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George Faithful

Trust, Repentance, and Apocalyptic Zionism:

Basilea Schlink and the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary Respond to War

Wars past, present, and future have shaped the development of the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary. Mother Basilea Schlink wrote that her sisterhood was “a child of the last war,” referring to the Second World War. Her vision for her sisterhood was equally shaped by the Cold War and by her expectations of the imminent nuclear world war that would usher in the Apocalypse. To these wars Mother Basilea and her sisterhood responded with a radical trust in God, daily individual and corporate repentance, and unwavering support for God’s Old Testament people, the Jews, and, by extension, the State of Israel.

The sisters’ radical trust in God first manifested itself in the events leading up to the founding of the sisterhood. On September 11, 1944, Allied bombers destroyed most of the city of Darmstadt, near Frankfurt in west-central Germany. Among the survivors were the young women of a Lutheran Bible study led by the future Mother Basilea Schlink and Mother Martyria Madauss. Both the leaders and the members of the Bible study saw themselves as gripped by God’s judgment and spared only by his mercy. Their reaction was one of repentance – a central theme in the life of the sisterhood which I will analyze shortly – and of trusting God with the entirety of their lives, depending on him in all things and following his perceived call, whatever the cost.

Schlink and Madauss had already undertaken significant acts of trust in God when they left established careers in Hamburg to move in with Miss Schlink’s parents and begin a women’s bible college together in 1935, then started a Bible study when the Bible college failed, and continued to teach the Old Testament in defiance of the edicts of the Third Reich, despite Schlink herself being questioned multiple times by the Gestapo. The two women struggled to impart to the members of

their Bible study a comparable degree of trust in God until the night of bombing in 1944. Although the official founding of the sisterhood would not be until 1947, both the founding mothers and their spiritual daughters would look back to the night of their city's bombing as the "hour of birth" of their sisterhood.

Of the several dozen girls in the bible study, a handful accompanied Miss Schlink and Miss Madauss on a retreat in the countryside in early 1945, despite the fact that the war continued around them. Under the guidance of two Methodist pastors, the women reflected on Christ's sacrifice and meditated on how they could make sacrifices of their own. Not knowing in whose hands their city would be, this small group decided to return to Darmstadt to be with the rest of their spiritual family. Because rail service had been disrupted by the war, they traveled the forty-five miles on foot.

Shortly after their arrival, Darmstadt surrendered to the Allies. Curfew became an opportunity for attempting extended periods of life together and supporting guests, who had to arrive during limited hours in the morning and could not leave again until the evening. The home of Miss Schlink's parents became their hub of activity. They shared their meager rations together, even when visitors traveling from outside the city limits were not able to contribute their own rations. Because the German populace was impoverished and in the midst of famine in the immediate aftermath of the war, such acts of self-sacrifice demanded an especially great deal of faith on the part of the soon-to-be sisters.

These women further demonstrated their trust in God by deciding to become a formal sisterhood. Contrary to popular belief, it is true that there have occasionally been monastic sisterhoods and brotherhoods in Protestantism. In Germany alone, three cloisters – Möllenbeck, Loccum, and Marienberg – embraced the Lutheran Reformation but retained much of their monastic practice, only to fade from existence during the 'Thirty Years' War. The deaconess movement of the nineteenth century established sisterhoods focused on social service in German

Protestant churches. However, such examples have always been on the fringe of normative Protestant experience. According to statistics compiled by Christoph Joest, the fifteen Protestant brotherhoods and sisterhoods founded in Europe in the first decade following World War Two surpassed in number those founded in the three decades preceding the war, suggesting that the experience of the war inspired many to question the sufficiency of the established forms of Protestant religious practice. The *Ecumenical* Sisterhood of Mary was formally founded in Darmstadt in the spring of 1947 as, by their own estimation, the first Protestant women's cloister in Germany since the Reformation. As the sisterhood developed over the ensuing decades, it became more explicitly monastic, building an extensive motherhouse and establishing a formal rule and vows, even as it became more overtly Protestant, changing their name to the *Evangelische* or "Protestant" Sisterhood of Mary in 1963. While they continued to reach out to members of all confessions, the sisters' initial emphasis on ecumenism proved unsustainable as the ecumenical movement became increasingly at odds with the sisters' understanding of orthodoxy and of the nature of Christ. They could trust in God and devote themselves to him, but they could not always count on others to follow their vision.

