EJT (2014) 23:2, 99–103 0960–2720

Editorial
World War One: Personal Reflections, Wider Issues and Some Tasks Ahead for European Theology

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A hundred years ago, in August 1914, the 'Great War' started. Naïvely meant to end war or all wars (so H.G. Wells in 1914), it was not the end of war, but one of the biggest carnages that the world has seen and the beginning of several wars in Europe and far beyond. It was the end of Europe as it had developed over centuries and the end of its credibility and leading role in the world.

Neither I, nor anybody else I know of, thought of producing a collection of essays to remember the occasion. A group like the *Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians* would have been predestined to reflect on the occasion, its theological repercussions and their present day significance. At the moment, only a few publications from a Christian perspective have appeared. A British example is the *World War 1 Bible*, published by the Bible Society of Britain,[1] itself an interesting project.[2] (It is unthinkable that the *Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft* would produce such a volume, the criticism *in* Germany would be massive.)

It would be easy and perhaps appropriate for a journal of theology to base a few reflections on the beginning of WWI on the basis of the standard treatments.[3] I have chosen a different route by reflecting on the traces of WWI in my own life, born some fifty years after this war (although I will refer to some of the wider theological discussions raised by WWI in the notes). I do not claim that this is representative in any sense. Obviously this is a German perspective.

My grandfather on my mother's side fought in the war as a young man (for whatever reason, I know nothing of his experiences). My great grandfather on my father's side served as a captain with his Prussian regiment on the German Eastern front until 1919. His personal 'highlight' must have been the battle of Tannenberg. An oil-painting of him in his uniform from 1917 hangs in my lounge. (Few Germans have that kind of thing at home and are willing to display it. No worries, this is not a sign of German militarism!). Both men survived the war, but must have been different men ever after. Presumably they never spoke much about it. Because they had opted for Germany in a referendum after the war, my father's family had to leave their home in Posen, when the region which had been part of the *Deutsche Reich* became Polish after the war.

As a schoolboy I read Erich Maria Remarque's (1898–1970) *Im Westen nichts Neues* from the year 1928. Remarque was personally involved as a wounded soldier and the book is a sobering account, which had and has every potential to turn its readers into pacifists. On the day when a wounded friend of the novel's main character, Paul Bäumer, dies on his shoulders as Bäumer carries him to safety, the official war report states that there was 'nothing new' to report from the German Western frontline. During a holiday in France one summer, my parents stopped for a day at the memorial sites around Verdun to show us Fort Douaumont, the Ossuary, the 'Bayonets Trench' and endless graves upon graves. Perhaps for this reason, in my own perception, WWI was mainly a French-German event.

When I grew up, one day my great grandfather's war medals were stolen when my grandfather's house was burgled. They probably ended up at some flea market – *sic transit Gloria mundi* or perhaps *Germaniae*! Curiously and perhaps revealing, the medals were not on display in the house, but kept in a safe! In some parts of Europe, war medals were (and are) not to be worn in public!

In 1984, when remembering 70 years of the beginning of WWI in France, there was the moving gesture when the French president and the German chancellor were standing next to each other before the Ossuary of Verdun during a memorial ceremony (itself a strong sign). François Mitterand stretched out his hand to hold Helmut Kohl's hand during a melancholic trumpet tune. There are moments that bond together humans of all kinds.[4]

