Repentance for the Holocaust

Chung, C. K. Martin

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57582

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2074619

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
On the evening of 17 October 1945 in Markuskirche (St. Mark’s Church) in Stuttgart, Pastor Martin Niemöller gave a sermon on a text from the book of Jeremiah:

Even if our wrongdoings accuse us,
You Yahweh, please help for the sake of Your Name.
Many have been our rebellions, and great is our sin against You.¹

According to an observer’s account, the sermon was powerful. In it Niemöller insisted: It does not suffice to give the guilt to the Nazis, the church must also confess its guilt, for Nazi crimes would not have been possible if the people of the church out of a genuine

¹. Jeremiah 14:7. The sermon was based on a longer segment of the scripture (vv. 7–11).
Christian faith had persisted. The following day, during the council meeting of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) then taking place in Markuskirche, a document of confession was created: the so-called Stuttgarter Schuldbeckenntnis (Stuttgart Confession of Guilt). It was formally presented to the visiting delegation of the World Council of Churches on 19 October.

“We know not only that we are in a community of suffering (Gemeinschaft der Leiden) with our people, but also in a solidarity of guilt (Solidarität der Schuld),” read the confession. “Endless suffering has been brought through us to many peoples and countries.”

“We accuse ourselves for not bearing witness with more courage, for not praying with more faith, for not believing with more joy, and for not loving with more zeal” in the fight against that spirit that had found its terrible expression in Nazism. “We turn to God in hope . . . that the spirit of peace and of love may come to reign, in whom alone can the tormented humanity find healing.”

The undersigned of the document include Niemöller and Theophil Wurm, then chairman of the Council of the EKD.

The Stuttgart Confession of Guilt was one of the published responses by the EKD in the early postwar years that either dealt specifically or were in some way related to the issue of Christian guilt. These included the Treysa “message” of 1945, the “word” of 1947 concerning the political path of the German people,

---


4. Ibid., 374–75.


the “message concerning the Jewish question” of 1948,\(^7\) and the Berlin-Weißensee “declaration” of 1950 regarding Christian guilt toward Israel.\(^8\) One common feature of these statements is the explicit reference to both the sins of Christians against God, and the need to turn back to God.

The Treysa message (1945) features the following: “Today we confess: Long before God spoke in anger, He sought us with the Word of His love and we did not listen. . . . We call to our people: turn again to God!” The “word on political path” (1947) has the following: “We went wrong . . . , we have put our own nation on the throne of God.” The message about the “Jewish question” (1948) says this: “Now we have to face the judgments of God which are coming upon us one after the other, so that we may bow beneath the mighty hand of God in sincere repentance, both as a Church and as a nation. . . . Through our suffering and our guilt He made us aware of His Word anew.”

This preoccupation—or rather, preconception—of “sin against God” rather than crimes against the victims (e.g., the Jewish people) has led some observers to criticize the lack of direct reference to the latter.\(^9\) Notwithstanding this valid criticism, these early statements did specifically refer to the triangular relationship of God-victim-perpetrator (the “mysterious link between Israel and the Church, created by God”),\(^10\) and directed the audience’s

\(^7\) English translation: “Message Concerning the Jewish Question (Council of Brethren of the Evangelical Church, Darmstadt, April 8, 1948),” in Hockenos, *Church Divided*, 195–97.


\(^9\) See, for example, Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001), 70: “Only in the year of 1950 . . . was a ‘word of guilt vis-à-vis Israel’ found in the EKD synod in Berlin Weißensee.” But in fact, already in the Bruderrat “Wort” of 1948 mentioned above, explicit reference to the Protestant churches’ wrongdoings against the Jewish people can be found: “We recognize with shame and grief what a great wrong we have done to Israel, and how deep our guilt is.” Hockenos, *Church Divided*, 211.

attention to the kind of turning (‘repentance [Umkehr] to God and turning [Hinkehr] toward the neighbor’\textsuperscript{11}) that is necessary in such a relational setting.

