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George Faithful

**Inverting the Eagle to Embrace the Star of David:
The Nationalist Roots of German Christian Zionism**

It is no secret that Christian Zionism in the U.S. has long been paired with American patriotism. Since at least as far back as William Blackstone's 1891 "Memorial," American Christian Zionists have proclaimed that their support of a Jewish homeland as bolstering their own country's perceived privileged relationship with God. Less obvious is the link between German nationalism and Christian Zionism in that country in the period following World War II. Whereas American Christian Zionism has been marked by militarism and triumphalism, the German variant has been understandably penitential in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, this paper will demonstrate that nationalist understandings of national identity provided a foundation for Christian Zionism in Germany, as exemplified by the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary.

The Protestant religious order was originally led by Klara Schlink, also known as Mother Basilea, one of two founding mothers, and has been known as the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary since the late 1960s. Schlink's belief in collective national guilt and collective national destiny shaped the sisterhood's vision. While there were Christian Zionists in Germany prior to the Holocaust, these were isolated individuals who tended to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Jews and to be more concerned with their conversion to Christianity than with the establishment of a Jewish state. The Ecumenical Sisters of Mary, on the other hand, promoted the establishment of the State of Israel as a necessity and rejected all negative stereotypes about Jews. Until they marginalized themselves from the mainstream of German Protestant Church life in the late 1960s, their call for national repentance yielded a significant number of their followers and supporters, perhaps the earliest instance in Germany of anything constituting a Christian Zionist movement.

Basilea Schlink crafted a distinctive form of Christian Zionism on the basis of her sorrow over the Holocaust and her reading of the Hebrew Bible, both of which shaped her understanding of the German *Volk* (people). Schlink sought to repent for her nation's immediate past and to overturn anti-Semitism; and in so doing she crafted an anti-German nationalism, a counter-ideology to the main currents of Nazism. Rather than develop a worldview free from nations and nationalism, she deferred to the national interests of Israel and the Jewish people. In short, Schlink and the Ecumenical Sisters of Mary were repentant Gentile Germans in support of the Jewish nation, driven by the idea that Germans were collectively guilty for the Holocaust.

The Preceding Generation of Christian Zionists in Germany

There were Christian Zionists in Germany prior to the Holocaust. These individuals tended to perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes, though one should note that this is consistent with Christian Zionism in other settings during that era. Among these few examples are some of Schlink's mentors.

During her late 20s in the 1920s, Schlink attended and subsequently briefly taught at a small women's Bible College for prospective missionaries near Berlin. Some of her teachers were influenced by Anglo-American dispensationalism, mixed with the indigenous millennialism circulating in post-World War I Europe. Jeanne Wasserzug was one of Schlink's most important mentors. Part of a family of Jewish heritage with the utmost dedication to the missionary expansion of the Church, especially in the Middle East, Jeanne helped Schlink consider the ways in which the Jewish people might play a special role in salvation history. Also on the faculty of the *Bibelhaus Malche*, Gertrud Traeder translated the Scofield Reference Bible's commentary into German. In the English-speaking world, Scofield's work popularized dispensationalism by advancing a literal and apocalyptic approach to scripture, emphasizing the promises that God had yet to fulfill for the

Jewish people and advocating a premillennial eschatology, i.e., the peaceful reign of Christ on earth for one thousand years prior to Armageddon.

As Schlink would later insist, Gertrud Traeder taught that the Jews were God's chosen people and that his promises for them in the Hebrew Bible were still valid. She married Jeanne Wasserzug's brother Saturnin, who had served as a missionary in the Middle East and with whom she founded a Bible school in Switzerland. In 1934, she published a slender volume, in which she proclaimed that "the people of Israel is the greatest miracle in world history" and that only the Bible could explain why it is so different from all other peoples. For Traeder as for Schlink, the Jewish people was distinct and miraculous, and she lamented that Jews would want to call themselves "Englishmen, Germans, and Americans first, and then Jews." She asserted that God's promise of the land of Israel-Palestine was an eternal promise for the Jewish people and that the Jews would soon return there, so that Christ could return and reign in Jerusalem for a millennium.