As a student of theology, I learned in church history class that on October 4th 1914, both Adolf Schlatter and Adolf von Harnack signed the *Manifest der 93*: *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*. This document refuted the arguments of the opponents of the war and called the German people to solidarity as they guard the highest goods of humanity (together with their enemies in the war).[5] The document was surpassed in the same month by the *Erklärung der Hochschullehrer des Deutschen Reiches*, which was signed by most German professors of theology.[6] I was shocked. As an evangelical student I was not surprised that Harnack, the champion of liberalism, had signed; but the signature of Schlatter, a scholar whom German evangelicals gladly adopted as a predecessor, was deeply worrying.[7] How could they have blended their faith, the universal Church of Jews and Gentiles for which they stood, with the nationalist, martial cause? For the student in his early twenties it was clear that a Schlatter should have known better! Schlatter's reflections on the death of his son in the war in 1914 are as moving as they are difficult to understand. Apparently at the beginning of the war, few Christians spoke out against it openly. 'Gott mit uns' was written on the belt buckles of the German soldiers and many will have been convinced of this, at least initially. Obviously divine support and legitimatisation were also claimed by the British, the French, etc. … It took the hundred of thousands dying in atrocious circumstances, and endless numbers of maimed and wounded men, to realise that God was not with us or anybody else – at least not in the sense in which he was claimed by all.

During my years as a postgraduate student in Aberdeen, I saw some striking war memorials. I remember remote places on the Shetland Islands, where young men were remembered who had died in the trenches along the rivers Somme and Marne in France. What on earth were they doing there? I also remember the impressive reconstruction of trench warfare, the suffering caused by German and other troops and the challenges and bravery of the British medical corps in the Florence Nightingale Museum in London.[8]

Each day when I take my son to school, we pass the local war memorial.[9] The names of more than forty men of the village who died in WWI are still there. I cannot tell who still remembers them. (Few other dead are remembered publicly for such a long time.) It is daunting to see many of the same last names on the panel which lists those who died in the war that started a mere 25 years after WWI and which was intimately linked to the first war.

A further encounter with WWI came with the 2005 anti-war movie *Merry Christmas*, *Joyeux Noël*, *Frohe Weihnachten*, a British, French and German co-production which is based on true accounts of Christmas 1914, when ordinary soldiers of the warring nations fraternised with each other in the trenches.[10] The hero of this film is a Scottish priest who voluntarily accompanies the men of his village to war. He later reads a mass in the no man's land between the trenches for Scottish, French and German troops, nurses wounded British soldiers and then is dismissed by his unsympathetic, martial bishop who is shown motivating young soldiers in a vitriolic tirade of hatred for their turn in the trenches. The contrast between the two clergymen could not have been greater. Rarely is a Christian minister portrayed as sympathetic as the Scottish country priest. It is comforting to know that there were people like him on all sides.

Recently I came across the WWI (and WWII) memorial in the Jesuit church in Heidelberg. Like many other such memorials, it mixes memory of the war dead and Christian motives (understandable in a church) in an uncomfortable manner. At the top of the monument, under the empty cross, is a fine stone sculpture of the *Pietà*, Mary grieving over her dead son Jesus in her lap.[11] Below are the words *Den Toten der beiden großen Kriege* and the words of Psalm 126:5-6 are written in golden letters: 'May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.' The hermeneutic of this post-war composition is ambiguous. Is the cross of Jesus at the top the clue to understanding? Does the monument claim that all this happened under the cross of Jesus? Is it, at best, an acknowledgement of guilt and need of forgiveness? Is there a perceived parallel in sacrifice? Who has sown in tears? Mary? The dead soldiers? Their

mothers? Was there any 'reaping' other than by Death? Who came home in joy and for how long in view of the trauma they had experienced? Is it a mere pious wish or an attempt to make some spiritual sense of the unfathomable? Can the verses be applied in this way?

The long term consequences of WWI are still with many of us – not only through memorials and movies. How different would the world be today if the millions of mainly young men who died from all the nations involved, had lived and made their contributions to their societies? How different would it have been for their children and grandchildren, had these men, but also their relatives at home, not been traumatised and unable to speak of their horrendous experiences?

In view of these encounters with WWI and the nations involved (and obviously the even more prominent traces of WWII), my encounters with Christians and other people from other countries have been crucial and tremendously enriching experiences. There is no alternative to meeting real people from abroad. The biannual conferences of the *Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians* and the meetings of its Executive Committee have been part of this experience. As a young student I was warmly received in this Fellowship and could meet evangelicals from all over Europe; some of them became friends, some even role models of evangelical scholarship and personal integrity.