In other words, it is not enough for the repentant sinner/perpetrator to stop at the state of ‘self-absolution’—a self-forgiving realm of Christianity and the ‘West’; he must move forward to face both God and neighbor.\textsuperscript{12} Hence, ‘it is not enough now merely to repair the damage caused by National Socialism. Our task goes further.’\textsuperscript{13} The reorientation of the repentant covers his wrongdoings and their consequences, but is not itself centered on these.

The expression of Christian guilt in light of this triangular relationship was not limited to the Protestants in the German-speaking world. Hans Küng, among others,\textsuperscript{14} reformulated a new triad of relationship among the Jews, Christians, and their Christ: ‘The sufferings of the Jewish people begin with Jesus himself. . . . Jesus was a Jew and all anti-Semitism is treachery toward Jesus himself.’\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, by linking National Socialism and the millennia-long ‘Christian’ antisemitism, Küng and others like him sought to turn postwar Christians away from falsely counting themselves as ‘pure victims’ vis-à-vis the Nazis and thereby sidestepping repentance: ‘Nazi anti-Judaism was the work of godless anti-Christian criminals; but, without the almost two-thousand-year-long pre-history of ‘Christian’ anti-Judaism which also prevented Christians in Germany from a convinced and energetic resistance on a broad front,

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{11} “Wort zum politischen Weg.”

\textsuperscript{12} Yet there is an ambiguity in this ‘turning toward the neighbor,’ for in point 6 of the same ‘word on political path’ (1947), it seems as if turning to Christ is itself \textit{enough} for the absolution of guilt—‘By recognizing and confessing this, we know we are as a community of Jesus Christ absolved (freigesprochen)’—without an explicit word on turning toward the \textit{victims for forgiveness}. See subsequent attempts at rectification in \textsuperscript{P14}.

\textsuperscript{13} “Message to the Pastors (Brethren Council, August 1945),” in Hockenos, \textit{Church Divided}, 181–83.

\textsuperscript{14} See also Johann Baptist Metz’s ‘memory of suffering’ in \textsuperscript{P6}.

it would not have been possible!” Hence, he concluded, “Christianity cannot evade a full avowal of its guilt.”\textsuperscript{16}

If this triangular way of seeing relationships were only confined to the religious realm, to the clerics and theologians, then its effect would only be thus limited. To the contrary, explicit or implicit reference to this relational structure can be found in postwar philosophical and “secular” realms as well. An example of the former is Karl Jaspers’s philosophy of guilt. In his conceptualization, all living Germans must present themselves to four “courts” (\textit{Instanzen}) in order to deal with their four layers of guilt arising from the preceding twelve years: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. The first two are dealt with when the guilty one faces other human beings: the judges and the victors. Moral guilt is dealt with as he is confronted by his conscience. The last of these, metaphysical guilt, can only be dealt with as he faces his God.

There is a solidarity among human beings as human beings that makes each co-responsible for all the wrongs and all the injustice in the world. . . . If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I am co-guilty. . . . Jurisdiction rests with God alone.\textsuperscript{17}

If in Jaspers’s \textit{Schuldfrage}, the emphasis on the self in its own purification has led to doubts as to whether this “self-centered” approach to guilt—or optimism regarding the human ability to achieve “self-illumination”\textsuperscript{18} and “self-purification”—has anything to do with the biblical conception of repentance, with God being the center between victims and perpetrators, in his subsequent work, \textit{The Origin and Goal of History}, the links between this “faith in man,” in his ability to approach his guilt, and “faith in God” are more forcefully emphasized:

Faith in man is faith in the possibility of freedom . . . that he, bestowed upon himself by God, shall thank or blame himself for what becomes

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Karl Jaspers, \textit{Die Schuldfrage} (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946), 31–32.
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Buber’s “self-illumination” in \textit{P6}. 
him. . . . Faith in man presupposes faith in the Deity through whom he is. Without faith in God, faith in man degenerates into contempt for man, into loss of respect for man as man, with the final consequence that the alien human life is treated with indifference, as something to be used and destroyed.¹⁹