Whatever the similarities Traeder shared with Schlink, there were unambiguous differences. Like Schlink, Traeder described God's relationship with the people of Israel as one of enduring love. However, in distinction to Schlink, Traeder emphasized the ways that God would cause Jews to suffer in order to correct them. Writing in a period of waxing anti-Semitism, Traeder insisted that before the Jews repented and turned to Christ, they would align themselves with the anti-Christ, he would betray them, and then they would suffer greatly. The pre-Holocaust context of the above statements provides some explanation for how Traeder could both love and malign the Jewish people. This remains a marked difference from Schlink, whose estimation of the Jews was always positive, although for both Traeder and Schlink "the Jews" were a theological construct.

The spiritual father of Schlink's sisterhood during its 1947 founding, Methodist pastor Paul Riedinger had a well-developed premillennial theology of Israel. In 1916, he had published a book to

reveal the true relationship between World War I and the Jewish people in light of the Bible. He proclaimed that Jews were the most blessed and the only chosen nation. The war had revealed the desperate needs of the Jewish people; now, preached Riedinger, was time for the people of Israel, the people on which the glory of God on earth depended, to shine. Like Schlink, he preferred to refer to the Jews as “the people of Israel” (*das Volk Israel*). Like Schlink after him, Riedinger proclaimed the promises that Israel had been given: land, blessing, and salvation for itself and, through it, for the other nations.

Riedinger insisted that the Jewish people needed to recognize its guilt before it could receive the fullness of God’s blessings, including the possession of the Promised Land. In particular, he accused Jews of greed and exerting a corrupting influence on the press, illustrating how he perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes. The history of Israel showed both that God was faithful and that those who turned away from him would suffer. Whatever might befall the Jews at God’s hand was what God had decided they deserved as commensurate with their sins. In his apocalyptic vision of the Jewish people, Riedinger expected a spiritual revival to precede Israel’s political revival as a nation.

Schlink’s Biblical Literalism

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Schlink’s Christian Zionism was distinct from that of her German predecessors in her rejection of all anti-Semitic overtones. She paired this with her articulation of collective German guilt, echoing some of her contemporaries, such as the signers of the 1945 Stuttgart Confession of Guilt and the 1947 Darmstadt Statement, although both of these documents concerned Germans’ guilt in World War II and made no reference to Jews or to the Holocaust. Schlink’s explicit reason for embracing collective guilt was her reading of the Hebrew

Bible. Her interpretation affirmed the collective identity of each people. She looked to prophets who preached that a particular people had sinned and that the people collectively needed to repent.

According to Schlink, each nation was called to follow the one true God. Any given nation could be righteous and faithful to God; or it could sin and accrue deep guilt, in which case it needed to repent, lest it face God's judgment, as in the case of the biblical people of Israel. For the Gentiles, the city-state of Nineveh provided a paradigm. The prophet Jonah had called its people to repent or suffer the wrath of God; they complied and received God's blessing. Other nations could likewise risk God's wrath, should they stray from him and fail to repent. At least since 1945, in the prelude to their order's founding, the future members of the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary had been praying for their people to repent like the people of Nineveh. In 1949, Schlink began to publicize the fact that Germany faced God's judgment. God was involved in human history. Each nation had a spiritual responsibility to follow God and could be morally culpable.

Nations were moral agents. The Ten Commandments, God's ethical covenant with the Israelites at Sinai, also formed his ethical standards for the other peoples. In her earliest published work on the Jews in 1956, Schlink affirmed that, "according to scripture, the sin of one's people is also one's personal sin," citing the prophet as an example Daniel, who lamented in Babylon over the fate of his people. She applied this principle in her insistence that the German people had collectively violated the Ten Commandments.

