

9. The Development of Moral Discernment in the Evangelical Church in Germany in Light of National Socialist State Crimes

Thomas Martin Schneider

The “Moral Disaster”

National Socialist state crimes, which include the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews, mark a profound break in particular for the history of the EKD. Wolf-Dieter Hauschild quite rightly called the crimes a “moral disaster.”¹ The Evangelical Church, to which about 60 percent of Germans belonged at the time, remained largely silent about the boycott of Jewish shops starting on 1 April, 1933, the 1935 Nuremberg race laws, the pogrom of November 1938, and the “Final Solution,” which the Nazis tried to keep secret. Organizational church assistance was available to a limited extent solely for “non-Aryan” Christians. In this respect, special mention should be made of the evangelical Office of Pastor Grüber in Berlin² and corresponding aid centres of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria in Munich and Nuremberg.³ Yet both this assistance and the courageous commitment of individual Christian men and women⁴

1. Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Lehrbuch der Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte, Vol. 2* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 906.

2. See also Hartmut Ludwig, *An der Seite der Entrechteten und Schwachen. Zur Geschichte des “Büro Pfarrer Grüber” (1938–1940) und der Evangelischen Hilfsstelle für ehemals Rasseverfolgte nach 1945* [On the side of the disenfranchised and the weak: On the history of “Pastor Grüber’s Office” (1938–1940) and the Evangelical Aid Centre for the Formerly Racially Persecuted after 1945] (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2009).

3. See Karl-Heinz Fix, *Glaubensgenossen in Not. Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Bayern und die Hilfe für aus rassistischen Gründen verfolgte Protestanten. Eine Dokumentation* [Fellow believers in need: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and help for racially persecuted Protestants. Documentation], LKGG 28 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011).

4. See Harald Schultze and Andreas Kurschat, eds. *“Ihr Ende schaut an . . .” Evangelische Märtyrer des 20. Jahrhunderts*, with the assistance of Claudia Bendick [“Look at their end . . .” Evangelical martyrs of the 20th century] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), as well as the online exhibition on resistance of Protestant Christians: www.evangelischer-widerstand.de (also English version).

disappear “quantitatively and qualitatively in the historical assessment behind the almost complete silence.”⁵

It should also be noted that especially among the radical “German Christians” in the Evangelical Church, there were Christians and church representatives who explicitly justified the persecution of Jews. Some, who viewed themselves as Christians or were active in the church, even played an active role in the extermination of the Jews, such as the Schleswig-Holstein pastor and SS-Obersturmbannführer Ernst Szymanowski (a.k.a. Biberstein), who left the Church in 1938.⁶ Lastly, it should not be forgotten that the so-called proof of Aryan ancestry, which literally made the difference between life and death, generally relied on church records, hence rectories. In addition to persecuting the Jews, the Nazi regime also engaged in bloody persecution of other groups, including political opponents like the Communists and Social Democrats, as well as Sinti and Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses and homosexuals. The church remained silent.

The only significant difference came when Hitler ordered the “euthanasia” programme at the beginning of the war. This involved the systematic killing of the mentally ill and physically disabled, impacting the church directly in its diaconal institutions. It led to noticeable resistance, ranging from successful delaying tactics to private efforts like the 1940 memorandum by Pastor Paul Gerhard Braune, director of Lobetal institutions, and the energetic protests of Theophil Wurm, bishop in Württemberg. It was thus possible to protect people from the murder campaign in many, albeit not all, church institutions. In addition to the intervention by the Wehrmacht (German armed forces), who feared for the lives of their war invalids, the input from the Catholic and Evangelical Church helped to put an end to systematic euthanasia.

However, “uncontrolled euthanasia” continued. State-imposed forced sterilization was opposed by Catholic but not Evangelical institutions, with the latter sometimes even participating actively therein.⁷ Moreover, forced labourers worked in church institutions, Catholic and Evangelical alike. Otherwise, as far as the “moral disaster” was concerned, there were no significant differences between the Evangelical and Catholic Church, which of course cannot in any way serve as an excuse for the Evangelical Church.

5. See Hauschild, *Lehrbuch der Kirchen*, 907.

6. See Ernst Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich. Wer war was vor und nach 1945 [A dictionary of persons in the Third Reich: Who was what before and after 1945]* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 22005), 47.

7. See Uwe Kaminsky, “Keilförmig”: *Das Diakonissenhaus Berlin-Teltow und die Betroffenen der Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus* [“Wedge-shaped”: The Berlin-Teltow deaconesses’ home and those affected by forced sterilization in National Socialism] (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2017).

Questions

The moral failure, from today's perspective, of the EKD during the Nazi era raises questions that deeply affect the church's self-image. Today, there appears to be nearly unanimous consensus within the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) that the protection of human life – which includes a commitment to the weak, disenfranchised, and persecuted, to peace and justice, to universal and inalienable human rights, to religious tolerance, to emancipation, and to equal rights and inclusion – as well as the fight against racism, dictatorship, and tyranny are among the pillars of the biblically based Christian faith, to which the Reformation of Martin Luther and others wished to return. There is also a widely held view that the Reformation provided the decisive impulse “for the emergence of the modern world,” including its free and democratic structures, as Ernst Troeltsch effectively argued over a hundred years ago.⁸ This was and still is frequently linked to a certain arrogance toward Roman Catholicism, which at the time appeared conservative and backward compared to Protestantism and even set an explicitly anti-modern course in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Finally, the “moral disaster” concerns, so to speak, a master narrative for the EKD founded in 1948, which has always seen itself and continues to see itself as the legitimate heir of the “Confessing Church” (“Bekennende Kirche”) under the Third Reich: Was not the “moral disaster” above all a matter of the heretical “German Christians,” who abandoned or rather betrayed the foundations of the Christian faith, to which the Confessing Church then returned?

But what if the Confessing Church also largely morally failed from today's perspective? And what if it appeared that the “German Christians” were thoroughly consistent with a lengthy tradition in German Protestantism and – conversely – were also part of the modern world? When and on the basis of what insights and factors did the fundamental change finally occur in the moral judging and acting of the EKD? Finally, where do current values block our vision of the historically possible? It is comfortable and easy to judge from the secure vantage point of future generations.