For Jaspers, it was the loss of this faith that had made the concentration camps a reality, and it was those who remained “intact as human souls” in the camps who “encourage us to hold fast to the ancient faith of man.”²⁰

The anchoring of this triangular vision in the biblical paradigm comes with the insight of sin. The seeing of sin, rather than the sole focus on the crime and the guilt of the perpetrator, is thus also a hallmark of postwar reflection on the Nazi era. In fact, as we have seen in the introduction, the theological vocabulary of sin has allowed German intellectuals (such as Wilhelm Röpke, Alfred Weber, Johannes Hessen, and Constantin Silens) from both inside and outside Germany to speak to the internal and external audiences about what they thought the Germans must turn from. Jaspers’s contribution, however, was distinctive, for it avoided the traps of self-victimization (Silens), of “Europeanizing” German guilt (Weber), of separating good, ordinary Germans from the bad, leading Nazis (Röpke), of placing oneself on the better side of Germany (Hessen and Röpke),²¹ and of presenting German Christianity as if it were uncompromised (Silens and Hessen). Jaspers’s all-living-Germans-are-guilty thesis laid the foundational standpoint for each and every postwar German to do specific repentance


²¹. This is also a problem with Friedrich Meinecke’s *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus, 1946). See P8.
according to the nonmutually-exclusive types of guilt involved.\textsuperscript{22} And concerning Christianity, though one could argue that “Christian” Nazis and Nazi sympathizers were in fact anti-Christian (i.e., there is a “true” Christianity to be rescued from these false “Christians” or un-Christian pagans), an unqualified presentation of Christianity as “the way out” could be misleading (to Christian self-victimization, for instance, rather than to repentance even for persecuted Christians, as Niemöller and those behind the Stuttgart Confession had called for). Jaspers’s contribution then was notable for basing his message of turning not on an unrealistic image of the church, but on prophetic hope: there is guilt, real guilt in various dimensions, some more visible than others; but there is also hope, real hope, based on “repentance as an individual before God” and not on the “false pathos” of self-pity.\textsuperscript{23}

To make German “sins” visible, postwar Germans also received help from the outside. In his acceptance speech for the 1951 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels), Albert Schweitzer pointed to the pride of “superman” attitude as the sin that had brought humanity to the age of fear and confusions of the time. “In a certain sense we have become supermen through the might we possess, in that we command the powers of nature. . . . But this superman suffers from a deficiency (\textit{Unvollkommenheit}); because its rationality has not become supermanly like its might. . . . He does not possess that level of highest rationality, which would allow him not to set his mind on using the might over the powers of nature to exterminate (\textit{Vernichten}), but to employ it for building up (\textit{Erbauen}).”\textsuperscript{24}

Perhaps earliest of all, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who grew up in Poland and studied in Germany before fleeing to the United States, where he would become one of the most-respected Jewish

\textsuperscript{22} What Jaspers had left out, however, was the later generations of Germans born after 1945. Habermas would carry the “guilt question” forward in the 1980s (see P12).


thinkers of the twentieth century, already propagated this sin perspective in assessing the early Nazi years and the unfolding crimes therein, as he spoke to a group of Quaker Christians in Frankfurt in early 1938: “In the beginning of this epoch was blasphemy. The holies of the world: the Law, Peace, and Faith were abused and desecrated. And then the desecration degenerated into the unprecedented disgrace.”  

It is also in Heschel, whose influence extends to postwar Christian theological thinking, that one can find lucid expressions of the triangular, God-centered relationship: “Religious observance has more than two dimensions; it is more than an act that happens between man and an idea. The unique feature of religious living is in its being three-dimensional. In a religious act man stands before God.”

“He does not take a direct approach to things. It is not a straight line, spanning subject and object, but rather a triangle—through God to the object.”