Schlink's Nationalism

Schlink did not oppose nationalism, provided that it was Jewish. Just as Jewish Zionists in Germany in the early- and mid-20th century incorporated pro-Jewish versions of German nationalist ideology into their understanding of themselves, so too Schlink incorporated material from German

nationalism into her Zionist vision.

Potential traces of wartime nationalism are discernable in Schlink's writings well after World War II. In 1949, she likened the spiritual victory of individuals to the military victories of nations. In 1956, invoking military vocabulary (*Krieg, Sieg, Kampf*, etc.), she spoke of the importance of individual soldiers' self-sacrifice on behalf of the *Volk* and for the sake of the Fatherland as an analogy for personal spiritual sacrifice. Each believer was a soldier of faith, fighting personal battles against sin and for salvation, just as each people fought for victory, demanding the self-sacrifice of its troops to that end. Schlink presented these principles as self-evident.

It is not merely the occasional rhetoric adopted by Schlink, but also the substance of her arguments that demonstrates a conviction that a national *Volk* was united by a common historical and spiritual destiny. She stopped short of ascribing to it a *Volksggeist*, but otherwise stressed each people's common bond and cohesive collective identity, a tradition dating at least as far back as Herder in the late 18th century. The German historian Harmut Lehmann has discerned clear Old Testament themes and allusions in 19th-century German nationalist rhetoric. This cross-pollination simply strengthens the present argument: Old Testament and German nationalist themes intermingled and reinforced the national consciousness of many modern Germans, including Schlink, who incorporated German nationalist themes into her Christian Zionism.

Schlink's Germans

Even though Germany had only been a nation state since 1871, concepts of Germans as a people had been circulating since the Reformation and especially since the Romantic era. Because Germans had lacked a single country to call their own, poets and philosophers defined the German *Volk* as possessing a common language, spirit, destiny, and moral responsibility. The Nazis exploited

and adapted these concepts, which long pre-dated them. Schlink herself spoke of the guilt of the German *Volk* and the chosen nature of the Jewish people, which she contrasted with the false message she believed Hitler had preached about Germans being the true chosen people.

According to Schlink, Germany was a nation on the brink of destruction, not merely politically and materially, as many believed in the immediate post-war years, but spiritually and existentially. Germans as a people had purported themselves to be a Christian nation, but had murdered God's chosen people; as a result, they stood under the threat of God's wrath. They and the other so-called Christian nations were to blame for the plight of the Jews and for all of the traditional stereotypes against them. In 1958, Schlink wrote: "We were the ones who forced the Jews to become usurers and junk dealers and locked them into Ghettos like tombs. [...] We, the 'Christian peoples,' were the ones who thus deprived the Jews of their rights." Schlink implicitly taught that to be German was to be a Gentile and a Christian, at least in name; the Christian peoples were synonymous with the Western nations. To be a German was to be the member of a people with a unified identity, however divided politically between East and West after 1949. Schlink was clear that German identity had a strong moral and spiritual component and that it was not fundamentally political, while she remained silent as to whether and to what degree it might have been cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or racial.

Schlink taught that God loved Germany. God had always worked in history to spiritually benefit the German people, regardless of how much they understood themselves to be suffering in the present. In 1949, she insisted that God knew his marvelous design, which appeared messy and incoherent for those in the midst of it. God would continue working on behalf of Germans, as he always had, regardless of whether or not they perceived it or appreciated it. Yet the form of God's work for them could take the form of judgment.

Schlink insisted that God had made the German people, just as he had made all peoples, and that he longed for them to return to him. God had not simply made Germans as individual humans, as God made all humans, but God had made the German people as a people. By extension, Schlink taught that God was the creator of each people and had himself laid the foundation for its identity. That God made all peoples as peoples was a common notion across the spectrum of nationalist thought in the preceding century, as exemplified by Joseph de Maistre, Giuseppe Mazzini, and W. E. B. DuBois.