The sisters' radical trust in God has continued to manifest itself in their dependence on God for financial support. Rather than pursue formal fundraising, work for pay, or denominational support, the sisters have always followed George Mueller's model of faith mission: they pray for what they need and expect to receive it, without soliciting donations. In the midst of her country's complete economic and moral devastation, Mother Basilea preached the necessity of trusting God to provide for both physical and spiritual needs. In the early years of the sisterhood, after Allied rationing had ended, some of the sisters' critics suggested that they would be unable to support themselves without jobs or conventional forms of income. Nonetheless, by 1951 the sisters had built their motherhouse, providing most of the physical labor and relying on donated building materials,

such as stones from a demolished Nazi army barracks. By 1966, they had built *Kanaan*, a multi-million dollar retreat center and series of prayer gardens next to the motherhouse. While the sisters have cultivated an ever-expanding network of supporters and kindred spirits, their income has consisted solely of gifts given without solicitation. Even the dozens of titles the sisters offer from their self-operated publishing house have only suggested donations, rather than prices.

At the heart of the first sisters' commitment to lead lives of radical trust in God was an understanding that God is a loving Father who always provides for the needs of his people. In distinction from the prevailing currents in German Protestant thought, the sisters understood those needs to be both spiritual and physical. Because of their belief that God always keeps his promises, the sisters concluded that the rules and moral guidelines of the Old Testament had been underemphasized by their contemporaries, leading them to seek ongoing individual and corporate repentance.

As mentioned earlier, the future sisters realized their personal need for repentance during the bombing of their city. They recognized that God was both a loving Father and a righteous Judge. By obeying him in the Ten Commandments and in the Beatitudes, the sisters expected to find blessing. By repenting of the ways in which they had fallen short and embracing God's forgiveness, they found cause for joy, thanksgiving, and praise in the midst of otherwise difficult circumstances. Indeed, every trial faced by the sisterhood could be cause for repentance. Should there be a shortfall of funds, the sisters would repent, assuming that they were being judged for some particular sin and that they must prostrate themselves before the throne of grace. Should there be a drought – too little rain – or should inclement weather prevent their building projects – too much rain – the sisters were prone to see themselves and their individual sins as the cause. The sisters held such beliefs in tension with the conviction that God could and would be a source of blessing even in the midst of suffering and that many of their trials, just like those of Christ, had nothing to do with whether they deserved

them. Yet in many circumstances, they believed that God was withholding his blessings until they would fully repent. In this way, the sisters looked to God's behavior toward the nation of Israel in the Old Testament as a model for how he behaved toward individuals and nations today.

As a result, Mother Basilea and her sisterhood accepted guilt as members of the German people for Germany's involvement in the Holocaust as members of a collective nation. All nations who stood against the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, were enemies of God. Even though Schlink and Madauss had been members of the Confessing Church, unaffiliated with the state church that was complicit in supporting the Third Reich, even though they continued to believe that God's Word included the Old Testament, despite official state directives to the contrary, and even though most of the future sisters were only teenagers, too young to be actively involved in resistance against the Nazi regime, the sisters nonetheless repented of not having done enough to save the Jews. At a time when most Germans wanted to forget the war or to blame the Allies for perpetrating atrocities of their own against Germany's civilian population, the Sisters of Mary were calling their fellow Germans to accept blame and to repent. A handful of other voices within the Protestant churches issued similar calls, which largely fell on deaf ears. Nonetheless, the sisters saw themselves as priestly intercessors, praying to God for mercy on behalf of their unrepentant countrymen, lest God sweep them away in judgment. Basilea understood every year of peace between East and West as proof that her sisterhood was succeeding in buying time for humanity before the final end of all earthly things.