Protestantism and Liberal Democracy

Eilert Herms was undoubtedly right when he stated that “liberal Western democracy cannot be linearly derived from Christian roots” and that “over long periods, Christianity lived under non-democratic systems of political rule,

8. See Ernst Troeltsch, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vol. VIII: Schriften zur Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt (1906–1913)* (Berlin / New York: De Gruyter, 2001).

which it not only accepted but also justified and allied itself with.”⁹ This applies more or less to all major Christian denominations and churches, and even to the Bible, which above all plays a normative role in the EKD. In any case, in the New Testament, due to the fundamental eschatological reservation to the world and its structures, there is no explicit theory of the state or the form of the state.¹⁰ Apart from this, the Bible contains both elements of criticism of rule, such as the prophetic criticism of kings (for example Judges 8–9) or Jesus’ words to rulers who oppress and inflict violence upon their people (Mark 10:42ff.), and elements legitimizing authority, such as the apostle Paul’s powerful admonition (Rom. 13:1): “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Heinz Eduard Tödt warned against overemphasizing one or the other, that is, either the criticism or the legitimation of authority, as has frequently been the case in the history of Christianity.¹¹

It is striking to note that current overviews of the history of democracy in the German language, such as the relevant work by Hans Vorländer from the popular series “C.H. Beck-Wissen”¹² or the Wikipedia article on democracy, contain virtually no references to the Reformation, Protestantism, or Christianity. The primary emphasis is on pre-Christian Greek antiquity and the somewhat abruptly anticlerical albeit still deistic French Enlightenment. As it happens, the history of Protestantism comprises both individual elements that drove democratic thinking, promoting or at least integrating it, and elements that either impede or even oppose the development of democracy. This is equally valid for the state and the inner church sphere.

Freedom in the Lutheran tradition

Freedom was a central concept for Martin Luther, as can be seen from the title of his famous 1520 treatise “On the Freedom of a Christian/De libertate Christiana.”¹³ For Luther, however, it was less about individual freedom from a modern, enlightened political perspective and more about freedom bound to God in terms of responsibility for others. However, the question remains

9. Eilert Herms, “Demokratie,” in RGG4 2 (1999), 649–52, at 652.

10. See Hermann E. J. Kalinna, “Demokratie II. Theologisch,” in EStL3 1 (1987), 469–76, at 469f.

11. Heinz Eduard Tödt, “Demokratie I. Ethisch,” in TRE 8 (1981), 434–52, at 434.

12. Hans Vorländer, *Demokratie. Geschichte, Formen, Theorien* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010).

13. WA 6, 20–38 and 49–73.

whether Luther's understanding of freedom also provided an impetus for the Enlightenment's understanding of freedom.

Before the Emperor in Worms in 1521, Luther referred not only to the holy scripture but also to his conscience and reason.¹⁴ Here as well, one may ask whether this could have provided an impulse for the Enlightenment idea of the general freedom of conscience and thought as well as the principle of reason, even though for Luther in Worms, what mattered was the *one* truth.

The basic principle of the "priesthood of all believers" in Luther's 1520 essay on the role of the nobility¹⁵ upset the medieval system of the three estates, even though Luther did not fundamentally question the latter and subsequently also stressed the need for a vis-à-vis of ecclesial ministry and congregation. We may ask once again if Luther may not have provided at least an impulse for the Enlightenment concept of equality and participation.

Luther's teaching of the "two realms," as he developed it in his 1523 text on temporal authority,¹⁶ acted as a "two-realms doctrine" that often played a de facto system-stabilizing role for authoritarian governments. But rightly understood, his doctrine also served as a catalyst for the Enlightenment notion of the separation of church and state and the separation of powers. The Lutheran "two-realms doctrine" is reflected by the fifth thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934, the "Magna Carta" of the Confessing Church. It emphasizes the State's own law, which however remains accountable to God:

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. It fulfils this task by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.¹⁷

The exceptional twofold condemnation warns against both encroachment of the State and encroachment of the church:

14. See also Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, Vol. 1* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1981), 438f.

15. WA 6, 404–469.

16. WA 11, 245–281.

17. *The Barmen Declaration (1934)*, EKD website, <https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm>.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.¹⁸

Luther surely did not intend for the Reformation to lead to a lasting diversification within Western Christianity. Nevertheless, this diversification provided a de facto impulse for the Enlightenment concept of pluralism and the relativism of truth.

The impetus that was provided by Luther, which he to a certain extent sought either relatively indirectly or not at all, was diametrically opposed to his rough polemic against rebellious peasants, "fanatics," "papists," Jews, Turks and so forth, which, albeit inadmissible for us today, was very typical of his time. Theologically speaking, Luther emphasized the complete lack of freedom of a human being's will in relation to God, which in his view could only enable the justification of the Christian and his freedom in the inner-worldly sphere and between human beings.¹⁹

Freedom in the Reformed tradition

In both Zwingli's Zurich and Calvin's Geneva, the Reformation was formally introduced through council decisions. Above all in Geneva, a close symbiosis developed between the city authorities and church leaders, which on various occasions was described as "theocracy" with totalitarian traits or even – to take up the title of a 2009 monograph by Volker Reinhardt – a "tyranny of virtue."²⁰ Yet Calvin is, paradoxically enough, still stylized as one of the forefathers of modern democracy.²¹ The two views, both Calvin's stylization as a tyrant as well as his classification as a pioneer of liberal democracy, testify to anachronistic, unhistorical projections and reveal more about the ideological positions of the respective recipients than they do about those of Calvin. Like Luther, Calvin

18. Ibid.

19. See Martin Luther, "De servo arbitrio," 1525 (WA 18, 600–787). Luther himself held this essay in high esteem (see WA Br 8, 99, 7f. [Nr 3162]).

20. Volker Reinhardt, *Tyrannie der Tugend. Calvin und die Reformation in Genf* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009).

21. See also Herman J. Selderhuis (ed.), *Calvin Handbuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 5; Joachim Staedtke, "Demokratische Traditionen im westlichen Protestantismus," in *Reformation und Zeugnis der Kirche. Gesammelte Studien*, ed. Dietrich Blaufuß (Zurich: TVZ, 1978), 281–304.

was first and foremost interested in theological questions: what mattered to him was God's sovereignty, not the sovereignty of the people.