If God had made the German people as a people, then its identity had been transmitted since its inception through some form of heredity. While Schlink at no point resorted to scientific or pseudo-scientific language of genetics or race, she nonetheless conveyed the idea that each people had an inherited identity of divine origin; the German people was not a mere human construct, but was created by God. Schlink's description of the *Volk* was *völkisch* (that is, German nationalist) in its style, though adamantly pro-Jewish and ultimately self-deprecating in its meaning. Though influenced by German nationalism, Schlink embraced service to God and the Jewish people as her first priorities; it was the task of the German people to support God and his work through the Jewish people. Germans were foolish if they expected other nations to help them or to treat them as special.

Schlink and the Ecumenical Sisters of Mary were keenly aware of the present plight of their fellow Germans. They prayed for the repentance of their nation, which Schlink likened to the nations opposed to God and to his people in the Old Testament. Still in the rubble, Schlink likened Germans in 1949 to the people of Nineveh, faced with the decision to repent or be destroyed. The German people was suffering and would continue to suffer because God was just and it deserved such treatment from him, indeed, needed such treatment in order to correct its path.

Despite their initial material poverty and intense suffering, Germans after World War II lived in a time of God's unmerited favor, a respite before the looming Apocalypse in which they faced certain doom, should they not repent. That was Schlink's proclamation. Fueled by the tensions between the Cold War powers, Schlink's apocalyptic fervor did not dim during her lifetime—as it has arguably not dimmed in the sisterhood since her death in 2001.

Schlink perceived that the spiritual condition of the German people after the Third Reich was one of deep need. Should the German people as a whole repent, the ensuing revival might reach the other peoples of the world and bring glory to God. Should Germans continue in their spiritual stubbornness to seek worldly things, and to ignore God and the gravity of their sins against the Jews, they would risk annihilation. Schlink encouraged her fellow-Germans to pray to God, asking for his mercy and forgiveness. For the time being, God the Father and God the Son mourned for Germany, as they mourned for all peoples who, as a whole, had rejected them; Germans had rejected the Jews, God's people, and to reject God's people was to reject God.

Schlink's Jews

According to Schlink, God had made the Jewish people, just as he had made the German people and all others. Nonetheless, unlike the Germans, the Jewish people had been uniquely chosen as the object of God's love to a greater degree than the other peoples. Like all other peoples, the Jewish people was imperfect and bore some guilt; but now, after centuries of suffering, the guilt of the Jews had now been paid for. While Schlink rejected the stereotypes traditionally attributed to Jews, she noted other, positive general characteristics of the Jews: respectability, nobility of character, professional competence, holiness, uniqueness, and persistence. By virtue of their comportment, the Jews had revealed the falsehoods told against them as such. Theirs was no

inferior people. The Jewish people had demonstrated itself to still be the people of God (*Gottesvolk*) and the people of the covenant (*Bundesvolk*), a contract first made between God and Abraham, then perpetuated and expanded by Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Jesus, all Jews *par excellence*.

Schlink conflated the Old Testament Israelites and the Jewish people of the modern era with Israelis. While embracing Israelis as Israelites has been a normal Christian Zionist trope in the Anglo-American Evangelical sphere, Schlink's radically pro-Israeli position was more anomalous in Germany. Martin Greschat notes that by the 1960s, many Germans assumed that they could distinguish Zionism from the policies of the State of Israel, supporting the former in principle while often criticizing the latter in favor of the plight of the Palestinians; Schlink made no such distinctions, unwavering in her support of Zionism broadly and of the State of Israel as a Jewish, God-ordained reality.