Back to Schlatter. I am more lenient with the old man than I was twenty-five years ago. I know more of his personal circumstances at the time. I now know Schlatter's signature was not his only response to the war. In his sermon on 9th August 1914 in the Tübinger Stiftskirche, Schlatter reminded the audience that they were not only placed in their own nation, but 'auch in den noch größeren Zusammenhang der Gemeinde Jesu …, die durch alle Länder geht'.[12] How both positions relate to each other remains unclear. We do not know how much independent information was available to Schlatter. In addition, the discussion of the complex political situation in summer 1914 and of the various failures and misunderstandings that eventually led to the war and the question of responsibility has moved on. With all that remains questionable, Schlatter, Swiss by origin, had identified with the people among whom he lived and ministered. What issues does Schlatter's and Harnack's response and that of many other theologians in Germany and in the other warring nations (explicable within their situation) raise regarding Christians and their stance towards their countries and their activities and propaganda?[13] What does it mean for Christians to be at the same time part of the world wide body of Christ, of a larger *Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians*, and of a particular family, municipality, region and country? Sometimes identification with the former is easier than with the latter. Obviously a war intensifies such tensions! At times it is easier to identify with the universal Church than with a particular congregation or denomination.

Some of the theological lessons were perhaps easier to learn for the nations that lost WWI than for the victors – if real and lasting 'winners' there were! But the following three decades showed that many, most strikingly the *Deutsche Christen*, had not learnt the lesson and followed the old pattern.[14]

At times I am bewildered at the naïve identification of some Christians with their national causes. Others are so heavenly minded that they appear to be detached from the society in which they live. Have we found answers to some of the questions raised by this war? What lessons were there to learn and must be reformulated and learnt again? Have we developed a proper 'theology of nationhood' or do we leave it to others to address this issue? But perhaps these reflections are a typical German response, strongly influenced by the *Third Reich* and its aftermath.[15]

What else has the war taught us? It would be interesting to start a dialogue among evangelical Christians on these issues.[16] What other journal than the *European Journal of Theology* would be equipped to host such a discussion? As a member of the editorial board of this journal, I would encourage such a discussion.

If my great grandfather's portrait in the lounge helps to keep such questions awake and to remind me of the lessons to learn, then a relative in uniform on the wall is not a burden.

Endnotes

1 See www.worldwar1bible.com [accessed 10-05-14].

2 Publications in German are M. Lätzel, *Die Katholische Kirche im Ersten Weltkrieg zwischen Nationalismus und Friedenswillen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2014); B. Cabanes & A. Duménil (eds), *Der Erste Weltkrieg: eine europäische Katastrophe* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 2013); N. Ferguson, *Der falsche Krieg: der Erste Weltkrieg und das 20. Jahrhundert* (München: Pantheon, 2013); J.

Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (München: Beck, 2014); E. Piper, *Nacht über Europa: Kulturgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2013); M. Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie: 1914 – 1918* (Wien: Böhlau, 2013); B. Tuchman, *August 1914* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2013).

3 For instance J. Leonhard, 'Weltkrieg, Erster I. Kirchengeschichtlich', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 8 (2005) 1442–1445.