Nevertheless, the external conditions of the Reformed Church favoured the emergence of structures that were decisive for later democratic developments. These conditions existed not only in the Swiss Confederation, with its city-republics, but also, for example, in France, where the Protestants suffered bloody persecution, in the Netherlands, fighting for independence from Spain, and in Scotland, locked in a long-standing conflict with England. On the basis of Calvin's four-offices teaching, ecclesiastical collegial management bodies, presbyteries, and synods were established in Reformed parishes and associations of parishes, partly as a counterpart to hostile authorities. This, in turn, led to the development of the presbyterial and synodal church orders in the 19th century, now established throughout the EKD, even though the concrete form varies. European emigrants brought the presbyterial and synodal concept to North America in the 17th century, where it was also practiced. As regards efforts aimed at emancipation from the English crown and enlightenment thinking, the ecclesial activation of parishioners in North America contributed "to the theoretical and practical development of democracy." Conversely, this in turn influenced conceptual ideas of church constitutions in Europe.²²

Wolf-Dieter Hauschild has pointed out that Calvin's original thinking along the above-mentioned lines underwent a significant transformation. The Christological rationale that was so dear to Calvin was replaced by a genuine democratic theoretical foundation. People followed general state-political developments and more or less argued, in accordance with the basic principle that all power emanates from the citizens, that the ecclesiastical authority is owned by the folk church or rather the church members.²³ As a result of the experience of the "church struggle," there was admittedly a return to a new understanding of the theological or Christological essence of church bodies. The Confessing Church's parallel leadership structures with their councils of brothers and synods were geared to the old Reformed model. This was in absolute contrast to the bodies governed by the "German Christians," which adopted the state's "Führer" principle. In particular, Reformed theologian Karl Barth also to a certain extent opposed the totalitarian claim of the unjust National Socialist nation to the totalitarian claim of Jesus Christ. This finds expression in Barth's teaching on the classification of "the Christian community and the civil community,"²⁴ as is already implied in the second thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration:

22. Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, "Presbyter / Presbyterium. III. Presbyterial-synodale Kirchenordnungen," in RGG4 6 (2003), 1614–16, at 1615.

23. Ibid.

24. Karl Barth, *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1946).

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.²⁵

This thesis, from which the church's role as a political watchdog can be derived, clearly conflicts with Luther's two-realms doctrine and thus also with the fifth Barmen thesis.

Developments since the Enlightenment

The freedom-promoting impulse of the Reformation was primarily taken up in the era of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and liberal "culture Protestantism" and further developed both in terms of politics and church policy. Nevertheless, it was not until 1985 that the – then West German – EKD took a clear stand in favour of democracy in its memorandum "The Evangelical Church and Liberal Democracy: The State of the Basic Law as an Offer and a Task."²⁶ To quote the deceased Leipzig church historian Kurt Nowak, the churches in the GDR "only came out clearly on the side of democracy at the time of the fall of the SED state, namely, at the Synod of the GDR Federation of Churches in September 1989 in Eisenach."²⁷

What were the reasons behind this late acknowledgement of democracy in Protestantism despite many democracy-promoting elements in its history? The close symbiotic link between throne and altar, as embodied by the Protestant territorial churches with the high episcopate of the sovereign, undoubtedly had an impact not only in Lutheran but also in Reformed territories. The Protestant territorial churches intrinsically contradicted Luther's two-realms doctrine and were only accepted by him as a temporary arrangement. As is well known, however, provisional arrangements often take on a life of their own, grow firm, and develop lasting institutions, all the more so if power-political interests are involved.

25. *The Barmen Declaration (1934)*.

26. *Evangelische Kirche und freiheitliche Demokratie. Der Staat des Grundgesetzes als Angebot und Aufgabe*, edited by the church office on behalf of the EKD Council (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 41990).

27. Kurt Nowak, "Protestantismus und Demokratie in Deutschland. Aspekte der politischen Moderne," in: Martin Greschat and Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, eds., *Christentum und Demokratie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 1–18, at 11.

The abrupt end of the monarchy in Germany in 1918, together with the lost war, marked a traumatic break for German Protestantism because it also led to the collapse of the ecclesial order. As a result, it was very difficult for many church representatives to get used to the idea of the first democracy on German soil. Consequently, during the uncertain transitional phase at the beginning of the Weimar Republic,²⁸ there were also various attempts by the anti-clerical political left to put into practice the programme of a radical separation between church and state. As it were, church circles kept in mind the “spectre” of the 1905 lay separation model in France and the harsh repression of the church in Bolshevik Russia. The mutually problematic relationship between the Evangelical Church and social democracy only eased in connection with the SPD’s Godesberg Party Manifesto of 1959. Some ten years later began the sometimes massive left-wing politicization in the Evangelical Church, which after the experiences of the Third Reich and in the wake of the so-called “68-movement”²⁹ can also be understood as a reflex to the right-wing politicization at the beginning of the 20th century, and thus to a certain extent as continuity and not necessarily as “the Great Change.”³⁰ In Nowak’s view, Protestantism in the East

28. See also Jochen Jacke, *Kirche zwischen Monarchie und Republik. Der preußische Protestantismus nach dem Zusammenbruch von 1918* [The Church between Monarchy and Republic. Prussian Protestantism after the 1918 collapse] *Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte* 12 (Hamburg: Christians, 1976); also see Thomas Martin Schneider, “Kontinuitäten und Aufbrüche – Die Rheinische Kirche in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik (1918–1933)” [Continuity and New Starts – The Rhineland Church in the time of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933)], in *Evangelische Kirchengeschichte im Rheinland, Bd. 4: Krise und Neuordnung im Zeitalter der Weltkriege: 1914–1948* [The History of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Vol. 4: Crisis and New Order in the Era of the World Wars: 1914–1948], SVRKG 173, ed. Thomas Martin Schneider (Bonn: Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 2013), 32–60, at 34–38

