

(Not for publication or citation)

## Public Statements of German Protestant Churches on Peace and Conflict Issues

Bernd Oberdorfer

Strictly spoken, the history of the public commitment of Lutheran Churches in Germany is not very long. Obviously, there have always been church leaders, pastors, theologians who raised their voices with reference to public affairs or intervened when they felt the interests of the church being ignored or endangered. But there was not something like an intrinsic “public mission” of the church acknowledged until (as I will show) the experience of Nazism made evident that it is not enough for the church – to quote a famous word of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – to heal the wounds of the victims of an accident but rather can be necessary to stop the car in advance to prevent the accident from happening. That means: The church’s public commitment could not any longer be restricted to religious education, pastoral care and social welfare work (the so-called *Innere Mission*, “inner mission”), but rather implied the church’s responsibility to publicly comment on crucial questions of the political and social life. This raised, however, many questions. Which are the topics the church is challenged to comment on? Which authority legitimates the church’s statements on ‘worldly’ issues? Are there specific insights the church introduces into the public discourse? Is there any ‘prophetic’ or even ‘supernatural’ knowledge the church can claim to have with reference to issues of the political or social life? Does the Bible or do the Lutheran Confessions give clear and unanimous directives for a “Christian” or “Lutheran” position in the controversial questions of contemporary world? This gives rise to a fundamental critique from a theological perspective: Does the plea for a political engagement of the church not essentially contradict the insights of the so-called “Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms” (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*) which was basic to the Reformers’ social ethics and moreover was a milestone of the history of the modern society we live in? Should, thus, the church not better keep silence in matters as to which it is not entitled to speak?

In my paper, at first, I would like to outline the historical background of the mental change that led the German Lutheran churches to publishing official political statements. Second, I will give a very prominent case study of the political engagement of Protestant churches in German Post-war society, namely the debates on remilitarization, nuclear weapons, “just war” and pacifism in the Cold War era (from the 50ies to the 80ies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Third, I will focus on the challenge the end of the Cold War meant for Protestant peace ethics and show the churches’ reaction to that paradigm change.

### The New Consciousness of the Church’s “Public Mission” after World War II

To understand the mental shift, the experience of Nazism brought to German Protestantism, we have first to throw a glance at the Reformers’ ideas about the legitimacy of political authority and about the church-state-relation which I will do with reference to Confessio Augustana art. 16. Basically, the Reformers confirmed that the government exists according to God’s will and

Christians therefore are morally obliged to obey the commandments and laws of the state and to actively participate in the duties of social life, e.g. by working as judges, civil servants, soldiers, even executioners. Christians are not entitled to abstain from that with reference to the Gospel. The Reformers argued that the state and its institutions are instruments of God’s will to conserve and protect His creation. By means of the state, God cares for the stability of human beings’ earthly life, as well as He, by means of the laws of physics, cares for the stable order of nature. Because of that, the Reformers highly esteemed the authority of the state and were extremely hesitant to ascribe the citizens a right of resistance. It is better to have a bad government than to create chaos by insubordination. Moreover, the Reformers were very sensitive with reference to the political role of the church. They criticized the bishops of being at the same time spiritual and political leaders and claimed that the church was not allowed to use the means of political power: *Sine vi humana, sed verbo*, without using force, only by preaching the Word of God, according to art. 28 of the Augsburg Confession, the church fulfils its task within the world and for the world. This seems to imply that the church has no right to intervene into state, economy or other parts of the secular world, but rather has to respect the intrinsic legitimacy of these spheres. It is not the church which gives these institutions their authority, they gain it from God Himself.