Though bemoaned as lonesome voices at the time, these responses to the Nazi era—sometimes from the perpetrator side, sometimes from the victim side—generated further responses, some of which will be further analyzed in the chapters below. To cite but one example here, in which we’ll see how one response that framed Nazism as a sin against God evoked another in kind, Victor Gollancz’s *Our Threatened Values*, parts of which were already cited above, was taken up in postwar Germany, abbreviated, and commented on as a “report” before it was translated in full. Whereas Gollancz as a British-Jewish intellectual promoted the sin perspective to his British readers, his German counterparts took it as a tool of orientation to guide German readers.

Responding to Gollancz’s characterization of Nazism as not just

---


an evil regime but a “religion of evil,” a German promoter of his message wrote:

[The opponents of Western civilization] are the people, who consciously negate God, even only as a philosophical concept, and instead of him worship something else, the state above all. Fascism was, seen in this way, the great apostasy, the armed rebellion against God. That human beings were tortured to death in National Socialist Germany and their last dignity was deprived of them had its deepest cause in this hatred against God and against the sparks of Godliness.

The aforementioned sin insights are of course in no way exhaustive or “representative” in the statistical sense; they are meant only to demonstrate the diverse forms through which the biblical concept of sin has found expression in the early postwar period or even during the Nazi years, and also to show how “sin” as a way of seeing approaches the problem of past atrocities very differently from the approach of “crime and guilt” alone. We have seen that, generally speaking, in introducing this extra dimension of seeing, the “viewers” are brought to realize the link—whether actual in the past or present, or potential in the future—between oneself and the crimes/atrocities in question that was hitherto invisible. Hence, these “turners” who have adopted a sin perspective (even in implicit, “secular” forms) have paved the way for another—and more difficult—step of “mutual-turning,” the realization of one’s own “co-sinfulness.” As Gollancz had perceived in 1945, the expulsion of Germans from different parts of Eastern Europe was a sign that the “Nazi spirit” had already infected the victors.

However, one is justified to ask, Would not this sin perspective, which tends to abstract and generalize concrete historical events, divert too much attention from the crimes, the victims, and the

---

perpetrators themselves? And would not the “all-guiltifying” effect\(^{32}\) of the sin perspective unwittingly weaken the critical self-reflection of the Germans, who, no matter how one looks at the Holocaust and the atrocities committed in the Nazi era surrounding it, have arguably the greatest need and responsibility to engage in such a process?

In this sense, it could only be a sign of reassurance to the outside world that German “turners” themselves were not unaware of this problem. Jaspers, for example, warned explicitly against such a pitfall:

It would be in fact an \textit{evasion} and a \textit{false excuse} if we Germans wanted to mitigate our guilt through reference to the guilt of humanity. This idea can bring no relief but drag us deeper. The question of original sin shall not become a way of dodging German guilt. The knowledge about original sin is not yet insight into German guilt. The religious confession of original sin shall also not become clothing of a false collective German confession of guilt, that in dishonest ambiguity one substitutes for the other.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) As Hannah Arendt said in 1945, “When all are guilty, \textit{none can judge} in the final analysis”; she then went on to criticize those who had fled Nazi persecution and now adopted an “unbearable element of self-righteousness,” just because of “the luck of being Jews.” For her, this was but a “vulgar reversal (Umkehr) of the Nazi doctrine.” Arendt, “Organisierte Schuld,” \textit{Die Wandlung} 1, no. 4 (1946): 339. It is interesting to note that whereas her original German text says “none can judge” (\textit{kann im Grunde niemand mehr urteilen}), an English version available at present says “none can be judged.” Peter Baehr, ed., \textit{The Portable Hannah Arendt} (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 150. But in light of the overall thrust of her response, and inasmuch as she sought to turn away from the collective condemnation of the “perpetrators” and from the self-righteousness of the “victims/accusers,” I think “none can be judged” would misrepresent her response as a “see no evil, condemn no evil” kind of acquittal for all.