

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF HISTORY: THE STUTTGART DECLARATION OF GUILT (1945) AS A CONSTITUTIVE ACT OF THE POST-WAR GERMAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

PIOTR KOPIEC*

ABSTRACT. The history of both societies and social institutions provides us with the examples of whether acts or documents, which, while expressing various ideas and values, have become sources of political, social and cultural inspirations as well as a reference points for active struggling for these ideas and values. The examples of such documents are numerous: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN, the constitutions of particular states, the Treaty of Maastricht as a founding act of the European Union.

Another illustration of such an historic document is also the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (*Die Stuttgarter Schulderklärung*), which was released in 1945 by the Evangelical Church of Germany and today is declared to be one of its most fundamental acts. The document was prepared by the group of theologians and church leaders who were involved in the resistant movement against the German Nazi-state. The declaration confirmed an awareness on the part of the German Evangelicals that the Protestant Churches in Germany were also held responsible for the moral disaster of Nazism, even though their blame consisted, above all, in a passive attitude towards evil. The paper surveys the main aspects of the history of declaration and attempts to provide a brief reflection on its theological and sociological importance. Furthermore, it stresses the links between the secularization processes and the nationalism reflected in the history of the German state and German church.

Keywords: The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, Evangelical Church in Germany, nationalism, secularism

The Institution of the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD*) traces its own history back to the end of the World War II. In a time of moral, cultural, social and economic calamities, a number of Evangelical priests, theologians and churchmen were looking for the new paths for German

* Assoc. Professor, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, E-mail: petrko@kul.lublin.pl.

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Protestantism after the moral collapse in the epoch of the Nazi-State. It was these representatives of the Church who were aware both of guilt of the German nation and of Christians partaking in the insanity and atrocities committed in the name of nationalism during the thirteen years of Hitler's power. They declared that the Church should be held responsible for its silent acceptance of the State's ideology. In spite of the unfavourable reaction of the majority of both their own Churches and the rest of the nation, they built a new ecclesial structure which sought to develop a new identity. Their struggles were depicted in many ways, particularly in the Constitution of the Church (*Grundordnung*) adopted in July 1948 in Eisenach.¹ Yet, the constitutive act had been preceded by the *Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt* (*The Stuttgarter Schuldbekentnis*), a document prepared and signed only three months after Germany had capitulated and which is today an integral and intrinsic factor of the identity of the EKD. One must state that this distinctive act of confession pronounced by a relatively small group of theologians on behalf of an entire nation, made the Church credible again in the eyes of following generations.

The Declaration brought about a break in the Protestant confessional tradition. It inspired a theological approach towards history, society and culture.² Furthermore, it demonstrated a sense of responsibility for the future of Christianity, the one which derived from the observations of the increasing secularization processes. In the opinion of theologians gathered in Stuttgart, the Church, when facing the new challenges of a future world, must be settled and reconciled with the past. The document may be thus declared to be an history-breaking act, the significance of which for the institution of the Church is primordial. It is still a source of inspiration for contemporary theological attempts to find the proper and credible place for Christian Churches in order to advance their mission.

I. Christianity, Secularization and Nationalism

The cruel experiences of the World War II were, and still are, influencing Western civilization. The moral disaster of Nazism led, on the one hand, to the degradation of many social institutions which supported traditionally legitimized social order and, on the other, to the slow erosion of the ideas that had driven this civilization for the three centuries since the

¹ A. Silomon, *Anspruch und Wirklichkeit der „besonderen Gemeinschaft“*. *Der Ost-West-Dialog der deutschen evangelischen Kirchen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 38.

² P. Kopiec, *Stuttgarckie Wyznanie Winy (1945) jako akt nawrócenia instytucjonalnego* [*The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (1945) as an Act of Institutional Conversion*], w: *Nawrócenie. Ewangeliczne wezwanie i konteksty interpretacyjne*, red. M. Składanowski, T. Syczewski, J. Połowianuk (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2015), 127-149.