29. See Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, “Evangelische Kirche in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen 1961 und 1979” [The Evangelical Church in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1961 and 1979], in *Der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren* [German Protestantism and the Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s], AKiZ B 47, ed. Siegfried Hermle, Claudia Lepp, and Harry Oelke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 51–90; Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, “Kontinuität im Wandel. Die Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland und die sog. 68er Bewegung” [Continuity in change: The Evangelical Church in Germany and the so-called 68 movement], in *1968 und die Kirchen* [1968 and the Churches], ed. Bernd Hey and Volkmar Wittmütz (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2008), 35–54; Klaus Fitschen, Siegfried Hermle, Katharina Kunter, Claudia Lepp, and Antje Roggenkamp-Kaufmann, eds., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus. Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1960er und 70er Jahre* [The politicization of Protestantism. Developments in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1960s and the 1970s], AKiZ B 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

30. For example, Uwe Kaminsky, “Die evangelische Kirche im Rheinland 1918 bis 1989. Eine Übersicht” [The Evangelical Church in the Rhineland from 1918 to 1989. An overview],

and West clung to “social notions of homogeneity” and to the “claim of acting as a ‘watchdog’ for political culture until well past 1945, even though there was a change in the ‘signs’ of ‘right’ and ‘left’.”³¹

On the other hand, it should of course not be overlooked that Protestants actively participated both in building the democratic structures of the Federal Republic of Germany and in the democratic opposition in the GDR. A number of leading representatives of the early Federal Republic were rooted in the Protestant church circles. The Evangelical Church played a decisive role in the opposition movement in the GDR, which finally led to the “peaceful revolution” in 1989.³²

The Evangelical Church and National Socialism

To understand the accommodation and collaboration of large segments of the Evangelical Church with National Socialism, it is not enough to refer to the backward-looking church leaders who missed the old monarchical order, all the more so because most of them adapted to the new circumstances sooner or later. To be sure, they rarely turned into committed democrats, but became rational republicans often enough. Moreover, in the time after 1918 there were diverse new departures in the Evangelical Church and theology. Thus, there was no push to reverse the course of history. At the time, it was very difficult to predict how the different currents and their individual representatives would develop and position themselves in the changed political circumstances of the Third Reich, unlike how things may seem today from the secure vantage point of later generations.

Early critics of National Socialism included theologians of very different persuasions, such as the Cologne theologian and vocational school teacher Ina Gschlössl, who was close to the religious socialists; the liberal Kiel professor of practical theology Otto Baumgarten; and Hermann Sasse, the publisher of the Church Yearbook and later a professor of theology at Erlangen, a staunch confessional Lutheran who was thus in the conservative camp. Conversely, the sympathizers and supporters of National Socialism included theologians

in *Evangelisch am Rhein. Werden und Wesen einer Landeskirche* [Evangelical on the Rhine: The development and being of a National Church], ed. Joachim Conrad, Stefan Flesch, Nicole Kuroпка, and Thomas Martin Schneider on behalf of the Committee for the History of the Rhineland Church and Contemporary Church History (Düsseldorf: Müller 2007), 96–120, at 96

31. Nowak, “Protestantismus und Demokratie,” 12f.

32. Cf. Rudolf Mau, *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945–2005)* (KiE 4/9) (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).

from very different political backgrounds, such as Emanuel Hirsch, part of the Lutheran renaissance; Friedrich Gogarten, who belonged to the circle of dialectic theology; the Reformed theologian Otto Weber; and Horst Schirmacher, who started out with the Religious Socialists.

There are countless examples that progressive, liberal theologians and representatives of culture Protestantism were not immune either to the temptations of National Socialism and the “German Christians.”³³ The most radical – Thuringian – wing of the “German Christians” even displayed a special affinity for liberal theology.³⁴ This is related to the fact that National Socialism certainly also evinced modern elements, while culturally open, dogma-critical or undogmatic Protestantism was susceptible to the spirit of the time and its aberrations. On the other hand, with the “German Christians” in general, contemporary political and ideological convictions took precedence over theology and trivialized theology was accommodated to political and ideological convictions.

Two factors played a key role in this respect: on the one hand, missionary convictions, and on the other hand, indifference to theological questions in a narrow or proper sense, as can be seen from the words of the later “German Christian” Bishop for the Church Province of Saxony, Friedrich Peter: “We never thought about whether we agreed theologically.”³⁵ Theology was secondary: the main issue was whether one agreed with the dominant political ideology and could thus present oneself as modern and not clinging to antiquated traditions. Official proclamations were issued frequently: the outdated creeds were left untouched but were no longer viewed as relevant. To the extent that any theological reflection took place, it was tied to historical theological ideas of the divine orders of creation.³⁶ These were then further developed with the uptake of elements of Nazi race ideology for the doctrine of the “Volksno-

33. See also Thomas Martin Schneider, “Glanz und Elend des Kulturprotestantismus: Adolf von Harnack and Johannes Müller-Elmau,” (splendour and misery of culture-protestantism), *MEKGR* 58 (2009), 193–203.

34. See Hans-Joachim Sonne, *Die politische Theologie der Deutschen Christen. Einheit und Vielfalt deutsch-christlichen Denkens, dargestellt anhand des Bundes für Deutsche Kirche, der Thüringer Kirchenbewegung “Deutsche Christen” und der Christlich-Deutschen Bewegung* [The political theology of the German Christians: Unity and diversity of German Christian discourse portray based on the Federation for a German Church, the Thuringian “German Christians” church movement and the Christian-German movement], (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 56–100; Anja Rinnen, *Kirchenmann und Nationalsozialist. Siegfried Lefflers ideelle Verschmelzung von Kirche und Drittem Reich* [Church man and National Socialist. Siegfried Leffler’s ideal conflation of the Church and the Third Reich], *FPDR* 9 (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1995).