Schlink portrayed Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Jesus should have been crowned by the Jews as their king, for they were his people and he had come to save them as his first priority; yet he was not the kind of king that his people had expected, for he brought a kingdom of love, instead of a kingdom of power. Rather than embrace him, they rejected him and condemned him to death. On this point Schlink rejected the traditional interpretation of Jews' inherited culpability as "Christ killers," declaring that Christ's blood was indeed on them, but as the blood of redemption, not the blood of guilt.

Jesus ached for the Jews to turn to him, as pained now as he had been at his first coming, when the Jews first rejected him. Because the Jewish people never converted as a people, it remained an object of distress for all three persons of the Trinity. For this reason, Schlink asked God the Son to raise up prophets in Israel to prepare his people for him.

The Jewish people now had its own nation state. Schlink marked this abrupt change with an awareness of the continuity of God's on-going work. Jewish history contained the revelation of God's involvement in the world; should unbelievers recognize this, more nations would come to him. She looked to the establishment of the State of Israel as one of the greatest miracles in history. The reassertion of the Jews as a people formed a tangible sign of God's existence. The establishment of the State of Israel represented the beginning of a new chapter in Jewish history, characterized by the outpouring of God's grace upon the Jewish people. Schlink did not perceive the new political existence of the Jewish state as a sharp break with the past, but rather part of God's long relationship with the people of Israel.

Schlink's most urgent concern for Jews was their spiritual health. She interpreted Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones, as prophesying a two-phase conversion of the Jews to Christianity. First, the scattered bones would be drawn back together into cohesive bodily forms; this had already occurred with the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel-Palestine. Second, the bones would return to life; this was the imminent return of Jews to God. Schlink looked to other scripture passages for confirmation of her certainty that the Jewish people would soon return to God in his fullness, revealed to the nations in the person of Christ. The Jewish people's persistence in existing, against all odds, demonstrated that God existed and kept his promises; and God's promises to the Jews would be complete when they had embraced Jesus as the Messiah.

Schlink remained vague in writing about the specifics of Jewish conversion. She did not specify whether they needed to become Christians in name, but she was clear that they needed Jesus. She did not evangelize Jews; but her reason for doing so was the guilt of Christians, especially Germans, toward Jews. Their efforts at proselytization would have no credibility. She still believed that Jews needed to convert to the person of Christ as their Messiah. Rather than approach

evangelism directly, Schlink encouraged her fellow Christians to pray for the Jewish people and to remind Jews of God's promises in scripture for them. Schlink's position, although conciliatory and apologetic in tone, did not diverge from traditional Christian exclusivism regarding salvation.

According to Schlink, whether they were Christians or not, Jews pointed to Christ, by virtue of his human lineage. Although God could seem distant from a human perspective and individual Jews might feel far from God, they had a close relationship with him, due to his unique love for them. As a result, all Christians had a duty to love the Jews. Because the Jews collectively embodied the suffering of Christ, they offered a tangible means for Christians hoping to draw closer to God in the person of Christ. To serve him, all Christians had to do was serve the Jews. Fittingly, Schlink's interpretation of Isaiah 53, of the Jewish people as a reminder of Christ as the Suffering Servant, is not far removed from one of the standard Jewish interpretations of the passage. For Schlink, in its suffering, the Jewish people represented Christ.

As God's uniquely chosen people, the Jews were God's representatives. As far as Schlink was concerned, those who truly loved God would love the Jews, for they were his people; and those who hated the Jews were the enemies of God, regardless of whatever lip service they paid to him. To cause harm to the Jewish people was to cause pain to God, such was the deep compassion that he felt for them. Christians, too, were the friends of God and true Christians would honor God's longstanding and special relationship with the Jewish people. For this reason, Schlink called the Jewish people "our older brother," emphasizing the identity of Jews and Christians' common father, the God of Jesus.