Enlightenment. The European pride in human achievements collided with the images of atrocities revealed in the liberated concentration camps. The conviction of the “world becoming adult” pronounced earlier by Kant became delusional once again. Jean-François Lyotard, when introducing the notion of postmodernity to philosophy and sociology, brought into prominence the term of metanarratives, thus, the leading ideas that organized cultures and societies up to the middle of the 20th century. Their bankruptcy, as he firmly claimed, was to be observed in the places symbolized by Auschwitz and Kolyma. Metanarratives lost its credibility and gave way to micronarratives, thus, the internal convictions shared by a countless number of small groups or individuals. The results of this process must have been reported in the illustration of relativism, the only common approved rule of the postmodern epoch.

The postmodern relativism appears to have been combined with the 1960s counterculture phenomena, a process that has weakened, or deeply transformed, many social institutions of the old order. The post-war generations have feverishly asked what happened in Auschwitz, and, also, “where was God in Auschwitz?”³ In the opinion of many people, states, culture, politics, family, axiological systems, and the previous model of upbringing, all of them lost their sense and credibility, since they were creating by and simultaneously created social institutions that failed to prevent from the totalitarian insanity. Accusations by the counterculture movements were also aimed at Christian churches and Christian culture, for they were considered to be an important part of the old order.

The Churches have paid for the close, and sometimes immediate, cooperation with the nationalist ideology in the interwar period, as in the case of Francoist Spain. Yet, while it is true to say, that Church leaders were late in recognizing the threats of national egoism and national darwinism, it is also true, that the nationalist idea was assumed to be an ally of Christianity in facing the dangers of communism. Even though Christians of all confessions were giving their lives in prisons and concentration camps, and on battlefields, as they fought atrocities driven by ideologies, an alliance of state and church in the majority of European countries paved the way to the secularization of the public sphere in the post-war reality.

A number of theologians had warned against nationalism as did most prominent Protestant authors, as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr, in particular, perceptively understood the nature of nationalism and its relationship to secularization. In his opinion, the triumph of the nationalist idea was deeply related to the moral alienation of a

³ N. Solomon, “Jewish Holocaust Theology”, *The Way*, 37, 3, (July 1997): 250.

secularized culture. He assumes that God is the centre of all values, thus, the only credible axiology is embedded in the Christian faith. When removing the notion of God from ethical and epistemological reasoning, a source of values has to be discovered in nature. Thus such natural instincts, as egoism and a desire to dominate, determines the hierarchy of values. Since these values are revealed and received in the culture of a given group or society, they strengthen its identity and justify acts committed on its behalf. Consequently, the nation as a large group of special significance, fills the empty place left by religion which is vanishing as a social force. Niebuhr sees the idea of nation as a spare-religion, or, more accurately, a counter-religion that puts national egoism at the top of the hierarchy of values.⁴ According to this interpretation, nationalism paves the way to the intensification of secularization processes. In Niebuhr's eyes an alliance of state and church entailed serious consequences for Christianity. It is worth mentioning, that although Niebuhr's interpretation concerned the case of the German Nazi-state in particular, it was many times confirmed in the history of 20th century.

II. The Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) for the Credibility of the Evangelical Church during the German Nazi-State.

Commentary prepared by the synod of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) held in Wrocław in October 1943 has contained these poignant words: "Woe betide us and our nation, if we approved the killing people because of their race or because it was assumed they were not allowed to live".⁵ It was one of the last act of the heroic history of the resistance movement on the part of the Evangelical Church against the Nazi-state.

These words witnessed the existential tragedy of their authors and, at the same time, revealed their awareness of being absolutely alienated from their own nation. The loneliness of the small group of churchmen and theologians deepened as they were discovering the extent of the participation of their Church and theology in the collective insanity of Nazism. They insisted that the Church has contributed to the spread of the nationalist idea to a certain degree, on the both ideological and institutional levels. Regarding the first one, they regarded the orthodox Lutheran teaching on two kingdoms as being partly responsible for the blind cult of authority, the unquestioning acceptance of the social order and the intrinsic principle of obedience

⁴ P. Merkley, *Rheinhold Niebuhr. A Political Account* (Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 222.