35. Quoted from Sonne, *Die politische Theologie*, 9.

36. See also Paul Althaus, *Theologie der Ordnungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1934).

mos,” according to which each people was suited to a typical law that was qualified as the central revelation of God and was at the same time personified and proclaimed by the charismatic Führer (leader) of the people.³⁷

The representatives of the Confessing Church, who theologically speaking were most often characterized by either dialectic theology or confessional Lutheranism, also predominantly distanced themselves from democracy when they did not reject it altogether. Martin Greschat has shown that the vast majority of the members of the Barmen Confessing Synod had German national or even National Socialist leanings.³⁸ The attitude and behaviour of the sole female synodal member, Stephanie Mackensen von Astfeld, was quite typical: She argued that her commitment within the Confessing Church could be reconciled with membership of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). When party expulsion proceedings were initiated against her in 1938 due to her Confessing Church commitment, she even defended herself successfully.³⁹

Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was undoubtedly one of the most farsighted and courageous theologians during the Third Reich, specifically rejected the sentence from Article 1 of the Weimar Constitution, namely, “State authority derives from the people.”⁴⁰ And in his June 1933 essay entitled “The Church Faced with the Jewish Question” – from which comes the much-quoted word “wheel,” which when necessary must “fall in the spokes” – Bonhoeffer is primarily thinking of only baptized Jews. In the same essay, he specifically recognizes the state’s right in the “Jewish question . . . to explore new avenues,” which even for Bonhoeffer “doubtless” involves “a social problem, with which our State must deal.”⁴¹ Sabine Dramm has argued in favour of freeing an increasingly sainted, politically and theologically instrumentalized Bonhoeffer for his own sake from the “patina of iconization”; she sees him as a minister to some resistance fighters rather than a resistance fighter himself.⁴²

37. See Thomas Martin Schneider, “Volksnomostheologie,” in *Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften. Akteure, Netzwerke, Forschungsprogramme*, ed. Michael Fahlbusch, Ingo Haar, and Alexander Pinwinkler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 1288–96.

38. Martin Greschat, “Bekenntnis und Politik. Voraussetzungen und Ziele der Barmer Bekenntnissynode” [Confession and politics: Prerequisites and goals of the Barmen Confessional Synod], *EvTh* 44 (1984), 524–42, at 535–37.

39. See Karin Oehlmann, *Stephanie von Mackensen und der Kirchenkampf*, Master’s thesis, Tübingen, 2002, 44–46.

40. See Nowak “Protestantismus und Demokratie,” 8 and 27.

41. DBW 12, 349–358, quotes: 351–53.

42. See Sabine Dramm, “Bonhoeffer ohne Heiligenschein” (Bonhoeffer without a halo), *Zeitzeichen* 2 (2006), 1214; Sabine Dramm, *V-Mann Gottes und der Abwehr? Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der Widerstand* [Intermediary of God and of the counterespionage? Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the resistance] (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

The democratic spirit of Karl Barth, who not least because of his outstanding importance for the Confessing Church is viewed by many even today as the church father of the 20th century, has been strongly challenged in the meanwhile. For example, Munich-based social ethicist Trutz Rendtorff criticized Barth for being more interested in a general reckoning with neo-Protestantism than with a critical examination of the National Socialist ideology and the “German Christian” heresies. In so doing, however, Barth broke with the modern enlightenment and squandered compatibility with the modernity.⁴³ According to Rendtorff’s student and successor, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Barth’s theology even “worked de facto to relativize democracy.”⁴⁴ Marburg church historian Jochen-Christoph Kaiser also viewed the culture- and social-critical attitude of Barth’s theology as a burden for the young Weimar democracy, judging it accordingly: “Through their biting criticism of any mixture of Christianity and culture or society, they [sc. “Barth and his new ‘school’”] weakened the positive strengths of the [Weimar] Republic and overlooked the opportunities that democracy and a pluralist polity also offered for the practice of belief.”⁴⁵

The fact that a strict return to theology proper can have a de facto political effect is reflected by the Barmen Theological Declaration,⁴⁶ which “in line with its understanding does not contain any political programme, guidance for resistance or directives for action.”⁴⁷ One can either view this ex post facto as a lack or judge matters more positively like Klaus Scholder: “In actual fact, the historical importance of the Theological Declaration lies precisely in the fact

43. Trutz Rendtorff, “Karl Barth und die Neuzeit. Fragen zur Barth-Forschung” [Karl Barth and the modern era: Questions for Barth research], *EvTh* 46 (1986), 298–314.

44. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, “‘Der Götze wackelt’? Erste Überlegungen zu Karl Barths Liberalismuskritik (‘Is the idol wobbling?’ First reflections on Karl Barth’s criticism of liberalism), *EvTh* 46 (1986), 422–41, at 440f.

45. Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, “Der Protestantismus von 1918 bis 1989,” in *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte, Bd. 3: Von der Französischen Revolution bis 1989* [An Ecumenical Church History, Vol. 3: From the French Revolution to 1989], ed. Thomas Kaufmann, Raymund Kottje, Bernd Moeller, and Hubert Wolf (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 181–270, at 189.

46. See also for the following Thomas Martin Schneider, “Zwischen historischem Dokument und Bekenntnis. 75 Jahre Barmer Theologische Erklärung” [Between historical document and confession. 75 years of the Barmen Theological Declaration], *Pastoraltheologie* 98 (2009), 138–56, at 147f.; Thomas Martin Schneider, *Wem gehört Barmen? Das Gründungsdokument der Bekennenden Kirche und seine Wirkungen* [To whom does Barmen belong? The founding document of the Confessing Church and its effects], *CuZ* 1 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017).

47. Martin Honecker, *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte* [The Barmen Theological Declaration and the history of its impact] Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vorträge G 330 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), 30

that it is not constrained by the then overwhelming political questioning.”⁴⁸ With regard to the fifth Barmen thesis, Scholder argues:

Thus, the fifth thesis resolutely rejects a directly political mandate for the church. It is not for the church to engage in political discussion; rather, it must stick to its business, namely, the proclamation of Jesus Christ. And it was precisely by so doing that it earned its own, irreplaceable and unique political profile.⁴⁹

However, the experience of the Third Reich also shows that religious freedom and political freedom or the lack thereof converge, and that it is part of the church's core mandate to be an advocate for the weak and oppressed. There were the courageous objections of individuals, such as Martin Gauger, the legal advisor representing the Lutheran wing of the Confessing Church in the Lutheran Council, who as far back as 1934 was dismissed from the civil service owing to his refusal to swear allegiance to the Führer and who was murdered by the Nazis in 1941 on account of his conscientious objection. Of special note, however, were the 1936 memorandum by the second provisional church leadership (VKL II) representing the radical Confessing Church to Hitler⁵⁰ and their penitential liturgy for a “Prayer service on the occasion of the threat of war” in 1938.⁵¹ Both texts contained direct political references. The memorandum,

