

## REVIEW

Björn Krondörfer, Katharina von Kellenbach, Norbert Reck, *Mit Blick auf die Täter. Fragen an die deutsche Theologie nach 1945* [*Facing the Perpetrators: Questions for German Theology after 1945*]

(Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 317 pp.

Reviewed by Hanspeter Heinz, Universität Augsburg

The question, "Where was God?" was central to Pope Benedict XVI's theological reflections of during his visit to Auschwitz. A focus on the experience of the victims first provoked Jewish, and then Christian scholars too, to pose radical questions about God. This violent shaking up of presumptions about an almighty, loving God led to the first phase of the "Theology after Auschwitz" (Moltmann, Sölle, Metz). The counterquestion, first asked ten years ago, was "Where was the Church? How were Christians complicit in Auschwitz through words, actions or lack of awareness?" This inaugurated the second phase of the "Theology after Auschwitz," which focused on the perpetrators, almost all of whom were baptized. This ethical question (which the Pope did not mention), calls for deeper reflection about guilt and sin, and also for an active and energetic change in the Church. The confession of universal guilt made publicly by Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's in 2000 to purify the historical conscience of the Church needs to be concretized by naming the persons responsible and by clearly voicing an opinion about their words, deeds, and failures. Only in this way, according to this volume's authors, can the burden of history be dealt with, so that it will not be like a fire smouldering under the carpet, continuing to pollute the air and suffocating any effective change.

This volume is the first to document the questionable reflections of 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologians on "The Church and the Nazism" and the first to make public the Church's questionable pastoral care of the Nazi criminals. In order to establish the facts, the extensive documentation was sorted through and critically analyzed. Krondörfer, a Protestant scholar, examines here autobiographies of 40 Protestant theologians that were published years or decades after the war but incorporated no sign of self-criticism. Reck, a Catholic theologian, employs empirical sociological methods to study eight exemplary but noteworthy Catholic authors; but with the help of more recent theologians, he also expresses a normative view about some of these authors' publications. Employing empirical and normative methods, von Kellenbach, a Protestant theologian, examines the pastoral care offered by the Protestant Church (primarily) for the reconciliation of the perpetrators with God. The authors are all of the generation born after 1960, that which was shaped by the new politics towards Eastern Europe, by the first signs of reconciliation with Poland, as well as by the influence of the film "Holocaust." They were the first who paid attention to the suffering of the victims.

The authors notice that only a very few of the generation of theologians who lived as adults under Hitler reflected after the war on their actions and failures in a self-critical way – in contrast to a number of historians during the fifties (p. 139, n. 110). More often, they presented themselves as victims: of the lost wars, of propaganda and Nazi-terror, of the bombing and the victors' occupation. Apologetically, they asked for understanding, claiming that they were not heroes but rather could not have acted otherwise. Krondörfer calls this suppression of primary guilt the secondary guilt. In his analysis, Reck also works out a theological reason. Those men (Rahner, Guardini et al.) considered the primary sin of their generation to be the tyranny of

modernity that placed humans over God, and not its anti-Semitism or nationalism. They called for a breaking away from atheistic modernity and a return to the Christian faith. This one-sided ascription of guilt only regarding God displaced any acknowledgement of guilt regarding human suffering (p. 192f.).

On the other hand, the Hitler Youth generation (Ratzinger, Metz, et al.) strongly “condemned, yet neglected a closer scrutiny” of the Nazi era (p. 209). But because they loyally sought to protect their own relatives and theology instructors and only declared “others” as responsible, the concrete guilt of the perpetrators remained unexamined and “it was consigned to the collective sense of shame”(p. 209).

Reck, in his final remarks, establishes that certain representatives of the present generation of theologians are the first to break unequivocally with the silence of the perpetrators. The work has not yet been done. Therefore, it is also valid for Christian theology that one who wants to accept responsibility within one’s own tradition must be prepared to call what is wrong wrong, and what is evil evil, identifying the perpetrators and their deeds by name (p. 221). Just as the unprocessed trauma of the victims is transmitted to subsequent generations, so too their unprocessed guilt continues to affect history, finding expression for most Germans even today in a strong sense of guilt instead of their being freed for conversion towards a new future.

Even more shocking than these errors of theology is von Kellenbach’s contribution, “The Practice of Reconciliation,” about the great missionary efforts to reintegrate the perpetrators into their Church, profession and society. The Nazi criminals condemned to death received Holy Communion without their manifesting any sign of confession or regret (with the single exception of Göring [p. 266]). In peace with their consciences and God, they were to go bravely to the gallows. Such pastoral, charitable and legal aid – even help in escaping – was also offered to inmates of prisons and internment camps. Nervously, at hour zero, the churches sought to close the door on the Nazi era and to begin anew in a Christian era. But all this happened at the price of forging solidarity with the victims (Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, communists).

Another stumbling block: post-war theologians, “warning about Old Testament vengeance” (p. 282), asserted that confessions of guilt should be addressed only to God, not to the victim. Instead, they urged Christian forgiveness. Yet mercy without justice, without just punishment, injures anew the dignity of the victims (p. 271). Von Kellenbach joins the American philosophers Claudia Card and Susan Neimann in rejecting the ethic of Kant who measures guilt only according to the will of the perpetrator and not according to the atrocities that the victims had to suffer (pp. 270-273). She rightly says this “practice of reconciliation” is the lowest point in the churches’ experience and teaching of atonement.

This book is an easily read and thoroughly researched documentation of the mistakes of German theologians and Church leaders during and after the Nazi period. Beyond this, these theological reflections are an invitation today finally to process guilt and sorrow, so that they will no longer influence the history of the descendants of the perpetrators and victims. This study is to be recommended not only to theologians, but also to teachers of religion and history, and not only in Germany. This phenomenon of victim mentality deludes all groups, institutions and nations who were in their own ways entangled in the horrors of World War II.

Translation: Felicitas Samtleben, Stadtbergen; Ruth Langer, SCJR