⁵ A. Morawska, *Chrześcijanin w Trzeciej Rzeszy* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Więzi, 1970), 77.

embedded in the German society (*Obrigkeit*), even as the social and political relationship was being corrupted.⁶ Regarding the latter, they looked at the immediate history of the division of their Church into two disproportionate parts. The more powerful and more numerous movement of the “German Christians” (*Deutsche Christen*) and the above mentioned above organization of the Confessional Church. The first one was an important supporter of Hitler’s regime, the second one is today assumed to be a crucial part of the resistance in German society.⁷ The fight between both sides was described as the *Kirchenkampf* and it is the history of a moral helplessness, apathy and theological compromises destroying Christianity from inside on the one hand, and, on the other, the history of heroism, moral inflexibility and theological heights.

Members of the Confessional Church very early discerned the inevitability of the defeat of the German Nazi-state. They also understood the immensity of the guilt of the German society. For the first time they developed an understanding of the specific role of the Church in demonstrating and realizing this guilt and in expressing repentance on behalf of an entire nation. In the opinion of Armin Buyens, as the starting point of the process leading to the confession of the nation may be acknowledged in the exchange of letters between representatives of the Confessional Church and the ecumenical working team of the future World Council of Churches. The German side was represented by Hans Asmussen from Berlin, and the ecumenical side by the most prominent figures of the ecumenism of the time: Willem Visser’t Hoof and Karl Barth.⁸

Members of the ecumenical movement and participants of the German resistance were in touch from the very outset of the war, particularly in order to help those who were persecuted by Hitler’s regime, e.g. people of Jewish descent, and, to report to the ecumenical circles as well as to the European Churches about the situation in the German society. Theologians and churchmen who were engaged in the reciprocal relations belonged to the elites of the Church, as e.g. Theophil Wurm, the bishop of Württemberg and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. All of them were earlier involved in the preparation of the Barmen Declaration, the founding act of the Confessional Church and most of them were later signatories to the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.

Yet apart from the often heroic history of the people involved in the resistance against the Nazi-state, the documents reporting their activities reveal a paradoxical attitude of being torn between their Christianity and their national loyalty. The content of letters sent to the members of the ecumenical

⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁷ E. Röhm, J. Thierfelder, *Kirche-Staat-Politik. Zum Öffentlichkeitsauftrag der Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag), 44ff.

⁸ A. Boyens, “Das Stuttgarter Schuldbekennnis von 19 Oktober 1945 – Entstehung und Bedeutung”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 19 (1971) Heft 4: 575.

movement shows the depth of their internal struggle, driven as it was by the awareness of both the guilt of their nation and also their patriotism. In a letter to Visser't Hooft Asmussen asked, "how the nations were to bear the burden of the terrifying guilt resulting from the war", and, he stressed, that, "the question of guilt should not be dealt with as a political problem but as a spiritual one".⁹ Furthermore, the author, while referring to the teachings on the priestly office of the Church, stressed the need for the common begging prayer as well as for the act of common confession of guilt. On the other hand, some utterances used in the text, have stirred many controversies, even among friends within the ecumenical movement. First of all, it has seemed Asmussen would not acknowledge the entire responsibility of Germans for the outbreak of war, and, further, he would expect a reciprocal act of confession of guilt, did by Germans and other nations who took part in the war.

It is striking to examine and to reveal the thinking of those who were involved in the German resistance against Hitler's regime. As mentioned above, they were torn apart by an internal crash of awareness of guilt of their own nation and their feeling of national belonging. The fact, that even members of the Confessional Church, thus, the most fervent adversaries of Hitler, remained in the intrinsic conflict, shows, how effective the propaganda of Nazi-state was, and how much it has influenced their identity. There were many fields where ideology shaped perception of Germans, and one of the most important was constituted by religion and theology. Language used by the then spin-doctors was full of religious and even mystic references and terms. Furthermore, theological thinking in dualistic categories of who is good and who is bad, allowed Nazis to organize the culture and the system of values as they wanted. Such a corrupted hierarchy of values was actually strengthening, as the fall of Hitler's regime became imminent. A millions of soldiers gave their lives on the battlefields and civilians lost their families, and homes. When observing and experiencing war atrocities, Germans regarded themselves as being another victim of war they had broken up. Yet these feelings of collective harm was combined with and intensified by the principal objectives of Nazi-ideology, making society more vulnerable to the demands of the idea of national state and justifying sacrifices for this idea. This has relativized the guilt of the German nation, in particular the parts of society who later protested against the trial of Nazi war criminals.