48. Klaus Scholder, “Die theologische Grundlage des Kirchenkampfes. Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung der Barmer Erklärung” [The theological foundations of the church struggle], *EvTh* 44 (1984), 505–524, quote: 510, quote from Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Konfliktgemeinschaft Kirche. Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* [The church as a community of conflict: Essays on the history of the Evangelical Church in Germany], AKiZ B 40 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 155

49. Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, Bd. 2: Das Jahr der Ernüchterung 1934. Barmen und Rom* [The Church and the Third Reich, Vol. 2: 1934 – The Year of Disillusionment. Barmen and Rome] (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1985), 198, quoted from Hauschild, *Konfliktgemeinschaft Kirche*, 177.

50. The memorandum and appendices are printed in: Kurt Dietrich Schmidt (ed.), *Dokumente des Kirchenkampfes, Bd. III/1* [Documents of the church struggle, Vol. 2/1], AGK 13 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 695–719. On this memorandum and the affair surrounding its launch abroad, see also Wilhelm Niemöller, *Die Bekennende Kirche sagt Hitler die Wahrheit* [The Confessing Church spoke truth to Hitler] (Bielefeld: Ludwig Bechauf Verlag, 1954); Martin Greschat (ed.), *Zwischen Widerspruch und Widerstand. Texte zur Denkschrift der Bekennenden Kirche an Hitler* (1936) [Between Contradiction and Resistance. Texts on the memorandum of the Confessing Church to Hitler], SKZG 6 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1987); and Gerhard Besier, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, Bd. 3* [The churches and the Third Reich, Vol. 3] (Berlin and Munich: Propyläen Verlag 2001), 482–510.

51. The supplication liturgy is printed inter alia in KJ 1933–442, 256ff.; and in Günter

which led to the murder of VKL II Office Manager Friedrich Weißler,⁵² states, “The evangelical conscience, mindful that it is jointly responsible for people and government, is sorely burdened by the fact that in Germany, which calls itself a constitutional State, there are still concentration camps and measures taken by the Secret State Police are not subject to any judicial review.”⁵³ The memorandum even took a stand on the “Jewish question,” albeit in a relatively vague, convoluted fashion: “If, in conjunction with the National Socialist world view, Christians have antisemitism imposed upon them that requires them to hate the Jews, this is opposed by the Christian precept of loving one’s neighbor.”⁵⁴ The supplication liturgy contained among other things a confession of the “sins of our people” against the Ten Commandments and strongly cautioned against the temptations, hatred and grim consequences that each war brought with it.⁵⁵

Apart from such courageous, clear-sighted utterances, it took a few years after 1945 – notwithstanding various earlier so-called admissions of guilt such as the Stuttgart Declaration of October 1945 – before those responsible within the churches clearly recognized that, at least due to silence and neglect and to the disastrous tradition of Christian anti-Judaism, they were complicit in the murder of millions of people. Clearly, this has less to do with self-critical theological reflection and more to do with a gradual awareness of the historical reality of this monstrous crime, as reflected by the “Word on the Jewish Question” drafted by the radical united-reformed wing of the Confessing Church attributable to the *Reichsbruderrat* of April 1948. Here, regardless of the condemnation of antisemitism against the “wayward children of Israel,” the focus is on remonstrance: “Because God is not mocked, the mute sermon of the Jewish fate is a warning for us [sc. Christians] and a reminder for the Jews of what will happen if they refuse to convert to the only one who can save them [sc. hence

Brakelmann (ed.), *Kirche im Krieg. Der deutsche Protestantismus am Beginn des II. Weltkriegs* [The church in the war: German Protestantism at the beginning of the Second World War] (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1979), 49f. See also Kurt Meier, *Der evangelische Kirchenkampf*, Bd. 3 [The Evangelical Church Struggle, Vol. 3] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 53–62

52. See Martin Greschat, “Friedrich Weißler. Ein Jurist der Bekennenden Kirche im Widerstand gegen Hitler“ (A jurist from the Confessing Church in the resistance against Hitler), in *Die verlassenen Kinder der Kirche. Der Umgang mit Christen jüdischer Herkunft im “Dritten Reich”* [The church’s forgotten children: The handling of Christians of Jewish origin in the “Third Reich”], ed. Ursula Büttner and Martin Greschat (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 86–122

53. Quoted from: KTGQ 5 (1999), 134.

54. Quoted from *ibid.*, 133.

55. Quoted from: Brakelmann *Kirche im Krieg*, 49f.

Jesus Christ].”⁵⁶ As far as viewing the Holocaust and the Shoah as God teaching the Jews to turn back to Christianity is concerned, such an interpretation from today’s perspective reflects stunning cynicism. Yet three years after the end of the Nazi regime, this was the interpretation proclaimed by those who – not without reason – viewed themselves as the most determined opponents of the National Socialists within the Evangelical Church.

The Question of “Why?”

In conclusion, we should once again explicitly take up the question, frequently raised today, of “Why?” Judged by today’s standards, why did the Evangelical Church largely fail, morally speaking, during the National Socialist era? And how was it able to overcome this moral crisis?

There were hardly charismatic individuals pointing the church in different directions. Among the “German Christians,” young Reichsleiter Joachim Hossenfelder was unable to prevail against Hitler’s protégé Ludwig Müller, losing any significant influence after Müller was elected Reichsbishop at the September 1933 Reichssynod and forced into political conformity (“gleichgeschaltet”) following the church elections of July 1933.⁵⁷ In the autumn of 1934 at the latest, Müller himself was no longer taken seriously in his own ranks, and he had been de facto disempowered by summer 1935.⁵⁸ Göttingen theology professor Emanuel Hirsch acted temporarily as the “German Christians” chief theologian to a certain extent, but was virtually invisible to the public eye.⁵⁹ Thus, as already mentioned above, theology played virtually no role for the “German Christians” either.