Thus, the Lutheran churches usually restricted themselves to remind the government to fulfill its God-given duties – without prescribing the government what it has to do. This cautiousness was made quite easy to the church because from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of World War I, in most parts of Germany the denominations were strictly separated from each other, and the sovereign of a Lutheran region was Lutheran himself. This came to an end, when in 1918 monarchy was abolished and secular democracy introduced. But although this was a shock for most Lutherans and many of them felt the new government being non-Christian or even anti-Christian (which in general it was not), the Lutheran churches did not officially decline the “Weimar Republic”. In the beginning of the “Third Reich”, however, they neither objected to the Nazi government. They only protested against the state’s attempts to rule the churches by introducing new structures, forcing them to change their order and even their doctrine. This even goes for the “*Bekennende Kirche*” (Confessing Church) which was established by pastors and congregation members of Protestant churches protesting against Nazi neo-pagan ideology and against Church leaders’ ‘appeasement’ policy. Notwithstanding some prominent exceptions like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who very early recognized the criminal character of the “Third Reich” leaders, most of the members of the *Bekennende Kirche* only fought against the Nazi church policy and sought to defend the autonomy of the church, but did not deny the government’s right to restructure the state according to national socialist principles, even if this included, e.g., the exclusion of the Jews from any civil rights. It was a long process of doubts and reflections which led some Protestants to understand that this was not enough. If we study the biographies of the Protestant members of the political anti-Nazi movement, it is moving to see how long it took them to overcome their feeling of being committed to this government, of being religiously obliged to loyalty. This only changed when they learned to see that this government was willing to lead Germany into death and destruction and did not pay any respect to the basic standards of humanity. The Nazi government, they concluded, is not only a bad government, it is no government at all, because it does not fulfill the God-given duty of a government to guarantee order but rather destroys it. So the members of the resistance groups acknowledged that it was their Christian duty to fight against this regime, even by using violence.

Evidently, this was a small minority of Protestant Christians. But after the end of the war, the Protestant Churches were confronted with their own responsibility for the political and moral disaster. They had to learn that it was wrong to remain silent, except when Church matters were at stake. They learned that it actually is part of the church's mission to comment on public affairs, to take public responsibility. But how should that happen? This was a big challenge for the churches, which implied that they had to redefine their position within society and to reinterpret their theological tradition of the church-state-relation. In the following, I would like to give an outline of the debates with reference to a topic which was crucial to Post-war German society and therefore extremely controversial: the question of war and peace.

### The Debates on War and Peace in Post-War Protestantism

Pacifism was not part of Protestant tradition in Germany. On the contrary, pacifism was explicitly rejected as being an egoistic refusal to participate in the defense of the own people, a violation of the fundamental Christian commandment of loving your neighbor. Moreover, war was recognized as a legitimate means of politics, albeit an *ultima ratio*, which was limited by the criteria of the classical doctrine of *bellum iustum*. But to define the state of *bellum iustum* was not regarded as being the church's, but rather the government's business, and the church did neither ascribe itself the right to judge the legitimacy of the government's declaring a "just war".

This deeply changed after World War II, for several reasons, of which I will only name a few:

Firstly, the experience of the devastating war made it evident that war is not any longer (if it has ever been) a 'regular' means of politics, because it destroys the social order instead of protecting or reestablishing it. When in 1948, the First Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Amsterdam stated: "War must not be according to God's will", this meant a radical shift at least for the 'traditional' Protestant Churches.

Secondly, the division of Germany intensified the discussion on war and peace in the German Protestant churches. Many Protestants were horrified by the fact that in case of a war between the West and the East Germans (and German Protestants) would have to fight against each other. This deeply influenced the debates of whether the churches should support the re-establishment of armed forces in Western Germany.

Thirdly, the development of nuclear weapons apparently made the traditional doctrine of "just war" preposterous. Because of the immense destructive potential of these weapons there was no moral justification of their use to be found. For decades, however, the question of whether it could be legitimate to *threaten* with nuclear weapons in order to prevent the respective other side from using them was highly controversial in German Protestant churches and even led to a *status confessionis* debate in the early eighties.

Fourthly, the churches were deeply involved in the discussions on the newly established constitutional right of refusing the compulsory military service out of reasons of conscience. The state accepted more or less only religious arguments to allow young men to do a civil service instead of joining the army. This initiated a very heavy inner-church debate. Some groups argued that the

only authentic Christian testimony in our time and age was to refuse military service. Others claimed that out of an ethics of responsibility, Christians should be willing to defend their country, if necessary, even with weapons in their hands, and thus declared it to be the better Christian way to do the military service.