It is certainly important to take into consideration a gradual process in revealing the enormity of the crimes committed on behalf of the German

⁹ G. Bessier, *Intimately Associated for Many Years. George K. A. Bells and Willem A. Visser't Hooft's Common Life-Work in the Service of the Church Universal – Mirrored in their Correspondance. (Part One 1938-1949)* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2015), 15.

nation. Immediately after the war, as atrocities from the concentration camps were coming to light, circumstances around the discussion about guilt were also changing. Such a process is well reflected in the history of the “Message to the German Churches”. The document was developed in the headquarters of the World Council Churches, just as the ecumenical organization was being established. The content was firstly written by German co-workers of the WCC and then summarized by Willem A. Visser’t Hooft, who was the first general secretary of the Genevan organization. The document addressed following topics: crimes committed on behalf of the entire German nation; genocide of the Jews; extermination of population on massive scale in Eastern and Southern Europe; resistance and protests on a part of churchmen against persecutions; the passive attitude of British Christians, who disregarded the threats of the Nazi-Germany; their poor support of those, who fought against Hitler’s regime; acknowledgement of the true Church of Jesus Christ existing in Germany; support of the German Christians, who would have admitted the guilt of German nation; the future challenge to rebuild the Church, the institution of the family and international life in Europe.¹⁰

The summary of this ecumenical message could be described as a working plan of the WCC in the post-war Europe. In the first decade of its existence the organization focused on the healing the wounds of a destroyed Europe and injured European societies. Moreover, it played an important role in reconciliation between European nations. On the other hand, the circumstances of the writing of the message, as well as discussion on its content have shown, how differently the matter of war and repentance was understood by the European. Britons regarded it as absolutely unacceptable to compare British passivity to Hitler before the war with the enormity of the German war crimes. Consequently, as more and more Nazi crimes were revealed, the document and its summary produced by Visser’t Hooft was criticized and, eventually rejected by ecumenists from the WCC. It is worthwhile to add, that later many historians cast doubt on the unilateral guilt of the German side:

“The defeated Germans, at the mercy of their conquerors in staged trials which afforded the accused little opportunity to place the war in historical perspective, were unable to raise the issue of the war crimes of the victors. This pretence of a collective, unilateral criminality on the part of the Germans afforded the victors a classic, dehumanizing, un-Christian exoneration”.¹¹

The gradual awareness of the need of an entire nation, and also of the Evangelical Church in Germany, to confess their guilt, is the history of self-overcoming, of rejecting the past thinking and of beginning anew., it is thus,

¹⁰ Boyens, *Das Stuttgarter Schuldbekentnis*, *ibid.*, 584ff.

¹¹ C. R. Lang, “Imposed German Guilt: The Stuttgart Declaration of 1945”, *Journal of Historical Review*, 8 (1988), 55-78.

the history of conversion, and, one must emphasize, a collective conversion. These two Christian Churches were the only institutions at the time, that were able to bear the task of rebuilding German society after the moral, cultural and social catastrophe driven by the Nazis. Yet this would be possible only when the guilt was confessed.

III. The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt as a Constitutive Act of New Social Order

“The Council of the Protestant Church in Germany welcomes representatives of the Ecumenical Council of Churches at its meeting in Stuttgart on 18.-19. October 1945.

We are all the more grateful for this visit, as we not only know that we are with our people in a large community of suffering, but also in a solidarity of guilt. With great pain we say: By us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole Church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.

Now a new beginning is to be made in our churches. Based on the Holy Scripture, with complete seriousness directed to the Lord of the Church, they start to cleanse themselves of the influences of beliefs foreign to the faith and to reorganize themselves. We hope to the God of grace and mercy that He will use our churches as His tools and give them license to proclaim His word and to obtain obedience for His will, amongst ourselves and among our whole people.

The fact that we, in this new beginning, find ourselves sincerely connected with the other churches of the ecumenical community fills us with great joy. We hope to God that by the common service of the churches the spirit of violence and revenge, which again today wants to become powerful, will be directed to the whole world, and that the spirit of peace and love will come to predominate, in which alone tortured humanity can find healing.