In the Confessing Church, two individuals in particular were taken seriously as influential personalities: Martin Niemöller, the chair of the Emergency Covenant of Pastors (Pfarrernotbund) – as the representative of the

56. This is printed inter alia in: Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945–1985* (Paderborn and Munich: Bonifatius, 1989), 540–44, at 542.

57. On Hossenfelder see Joachim G. Vehse, “Leben und Wirken des ersten Reichsleiters der Deutschen Christen, Joachim Hossenfelder,” *Schriften des Vereins für Schleswig-Holsteinische Kirchengeschichte, II. Reihe* 38 (1982), 73–123.

58. On Müller see Thomas Martin Schneider, *Reichsbischof Ludwig Müller. Eine Untersuchung zu Leben, Werk und Persönlichkeit*, AKiZ B 19 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

59. On Hirsch see also Eilert Herms, “Emanuel Hirsch,” in *Profile des Luthertums. Biographien zum 20. Jahrhundert*, LKGG 20, ed. Wolf-Dieter Hauschild (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 301–20.

united-reformed wing⁶⁰ – and Regional Bishop Hans Meiser – as the leading figure of the Lutheran wing. However, at the beginning of the Nazi regime, Niemöller sympathized wholeheartedly, politically speaking, with National Socialism, and many today reject Meiser due to his anti-Jewish statements from the year 1926.⁶¹ To be sure, after 1945 Niemöller raised the question of guilt like no other, playing a decisive role in the drafting of both the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt of 1945 and the Darmstadt Statement of 1947.⁶² However, he was not attracted by Western-style liberal democracy and called for an election boycott in the young Federal Republic. It should also be noted that Confessing Church members, in deliberate contrast to the “German Christians,” relinquished management positions entrusted with power, opting instead for collegial governance structures. Today, the chairs of these governance bodies have either been more or less disavowed, like that of the first Provisional Church Governing Body (VKL I), Hanover Bishop August Marahrens,⁶³ or are hardly known by current experts, like that of the second Provisional Church Governing Body (VKL II), Dahlem Pastor Fritz Müller.

Karl Barth was undoubtedly theologically influential for the united-reformed wing of the Confessing Church. However, the Barmen Theological Declaration, which he was instrumental in drafting, deliberately avoided any

60. On Niemöller see the new critical biography by Benjamin Ziemann, *Martin Niemöller. Ein Leben in Opposition* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2019).

61. On Meiser see Gerhart Herold and Carsten Nicolaisen, eds., *Hans Meiser (1881–1956). Ein lutherischer Bischof im Wandel der politischen Systeme* (Munich: Claudius Verlag, 2006); Lukas Bormann, “Der ‘Stürmer’ und das evangelische Nürnberg (1924–1927). Zur Entstehung von Hans Meisers Artikel aus dem Jahr 1926 ‘Die evangelische Gemeinde und die Judenfrage’” [The “Sturmer” and Evangelical Nuremberg 1924–1927: On the genesis of Hans Meiser’s article from 1926 “The Evangelical Community and the Jewish Question”), *ZBKG* 78 (2009), 187–212; Berndt Hamm, Harry Oelke, and Gury Schneider-Ludorff, eds., *Spielräume des Handelns und der Erinnerung. Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Bayern und der Nationalsozialismus* [Room for manoeuvring and remembering. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and National Socialism], AKiZ B 50 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). Nora Andrea Schulze’s comprehensive dissertation on Meiser (at the University of Munich) will be published soon.

62. See also Martin Greschat (ed.), *Im Zeichen der Schuld. 40 Jahre Stuttgarter Schuldbekennnis* [Under the sign of guilt, forty years of Stuttgart’s acknowledgement of guilt] (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985); Gerhard Besier and Gerhard Sauter, *Wie Christen ihre Schuld bekennen. Die Stuttgarter Erklärung 1945* [How Christians acknowledge their guilt: The Stuttgart Declaration of 1945]. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985)

63. See also Gerhard Besier, “Selbstreinigung” unter britischer Besatzungsherrschaft. *Die Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers und ihr Landesbischof Marahrens 1945–1947* [“Self-purification” under the British occupation: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover and its Bishop Marahrens], SKGNS 27 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Hans Otte, August Marahrens, in: Hauschild *Profile des Luthertums*, 503–28.

explicit political statements; otherwise it would never have been received by a majority. When Barth was forced to leave Germany in 1935 his influence quite naturally declined. Subsequently, the more radical wing of the Confessing Church also distanced itself from him, at the latest by the publication of his letter dated 19 September 1938 to Czech theologian Josef Hromádka, in which he called on Christians to militarily resist Hitler's aggressive expansionist ambitions.⁶⁴

The Lutheran wing of the Confessing Church sought direction from the Lutheran Confessions of the 16th century, the Neo-Lutheranism of the 19th century and also to a certain extent by the Lutheran renaissance of the early 20th century.⁶⁵ The Lutherans did not have a theologian of Barth's caliber. Some influence was wielded by the later Hanover Bishop, Hanns Lilje,⁶⁶ by the university professor from Bethel, then Neuendettelsau, Georg Merz,⁶⁷ strongly influenced by Barth; and by Hermann Sasse, who left the church out of frustration and emigrated to Australia after 1945.⁶⁸ In accordance with the Lutheran tradition of the two-realms doctrine, Lutheran theologians and church leaders attached great importance to the separation of church and state and theology and politics.

Among the "German Christians," the key factors were the National Socialist spirit of the time and the complete dominance of political convictions and activities at the expense of Christian theological substance. Within the Confessing Church, both wings replaced these key factors by a return to the theological proprium of the church. This was either accompanied by fundamental sympathy for the National Socialist spirit of the time or led to an almost demonstrative renunciation of politics coupled with disregard for human rights violations by National Socialists. The only objections were raised in cases where the freedom

64. See also Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 262f.

65. See Thomas Martin Schneider, *Gegen den Zeitgeist. Der Weg zur VELKD als lutherischer Bekenntniskirche* [Against the spirit of the time: The path to the VELKD as the Lutheran Confessing Church], AKiZ B 49 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

66. See Harry Oelke, *Hanns Lilje. Ein Lutheraner in der Weimarer Republik und im Kirchenkampf* [A Lutheran in the Weimar Republic and in the church struggle] (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999); Harry Oelke, "Hanns Lilje," in Hauschild, *Profile des Luthertums*, 463–84.