Basilea's high esteem for the Jewish people was the positive corollary of her collective view of repentance for the Holocaust. Her overtures of reconciliation toward Jewish survivors of the war blossomed into a stance of unconditional support for the State of Israel after its wars with its Arab neighbors beginning in 1948. Ironically, the sisters' retreat center, *Kanaan*, drew its inspiration from the then-war-torn Israel as a "land of love and peace." Like many Christian Zionists, Basilea saw the

Jews' return to Palestine as the fulfillment of prophecy, a harbinger of the Apocalypse, and a prelude to mass Jewish conversions to Christianity. Yet Basilea's support for Israel was not merely theologically utilitarian, for it involved a significant element of compassion. She sacrificed a significant portion of the sisters' resources to establish a home in Jerusalem to care for Holocaust survivors and she worked tirelessly to foster friendship between Christians and Jews, and between Germans and Israelis.

In light of the Cold War, Mother Basilea and her sisterhood expected the Apocalypse to be soon. This provided an even stronger impetus than the wars of the past for the sisters to trust God's provision, to seek forgiveness from sin – both their own and others' – and to support God's chosen people, Israel. The sisters tended to conflate the State of Israel with Jewish people collectively and with the Old Testament nation of Israel.

Unifying Mother Basilea's thought was her conviction that God always keeps his promises. Because God was always the same, Christians needed to trust in him to provide for their every need. Because God was always the same, Christians needed to measure themselves against the standards of the whole Bible and come before God in repentance when they found themselves falling short. Because God was always the same, God's promises to the Jews were still valid and Christians owed Jews gratitude, contrition, and support.

World War Two taught the sisters that a God-hating regime could threaten to conquer the world – for the sisters, hating Jews and hating God were synonymous. The Cold War, with its occasional hot spots and frequent moments of international tension, taught the sisters that further conflict was an ever-present possibility; and, because of the seemingly inevitable use of nuclear weapons, they accepted that the imminent world war would likely be the last, a prelude to the return of Christ.

In uncertain times, the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary embraced trust in the certainty of God's almighty hand. In the aftermath of a defiant regime driven by hate, they established a community centered on penitence and love, including love for those most hated by the Nazis. In the aftermath of the destruction of war, they constructed a land of peace. It is not difficult to understand why. War, especially the Second World War and the leader who initiated it, has provided so many clear examples of what a life of faith should not be, it should be no surprise that some after Hitler would aspire to be his opposite. In doing so, the Sisters of Mary transcended the traditional boundaries of Protestantism and became, if not the first, then one of the most vivid and creative expressions of Protestant monasticism. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

As a an epilogue, I should add that the sisterhood continues to thrive today. A few weeks ago I visited *Kanaan*. The aging sisterhood still attracts new members. The main branch houses over one-hundred sisters, with a few dozen other sisters serving in smaller branches of *Kanaan* in Phoenix, Arizona, eastern Australia, England, and elsewhere. Mother Basilea died in 2001, leaving behind a throng of spiritual daughters who miss her dearly and cherish her memory. The new generation of leaders possesses a great sense of calm and composure. Sister Verita, one of the five leaders, happens to be an American. She shared with me how extensive the sisters' building renovations now are: facilities constructed in the 1950s must now be completely overhauled; it was not self-evident when they were built that enough time remained before the end for such things to be necessary. Yet the second and third generations of sisters retain a sense of that imminent expectation. The previous war is still in memory and the final war, whenever it may come, could be any day. With this in mind, the sisters juggle building for posterity with urgent action in light of Jesus' possible return today.

Somewhere high on a ridge in the Bavarian Alps over Berchtesgaden, overlooking Hitler's Eagle's Nest, the sisters erected a monument in 1964. Perhaps it is still there. I spent a whole day

looking for it and could not find it. None of the sisters had been there recently and none of the locals had seen it themselves. It may be that the monument has crumbled or been removed, but I hope that the trail leading to it has simply become overgrown, leaving a surprise for hikers to happen upon. Old photographs at least testify to what was there: a relief depicting Noah worshipping next to the Ark and beneath a rainbow, with text on either side. To the left of Noah, the words of Revelation 14:7: “Fear God and give him honor, because the time of his judgment has come. Pray to the one who made heaven and earth.” To the right, the words of Mother Basilea herself, her prayer in light of the horrors of war: “Oh, Father, let your world remain a while yet and let not your glory in creation fade. We want to praise you, rather than ruin the world around us.” It was a simple prayer, but, in the face of such evil, perhaps only a simple prayer will do.