It is significant that the long and intensive debates resulted in official statements which tried to integrate *both* positions. The *Heidelberg Theses* of 1959 declared military service and civil service to be "complementary" ways of witnessing the peace of Christ in the modern world. Compared to the pre-war anti-pacifism, this was an enormous progress (and, by the way, displayed a new openness to the traditions of the left wing reformation). But what the term "complementary" (which was taken from quantum physics) exactly meant in this case, could not be made entirely clear. In a strict sense, it would mean that the options of pacifism and armed defense are in need of one another, so that the pacifist would have to accept and even to support that there is an army, and, vice versa, the advocate of the army would have to accept that there must be Christians who refuse military service. For both sides, this was a challenge of which it was not clear whether it did not imply an intrinsic self-contradiction. Therefore, there was also a 'weaker' interpretation of "complementarity" which said that both positions at least have to understand and respect that the respective other position is a possible consequence of the common Christian faith although regarding this position to be wrong. Thus, it is not surprising that this formula did not terminate the discussion. Whereas in the fifties and sixties an equivalence of both options was maintained, in the eighties the church debates tended to state an asymmetry between "peace service with or without weapons": The well known 1981 *Friedensdenkschrift* ("peace memorandum") of the EKD said that for Christians the armed defense (including the possession – but not the use – of nuclear weapons) was "still" a possible way of peace keeping which implied that abstaining from weapons might be the clearer witness of Christ's peace in the world.

These debates on peace ethics are interesting in themselves (and I will come back to that), but they are also a significant case study on how German Protestantism realized its 'public mission'. With regard to that, there are at least three aspects which seem important to me:

Firstly, the way the Church participates in the public debates displays a new role of the Church in society. The Church accepts to be part of a pluralistic society and does not claim to be an as it were extraterrestrial community which has nothing to do with 'earthly matters'. Thus, the Church feels obliged to take responsibility in society by actively commenting on public affairs – not in the role of a super-referee, but rather as one NGO among others NGOs.

Secondly, the inner-Church debates on war and peace issues show that the Church is pluralistic in itself. There is not the one and only position of "the" Church in ethical and political questions. On the contrary, it can hardly be ignored that almost every opinion which is uttered in public discourse can also be identified within Church groups. This explains the somewhat restrained character of the official statements of the Church. They are the results of intensive inner-Church debates which try to find a common base of the different positions. Quite often, then, these statements do not sound very exciting and are therefore sometimes criticized of being 'only a compromise' instead of raising the 'prophetic voice' of the people of God. But exactly this is the function of these statements: They are results of an inner-Church communication which aims at

gaining a consensus and, at best case, lead to a deeper mutual understanding and respect of the different church groups. They do not display a 'prophetic attitude', but intend to foster dialogue and mutual 'learning processes'. They aim at integration instead of exclusion – even at the expense of appearing not courageous or powerful enough.

Thirdly, one may ask what precisely these Church statements contribute to the public discourse. In other words: What distinguishes Church statements to war and peace issues from other statements (e.g. from political parties, secular intellectuals, Muslim leaders)? Is there anything *only* the Church can say? The official "Denkschriften" of the EKD claim to take into account two criteria for public Church statements: They must be "schriftgemäß" (in coherence with Holy Scripture) and "sachgemäß" (adequate to the issue at stake). Thus, they must give a concise analysis of the respective problem, using the best available scientific knowledge and at the same time developing from the biblical sources a coherent Christian perspective on the problem. However, the arguments have to be brought forward in a way also non-Christians are able to understand. As to the peace issue, a specific Christian perspective can be identified with regard to at least two points:

The church statements point out a distinction between the definite and eternal peace which only God can give and the earthly peace as a result of human efforts. This does not aim, however, at separating God's peace from earthly peace and declaring human efforts unnecessary. On the contrary, the prevalence of God's peace constitutes an asymmetry between peace and war on earth: undoubtedly, the striving for peace has to be given preference to the option of violence. God's peace as it were 'blesses' any peace efforts. But it is part of this 'blessing' that in its light all human efforts can be recognized as *limited* efforts. We cannot and therefore need not create universal peace.