4 See the reflections by the renowned journalist and eyewitness Ulrich Wickert on http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/kohl-und-mitterrand-in-verdun-warum-reichten-sie-sich-die-hand-1857470.html [accessed 10-05-14]. Wickert reports: 'Da stehen an diesem Samstagnachmittag der Franzose, der im Zweiten Weltkrieg kämpfte, und der Deutsche, der seinen älteren Bruder in diesem Krieg verlor, inmitten von Kreuzen vor dem Gebeinhaus. Höhepunkt ist ihr stummes Verweilen vor dem mit Fahnen beider Länder bedecktem Sarg. Es ist kalt. Sie tragen Wintermäntel. Neben dem Sarg hängt auf kurzen Lattenständern jeweils ein Kranz. Und in die Stille hinein ertönt der langgezogene Ton der Trompete. Wer jetzt hier steht, den bedrückt allein das Wissen um den Wahnsinn der Menschen, die sich hier gemordet haben. Meist junge Männer um die zwanzig. Ganze Dörfer sind in Frankreich ausgestorben, weil die Mädchen wegzogen, nachdem die Männer nicht zurückkamen. Mit jedem Ton, den die Trompete zur Klage formt, steigt das Gefühl der Hilflosigkeit. Und der Einsamkeit. Jeder schaut in sich hinein. Auch ich achtete auf den Trompeter und habe die Bewegung der Hände zueinander nicht gesehen. Später fragte ich François Mitterrand, wer von beiden die symbolische Geste initiiert habe. Mitterrand antwortete, er habe plötzlich das Bedürfnis gespürt, aus seiner Vereinsamung herauszutreten und mit einer Geste Helmut Kohl zu erreichen. Da habe er seine Hand ausgestreckt, und Kohl habe sie ergriffen. Helmut Kohl hat mir dies später bestätigt. Der deutsche Kanzler war erleichtert über die Geste Mitterrands. Mitterrand, der seine Gefühle stets für sich bewahrte, blickte trotz seiner Gebärde weiter in sich hinein, während Helmut Kohl in diesem beklemmenden Augenblick erleichtert zu dem Franzosen hinüberschaut, dankbar für diesen scheinbar kleinen Ausdruck von Menschlichkeit.'

5 For the text see http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_der_93 [accessed 10-05-14].

6 F.W. Graf, 'Nationalismus IV. Stellung der Kirchen 1. Europa', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 5 (2003) (71–74) 72 notes that this was not merely a German phenomenon: 'Im 1. Weltkrieg waren die Theologen aller kriegführenden Nationen mit großer Mehrheit bereit, trotz des von vielen bekundeten übernationalen, universalistischen Charakters des christlichen Glaubens das bedingungslose Eintreten für die jeweils als gerecht erklärte Sache der eigenen Nation zur „heiligen Pflicht" zu erklären. Der „Kulturkrieg" um konkurrierende Freiheitsideen bewirkte auf allen Seiten auch eine aggressiv nationalistische Fundamentalpolitisierung von theologischem Diskurs und kirchlicher Verkündigung. ... In den einstigen Feindstaaten, vor allem in Deutschland und in Frankreich, blieben die kirchlichen Diskurse aber weiter stark nationalistischen Leitvorstellungen verpflichtet.'

7 For Schlatter's response to the war see Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter, Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996) 522-569. Surprisingly, Neuer does not mention the *Manifest*.

8 See www.florence-nightingale.co.uk [accessed 10-05-14].

9 For a survey and evaluation of German war memorials see M. Lurz, 'Kriegerdenkmäler', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 20 (1990) 55-61.

10 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyeux_Noël [accessed 10-05-14].

11 Lurz, 'Kriegerdenkmäler', 58.33–37 notes: 'Bei katholischen Stiftungen kam daher häufig die Pietà vor. Es gab sie in allen Varianten von einer christlichen bis zu einer national-profanen, von der zeitlosen Kleidung des Urtyps bis zur Uniform des Ersten Weltkriegs. Dabei fanden sich die trauernden Angehörigen – speziell Frau oder Mutter – auf dem Denkmal wieder, mit dessen Geschehen sie sich als Betrachter identifizierten. ... Die katholische Kirche erkannte in der Weimarer Republik ihre Chance darin, den Hinterbliebenen Stütze und Trost in ihrer Trauer zu bieten. Deutlicher als bei den Protestanten stand in katholischen Denkmälern die christliche Sinngebung im Vordergrund. Im Nachhinein betrachtet, versagten beide Kirchen vor der Aufgabe, ein Gegengewicht zum Nationalismus und Revanchismus der Kriegervereine und Traditionsverbände zu bieten'. Later, Lurz notes: 'Wo angesichts der Überhöhung des Krieges dessen Verständnis als Folge der Sünde zurücktrat, konnte sich verschärft die Theodizeefrage stellen, die allerdings explizit auf Denkmälern nie auftauchte, sondern mit dem Hinweis auf den Opfertod Christi beantwortet wurde. Trost spendete der Gedanke an die Auferstehung und das Jüngste Gericht' (59.10–15). In view of Lurz's summary, the analogy between the soldiers' death and the violent death of Jesus of the Heidelberg type war memorial, is noteworthy: 'Der Überblick über die Geschichte der Kriegerdenkmäler zeigt, dass vom Unterschied zwischen Kriegs- und natürlichem Tod immer wieder abgelenkt wurde; von der Tatsache nämlich, dass der Kriegstod von Menschenhand herbeigeführt wird und sich infolgedessen die Frage