Lacunae

Schlink's version of what constituted the Jewish people is as revealing in what she omitted as in what she affirmed. Schlink ignored the present or future guilt of the Jewish people, insisting that their past sins had been paid for. She did not consider the implications of potential collaboration between individual Jews and the Nazis, cases in which those involved would have been guilty as individuals in ways that Schlink and the members of her sisterhood were not, despite her insistence on Jewish innocence and German guilt. Neither did she consider those who denied their Jewish identity for the sake of survival or willing assimilation as anything less than Jewish. She completely overlooked those of partial Jewish ancestry and the ambiguities inherent in how individuals of mixed ancestry define their membership in one people or another. In Schlink's mind, every Jew was a victim and a member of the Jewish people, even those whose self-understandings ran counter to such claims.

Equally absent from Schlink's written work was recognition of the significance of Jewish Christians, though some were members of her community. She made no mention in her writings of Jewish Christians, either in her own time or in the history of the church, though *Judenchristentum* had been a staple in mainstream German theological and biblical scholarship since the mid-19th century. Interpreting Jesus, Mary, and the first Christians as Jews formed a significant trend in scholarship during Schlink's lifetime. Her failure to address the Jewishness of the central figures of her spirituality speaks as much to her intellectual isolation as to her failure to integrate the various strands of her thought.

Repentance and Service: Living in Light of Schlink's Vision

The German people had sinned against the Jewish people and needed to repent; otherwise, Germans could be sure that God would destroy them in judgment. In 1949, Schlink published a work explaining that Germany's suffering in the war was the result of God's judgment. Germany's post-war struggles were but a foretaste of God's wrath. Christians who were especially devoted to God could come before God in prayer, interceding on behalf of their nation in repentance.

In 1955, Schlink began using the phrase "our German guilt" regarding the Holocaust. While this was a decade after the war, this was substantially earlier than mainstream appraisals of the Holocaust in German public life, which did not occur until well into the 1960s. In 1955, Schlink traveled to Israel in order to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with Jews as a German and as a Christian. The next year, she published the first of several books addressing Christians' failures to love and honor the Jews, particularly noting the guilt of the German people against Jews and against God in the Holocaust. In 1959, she established a nursing home in Jerusalem to care for Holocaust survivors. In the subsequent years, she established a larger contingent of sisters in Jerusalem to minister to tourists throughout the Holy Land by distributing tracts and by marking important sites with plaques; these were inscribed with Bible verses and words of Mother Basilea, explaining the significance of the places they marked, whether in reference to the story of the people of Israel or the life of Christ.

Repentance was the only legitimate response of faith to realizing one's guilt, Schlink argued. This was true for individuals and for entire peoples, but in order for a whole people to repent, a select few had to lead the way. Schlink and the members of her sisterhood considered themselves to be in this elite. They repented for their own sins and constantly rebuked each other for sins they perceived; any time anything went wrong in the life of the sisterhood, such as during their numerous

building projects in the 1950s and 60s, they assumed that someone among them was guilty of unconfessed sin and they repented; and, because they had spiritually purified themselves before God, they could offer acceptable prayers and repentance as Germans on behalf of the German people. Every day the sisters spend their morning coffee break standing in silence, in memory of the morning call to attention Jewish victims endured in concentration camps. Like Christians worldwide, the sisters have always celebrated Christ's resurrection on Sunday morning; but, in addition to this, every Friday at three o'clock, the hour of Christ's death, they mourn and repent of their guilt toward him; and every Friday at sundown, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, the sisters pray for the Jewish people and repent for their sins against them.

The Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary provides one cogent example of how post-war German Christians' attitudes toward Jews may have been shaped by their own recent experiences of German nationalism. German Christian Zionism in the generation after the Holocaust was radically different from the German nationalism that preceded it, but the two ideologies shared similar structures and similar contents, with the caveat that the former turned the latter upside-down, inverting its priorities. Pro-Jewish, anti-German nationalism is still nationalism. The better we can understand such instances of Christian Zionism and the reasons for their existence and development, the better we can analyze the broader phenomenon of Christian Zionism beyond the Anglo-American sphere.