The church statements also insist that peace is much more than the absence of war. Based on the biblical tradition of *shalom*, they show that peace includes *justice* with reference to any social sphere: economical justice, gender justice, generation and health care justice, even ecological justice. The church statements emphasize the interdependency of all these aspects. They draw the attention to the fact that the task of overcoming military conflicts always implies the challenge to overcome violence within society as well as economical injustice between the 'developed' and the 'less developed' world regions. This mirrors the specific character of the Christian church in which it does not matter any longer to be "jewish or pagan, slave or free, male or female, because they are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

Of course, Church statements on political and social issues have to be adequate to the concrete question at stake and thus to take into consideration the specific circumstances of the respective time and age. In other words: They are not intended to be for eternity, but have their 'momentum'. If the historical conditions change, the Church position has to be revised, too. As to the war and peace issue, the fall of the Wall in 1989 meant a radical change. Finishing my paper, I would like to give a very short outline of how the German Protestant churches reacted to that change.

### New Challenges for Protestant Peace Ethics after the End of 'Cold War'

In the eighties, there was a consensus in German Protestantism that the traditional doctrine of "just war" (*bellum iustum*) could not be maintained any longer. Wolfgang Huber and Hans-Richard Reuter introduced the concept of "just peace" in order to emphasize the fundamental priority of peace keeping and non-violent conflict management. This emphasis was even intensified when the western and the eastern churches reunited after the German state reunification, because in the East German churches, in socialist times pacifism was a strong 'identity marker' which allowed to keep distance to the regime. However, the hope that the international community would develop in a more peaceful way after the end of 'Cold War' was thoroughly proofed wrong. New conflicts, even new kinds of conflicts arose, of which I only name the Yugoslavia conflict (which highlighted anew the dimension of ethnic tensions), the military actions in Iraq and the new terrorism, starting with "9/11". The churches had to ask themselves whether it was still sufficient to only state an absolute priority of war prevention and establishing an international order of justice to any military measures of stopping violence without giving answers to what should be done in cases of emergency. A very controversial inner-church debate was caused by the Kosovo conflict: Should the international community be given the right of armed "human intervention" if the existence of ethnic groups is in danger? In this debate, a lot of aspects played a crucial role: Was the military intervention an adequate measure to help the threatened group or would it even make their situation worse? Who was to legitimize the intervention? Only the UN? Or – in case the UN Security Council would not come to a unanimous decision – also the NATO? Or even ad-hoc-alliances as it was the case, then, in the second Iraq war? Or should the churches, on the contrary, continue to insist in strictly fostering non-violent peace politics? Interestingly enough, whereas many German church leaders were willing to support military intervention in Kosovo (although some of them regretted this afterwards), they were very hesitant to do that in the second Iraq conflict, particularly because this intervention did not appear to aiming at averting an imminent human catastrophe and, moreover, evidently was not without alternative. The debates, however, displayed an urgent need of a more fundamental reflection on the principles of Protestant Peace Ethics in the horizon of the new challenges. Therefore, in 2007, the EKD published a new "Friedensdenkschrift" (*peace memorandum*) which tried to articulate a new consensus of German Protestantism with regard to peace and conflict issues and, at the same time, to contribute profound arguments to the public discourse in German society. It is neither possible nor necessary to give a full report of the content of this memorandum. It might be sufficient to spotlight firstly the memorandum's emphasis on an international order based on supranational institutions like the UN and supranational law which the EKD regards to be the best prevention of violent conflicts and secondly the study's remarks on the new relevance of religions for the emergence as well as the solution of conflicts.

To conclude: This presentation was supposed to give you an example of how a pluralistic Church comes to term with controversial ethical issues and at the same time contributes to public debates within a pluralistic society. Obviously, this is only one 'role model' for the 'public mission' of the Church which cannot be transferred without qualification to other cultural contexts. But in the German context, it helped the Protestant churches to play an active role in society instead of remaining in the 'splendid isolation' of abstaining from responsibility.