nach der Berechtigung des Tötens stellt. Statt den Blick auf die damit verbundenen Probleme christlicher Ethik zu lenken, gingen die Kirchen eine mehr oder weniger enge Symbiose mit den säkularen und nationalen Interessen ein' (60.23–28).

12 Neuer, *Schlatter*, 525. On strong loyalty with the national cause as a common Christian response to the war, by no means limited to Germans, see Leonhard, 'Weltkrieg'.

13 Graf, 'Nationalismus', 73 notes: ‚In den Kirchen der westlichen Hemisphäre galt der Nationalismus nach dem Ende des 2. Weltkriegs als Ausdruck kollektiver Sünde. Beeinflusst von der Sozialethik der nordamerikanischen Protestantismen wurde in der Genfer Ökumene programmatisch der transnationale Charakter des Christentums betont. Die Nationaltheologien des 19. Jh. und die theologische Verstärkung der Radikalnationalismen des frühen 20. Jh. wurden als theologisch illegitim kritisiert. ... Trotz der verbreiteten Nationalismuskritik blieben die systematischen Probleme der Verhältnisbestimmung von Glaubensgewissheit und moralischer Bindung an die eigene Nation in allen europäischen Kirchen diskussionsbestimmend. ... In den Kirchen der Siegerstaaten des 2. Weltkrieges fiel die kritische Revision älterer religiöser Nationalismen deshalb zurückhaltender als in Deutschland aus, und auch in den kleineren, von NS-Deutschland besetzten europäischen Ländern blieben in der *memoria* der erlittenen Leiden traditionelle Synthesen von Volk, Nation und Christlichkeit stark erhalten.'

14 See M. Honecker, 'Volk 4. Die Auseinandersetzung der deutschen evangelischen Theologie mit der völkischen Bewegung und dem Volksgedanken', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 35 (2003) 199-204.

15 However, F.W. Graf, 'Völkische Theologie', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 8 (2005) 1169 notes: 'Die im theologischen Diskurs insbesondere Deutschlands seit 1945 vertretene Auffassung, dass sich Entstehung und Faszination von völkischer Theologie im deutschen Sprachraum einem nationalspezifischen theologisch-ideologischen Sonderweg verdankten, wird durch die ungebrochene Attraktivität von volksbezogenen Befreiungstheologien vor allem in zahlreichen Ländern der Dritten Welt, aber auch in einigen vom orthodoxen Christentum geprägten Gesellschaften im östlichen Europa vielfältig dementiert.'

16 A point of departure might be M. Honecker, 'Volk 5. Sozialethische Überlegungen', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 35 (2003) 205-207.

With this issue ends the work of Dr James Eglinton as review editor. The new review editor is Dr Joel White of the Freie Theologische Hochschule Giessen, Germany, email address white@fthgiessen.de.

Diese Ausgabe ist die letzte, für die Dr James Eglinton Rezensionsbeauftragter war. Der neue Rezensionsbeauftragter ist Dr Joel White, Freie Theologische Hochschule Giessen, Deutschland, white@fthgiessen.de.