67. See Manacnuc Mathias Lichtenfeld, *Georg Merz – Pastoraltheologe zwischen den Zeiten. Leben und Werk in Weimarer Republik und Kirchenkampf als theologischer Beitrag zur Praxis der Kirche* [Pastoral theologian between the times: Life and works in the Weimar Republic and the church struggle as a theological contribution to the praxis of the church], LKGG 18 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

68. See also Maurice Schild, "Hermann Sasse," in: Hauschild, *Profile des Luthertums*, 591–603.

and independence of the church and its theological doctrine and confessions were threatened.

Whereas the “German Christians” were also thoroughly discredited with the fall of the Nazi regime in 1945, the representatives of the Confessing Church were able to portray themselves as winners of history. With regard to the “self-purification” imposed by the occupying powers instead of the denazification applied elsewhere, the new church governance bodies moved ahead at a snail’s pace; overall, the upshot was a few transfers and early retirements.⁶⁹ What is more, EKD Council Chair Theophil Wurm sharply criticized the denazification process on the whole.⁷⁰ Even Niemöller saw to it that a heavily incriminated Nazi official was reintegrated into the service of the church following his rejection by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.⁷¹ The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, viewed as inadequate from today’s perspective, was widely rejected in evangelical Germany at the time and only came into being at the request of church leaders from abroad, who wanted to give the new EKD access to the worldwide ecumenical community. The Darmstadt Statement was only accepted and received by a relatively small circle, who represented neither the broad consensus of Barmen nor German post-war Protestantism. It was significantly more political than the Stuttgart Declaration, evincing a certain affinity with socialist thinking.⁷²

As the new social movements of the 1960s to 1980s led younger generations to demand a critical reappraisal of the Nazi era, theology and church once again became political, completely in line with the Darmstadt Statement, but this time with leftist leanings.⁷³ After initial resistance, political theologian

69. See also Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945–1949. Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit* [The Evangelical Church and Denazification 1945–1949: The Burden of the National Socialist Past] (Munich: De Gruyter, 1989).

70. See also Wurm’s essay on the American military regime in Germany of 26 April 1946, published in Clemens Vollnhals (ed.), *Entnazifizierung. Politische Säuberung und Rehabilitation in den vier Besatzungszonen 1945–1949* [Denazification: Political cleansing and rehabilitation in the four occupied zones 1945–1949] (Munich: DTV, 1991), 292f.

71. See Manfred Gailus, “Vom ‘gottgläubigen’ Kirchenkämpfer Rosenbergs zum ‘christgläubigen’ Pfarrer Niemöllers: Matthes Zieglers wunderbare Wandlungen im 20. Jahrhundert” [From Rosenberg’s “God’s faithful” church leader to Pastor Niemöller’s “Christ’s faithful”: Matthes Ziegler’s marvellous conversions in the 20th century], in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 54:11 (2006).

72. See point 5 of the Darmstadt Statement: “We went astray when we overlooked the fact that the economic materialism of Marxist teaching should have reminded the church of the mission and promise of the community for human life and living together in this world.” Quoted from Greschat *Im Zeichen der Schuld*, 85f.

73. See also Klaus Fitschen et al., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus*.

Dorothee Sölle became influential in this respect. Focusing on narrowly defined theology, as had been the case for the Confessing Church, was viewed as too narrow; the old dogmatic concerns lost their relevance and were overlaid by political and socio-ethical questions. This of course went hand in hand with significant loss of societal importance for the folk church. The role played by synods and other church governance bodies can only be determined in individual cases following further research; often, the corresponding minutes have not yet been published. If enquiries are made as to the relevant authorities in and around the “church struggle,” what first comes to mind is on the one hand the attraction of the respective general spirit of the time and on the other hand church leaders sought guidance from the “old confessions” – as in the case of the Lutheran Confessing Church – or from “God’s Word” – as in the case of Barth.

Conclusion

Viewed from today’s perspective, the EKD, and to be sure the Confessing Church as well, largely failed in its moral role in the face of the National Socialist state crimes. With regard to the promotion of freedom in the present political sense, including human rights, the history of the Reformation churches in Germany must be judged as ambivalent. It contains both freedom-promoting impulses and tendencies – often to a certain extent as a side effect, and sometimes also unwanted – and freedom-inhibiting inspirations and trends. The “German Christians” who sympathized with the National Socialists were modern insofar as they were prepared to adapt to the then topical political and ideological spirit of the time, largely viewed as progressive, relinquishing in return their confessional tradition and theological substance. In terms of structure – albeit not in terms of content! – this was thoroughly consistent with the history of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* with its diverse accommodation attempts at the same time.

In contrast to the course set by the “German Christians,” the Confessing Church opted theologically speaking – in the best sense of “re-formation” – for conservative insistence on the confessional foundations and, in a heated, highly political setting, for relatively unpolitical prioritization of theological substance. Like the Catholic Church, the Confessing Church managed to resist the Nazi regime’s forced political conformity (*Gleichschaltung*). This is both a lot and little. It is a great deal in relation to other large societal groups, such as parties, unions, and employers’ associations, which either did not or could not withstand the pressure of *Gleichschaltung*. It is little, because there was only significant political resistance at best in the beginning or only by a few individuals.

Owing to concerns over preserving confessional identity and organizational independence, the Confessional Church paid little attention to political problems and human rights violations that did not directly concern the church – not even in the Barmen Theological Declaration.

A common reproach to the churches is that they were too unpolitical and all too selfishly only looked after their own concerns. However, this reproach falls short. The example of the “German Christians” shows how problematic the politicization of the church can be if the church fails to preserve its confessional identity and surrenders its organizational independence. On the whole, the EKD only gradually managed to take a political position in favour of the disenfranchised and persecuted outside its own ranks and, with a few exceptions, only some time after the Nazi era, once the qualitative and quantitative extent of the Nazi state crimes had become known and it had become clear that they were diametrically opposed to the Bible’s fundamental ethical postulates. The church, here as well, actively participated in the overall societal development.