Thus we ask at a time, in which the whole world needs a new beginning: *Veni creator Spiritus!* (Come, spirit of the creator!)”.¹²

Although content of the confession is very condensed, the text contains rich meanings. When making a theological analysis, it is possible to distinguish at least three important references. Firstly, the declaration refers to the Barmen Declaration, in particular to the words: “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

¹² The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt: <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/niem/StuttgartDeclaration.htm> [Access: 18.05.2016]

sanctification through him”.¹³ Secondly, there is reflected the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an approach that later influenced decisively theological trends in the Evangelical Church in Germany. In the collection of the prison letters, that were posthumously released as a volume “Letter and Papers from Prison” (German title “Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft”), Bonhoeffer bitterly stated that “ Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings¹⁴. In order to be a credible force of the secular epoch, church must reconstruct its structure and functions. Church must also explain to modern societies, what does it mean to live with Christ and how to live “for others”. Thirdly, the words of the Declaration reveal theological belief about a need for realizing the Kingdom of God on earth, here and now, *hic et nunc*, a concept deeply embedded in the liberal theology of the 19th century.

As it was mentioned above, the writing of the was preceding by long discussions. Also, while it developed, the enormity of the crimes committed by the German Nazi state were being revealed. Nevertheless, the authors of the declaration were chastised from two opposite side. One the one hand the document was welcomed by various European Evangelical churches, yet, their members raised doubts over its representativity, thus, they asked whether it is affirmed by all of German society. On the other hand, Germans did not understand the meaning of collective sin and a need for the confession of guilt at the time. The majority of Germans regarded themselves as victims of the Nazis, furthermore, the feeling of defeat and harm were strengthened due to the economic and social calamities. Thus, the doubts raised by the European evangelicals were justified.

Authors of the document met also stumbling blocks within their own church. Deep divisions were revealed again and again, based on the evaluation of the attitude of the German church towards Nazis. Tensions were also reflected in the attitudes of the delegates to the Church Conference that was organized at the turn of August and September 1945 in Treysa, Hessen. The conference was the preparatory meeting for the gathering in Eisenach in 1948, where the Evangelical

¹³ N. Davies, M. Convey, *World Christianity in the Twentieth Century. A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 389.

Church in Germany was officially established. Many conservative churchmen and priests, in particular from the Northern Germany, did not want to consider issue of a guilt of the church, since they did not accept there was a need of such a discussion.¹⁵ Otto Dibelius, the bishop of Berlin and one of the most prominent activists of the Confessional Church, wrote, that many churchmen were opposed to the “account of guilt” of Germans. Furthermore, many worried about the consequences of such a document. In their opinion it could justify a harsher Allies policy against a defeated Germany.¹⁶

Consequently, the preparation of the declaration required great from determination on behalf of the authors, as well as courage, to resist mounting criticism. They eventually expressed doubts about their efforts. In particular, they were struck by the arguments of their adversaries who emphasized their responsibility for the faithful and the importance of belonging to the national community.

Significance of the act of the declaration of guilt is that it consisted of an historical examination of conscience. It paved the way for a new, institutional Church structure, that has helped it to prepare to face new oncoming challenges of secularization.

In spite of its concise form, the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt embraces many primordial factors concerning whether human nature, or principles of social processes, or cultural patterns and human spirituality. It is, first of all, an act that reflected Christian responsibility, wisdom and humility of its authors. Theologians who were gathered in Stuttgart understood what are the main objectives of the church. Even though majority of them were victims of the Nazi state, they became representatives and promoters of a declaration act that had acknowledged a guilt of the nation. They saw their functions on two levels, theological and historical. The first one would have consisted in a propitiative prayer and representation of the German nation before God, the second would have helped German society to accept an awareness of its own corporate sin and to achieve a reconciliation with other European nations.

Signatories of the declaration were aware that their efforts would bear fruit very slowly. They face also uncertainty over church’s involvement in the processes concerning the nation. Deep reflection by theologians resulted in acceptance that the Church might lose its credibility, and consequently, might

¹⁵ C. Vollnhaus, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945-1949: Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit*, München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag 1989, s. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, s. 35.

need a new inception. In their opinion that was the situation of the German Evangelical church. It was clearly highlighted twenty years later, when secularization processes, counterculture of the 1960' and questions concerned history were transforming Western societies. The act of converting of the institution of church helped to make it credible and to prepare it to face the challenge of post-war society and culture.

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