely different.

Although the generations involved maintain a certain ambiguity about their role and involvement in their private memory, the memory of their grandchildren is cleansed from any personal guilt ascribed to their grandparents.⁵

So while there is general acceptance of the German guilt, personal guilt is denied. Here the question of specific guilt comes into play. As Darmstadt did, there are specific mistakes which one can relate to and decide whether or not one is guilty. Here the individual memory is involved and challenged directly.

Two aspects need to be considered. On one hand, it is necessary for social reconciliation that all experiences are involved: my wrongdoings as well as my suffering. Thus, the project of *Reconciling Memories in Northern Ireland* aims at an exchange of different stories of suffering. Memory is needed for liberation.⁶

True mundane reconciliation is only achievable if it is possible to integrate all memories into a new, shared and reconciled memory which does not exclude any suffering but does justice to the ambiguity of human life—including the reality that, in most cases, one is both the perpetrator and victim at the same time.⁷

This includes a substantial theological dimension at the same time. As Dietrich RITSCHL has shown, it is the stories we tell that structure our thinking; the stories available to us form the way we are able to tell our own story.

Thereby the underlying logic of the stories is relevant: Am I able to tell stories of guilt? Am I able to tell stories of suffering which do not exclude my own responsibility? Are the stories I am telling realistic in their view of the world?

The Darmstadt declaration tries to tell such stories of errors and of

5 JENSEN Olaf, *Was bleibt vom "Dritten Reich"?* In *Junge Kirche* 2000/61. 463–469. Also: WELZER Harald, *Kumulatives Heroisieren: Nationalsozialismus und Krieg im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen*. In *Mittelweg* 36 2001/2. 57–73.

6 FALCONER Alan D. – LIECHTY Joseph (eds.), *Reconciling Memories*. Dublin, 1998.

7 MCCAGUEY Terence P., *Memory and Redemption: Church, Politics and Prophetic Theology in Ireland*. Dublin, 1993.

going astray. In taking them up and linking them to the need and experience of forgiveness through God, it becomes possible to find the biblical stories of redemption and liberation echoing in one's own life. Thus I am able to speak in an appropriate way to God about my life and to other people about my faith.⁸

The journey for reconciled memories involves not only a peaceful co-existence of different groups with diverse histories or stories in a secular sense, but includes a theological dimension which may be able to transcend the purely historic dimension of guilt in the past.

Since one's own history of guilt and suffering is related to the biblical stories of redemption and forgiveness, to the stories of *metanoia* and new social inclusion, faith may serve as an empowering mechanism for facing those aspects of guilt that otherwise would be denied.

3. What Role Can the Churches Play?

Looking back at the long way the Protestant churches in Germany had to go in order to face their involvement in the historic guilt of Germany's past, it seems to me that three lessons are helpful from this history.

A. The Right Mode of Speaking

In statements and approaches to histories of pain, guilt and suffering, it is necessary for the churches to focus on a theologically adequate mode of speaking. When is it appropriate to use the mode of *confession*? Here the addressee is God, so it is only adequate to use this mode in order to ask for the freedom to face one's own past and wrongdoings.

The opportunity to get rid of the limitation of our identification with the errors of the past, which were against God's proclamation and in contradiction to God's orders, is at stake. This might ultimately free us to speak of our guilt also to those against whom we have become guilty, not needing their forgiveness beforehand in order to be able to speak about it.

When is it right to use the mode of *lamentation*? This way of speaking also is directed towards God and allows accounting of our feelings, our suffering and our need for justice, for change and help. Again, this requires the clear distinction between lamentation—which is theologically appropriate—and political accusation, which should find its place in the political realm.

There might also be a need, however, for the *prophetic voice* of the

8 RITSCHL Dietrich, *Zur Logik der Theologie: Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. München, 1988. 300.

Church regarding wrongs in our world. This prophetic voice only remains biblically grounded if it is directed to the faithful of one's own community, and not as a mere blame of the others for pain and suffering.

Also the modes of *prayer* and *proclamation* are open to the Church. In prayer, however, the direction is again to God, thereby implying a focus on what we ask from God, not what we want others to ask from God.

The proclamation of the Church finally offers people the opportunity to find their life and personal stories in the overarching story of God with God's people and with the world. Proclamation is not the place of denial, in which the present state shall be ignored and a future in ignorance of the current situation described, but rather a place of relating the present situation to the promises of the Gospel, thus making it understandable in a new liberating way.

B. Honesty and Specific Speaking

In order to integrate our own stories into the overarching story of God's promise and redemption, it is necessary to speak of specific issues and situations. Only in this case we are able to join in the confession of guilt, as we discover that we have the same need of forgiveness.

And only in this case we are able to realise that our lives are in need of a different reconciliation. In the case of post-war Germany the statements of Stuttgart and Darmstadt did not apply to the whole Church, as it was not true for those few Christians, who were pacifists, who opposed the Nazi dictatorship from its beginning on—people like Dietrich BONHOEFFER and others.

It was also not true for those religious Socialists, who from early on had left the path of a nationalistic view of the Church and the state. On the other hand, only a specific mode of talking allows for new understanding of our own past and a true call for forgiveness and reconciliation.

C. Creating a Community of Alternative Experience

Later in the history of the German Protestant churches, movements like *Aktion Sühnezeichen* were created. Young German people went to the victims of Germany's past and tried to bear witness to the reconciliation the Church was asking for and witnessing to.

Thus a space for shared experience was created, an open space for

meeting, for developing a common future, and for sharing memories. This needs to be a space which does justice to the ambiguous past and liberates the actors to a reconciled future.

This cannot be guaranteed by the Church, but the Church can try to search for a community which is not based upon the past or the limitations of political understanding, national identity or group identities that are created in confrontation with others. The space created by the Church should rather be oriented towards a community which transcends these limitations and looks for God's promise and the hope derived from it.

Suggested Reading

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