

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

Manfred W. Kohl, ThD

Let me begin with some simple definitions. The word *holocaust* has a Greek origin meaning “sacrifice by fire.” The word has been used to describe the terrible time in Nazi Germany prior to and during the Second World War eliminating around six million Jews as well as uncountable gypsies, prisoners of war, homosexuals, communists, socialists, mentally and physically disabled persons, and many, many others. The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January of 1933, believed that Germans were “radically superior” and that everybody “deemed inferior,” was an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

The story of what happened in the 1930s and 40s in the concentration camps and in the gassing facilities known as the “final solution” is well known and documented by countless eyewitnesses. Only a fool would question or deny these facts. Although the term *holocaust* is rightly used in connection with the Nazi Germany atrocities, the term also describes a holocaust mentality, philosophy, even religious beliefs expressing the superiority (*****) of one and eradicating everything that interferes with this superiority. It is the most extreme form of evil manifested in the purest expression of hate. The mass killings in Stalin’s Russia, Amin’s Uganda, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Hussein’s Iraq, and uncountable others should be labeled a result of a holocaust mentality.

If a person, a tribe, a people, a nation believes itself superior to others, to be perfect or on the way to achieving perfection, therefore everything in the way must be eliminated and eradicated. With a direct or indirect belief and determination of “We are the better, the superior, the chosen ones,” the seed of evil is implanted that ends in some form of holocaust action. Today the people in Darfur, in West Africa, in Palestine, and in

many more areas around the world experiencing “holocaust action” at the hands of others who think they are superior, better, or even “chosen” by God.

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The *Evangelical Church* has its beginning in German Pietism. The term *Pietism* is to be understood not merely, or even primarily, as a movement in church history in Central Europe from 1675 to 1750 but, even more important, as a force within the stream of Protestantism to the present day. Its origins and development have been seen in Puritan piety, in the mystical spiritualism of some of the radical reformers and, according to the historian Ritschl, even as far back as the medieval monastic mysticism. The publication of Spener’s *Pia desideria*, the *Programmschrift* (platform) of Pietism in 1675, is historically accepted as the beginning of Pietism. Only a few years prior to the publication of the *Pia desideria* Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt, had begun to gather together believers in his weekly *collegia pietatis*, the purpose of which was to provide individuals with more spiritual edification than they would be able to receive from the Sunday morning worship service alone. Today, nearly 350 years later, this practice is still carried on in the *Gemeinschaftstunden*, the German term for bible study fellowship meetings. August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), the great pedagogue and founder of the *collegium philobiblicum* at Leipzig and the first pietistic institution at Halle, is recognized as the second patriarchal figure in Pietism. Francke differentiated almost to the extreme between the natural man and the born-again man, between the outer and the inner (*Schale und Kern*) between mere surface knowledge and the real inner experience, between “Christian” in name only and the Christian marked by the experience of his inner life (*Busskampf, Wiedergeburt, and geistliche Früchte*). The

contribution of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the tolerant, ecumenical, and mission-oriented aristocrat who was immortalized in the work at Herrnhut, is to be seen in the Christocentric piety of Herrnhuter Pietism, in which the blood of Christ (*Blutstheologic*) and the spirit of love (*Liebesgeist*) are all-important. In this, Zinzendorf emphasized mysticism almost to the extreme; one may cite as an example his concept of the bride and passion (*Braut- und Passionsmystik*). Radical Pietism, the extremist group, should also be mentioned here as part of the tradition and, finally, Schwabian Pietism, the Württemberg movement, which was influenced by all the other pietistic trends. The Schwabian movement is significant in that it was less dependent on the sponsorship of the nobility and therefore became more a people's movement from the outset. The voice of "the quiet ones" (*die Stimme der Stillen*) is an appropriate title for the Schwabian Pietists.

Each form of Pietism – Reformed, Lutheran, Herrnhuter, and Schwabian – suffered a decline following its initial success, but in the late 18th and 19th centuries a newly revitalized Pietistic movement, the *Erweckungs- und Evangelisations-bewegung*, sprang up, with special emphasis on revival and evangelism as its new component. Out of this revival grew numerous mission organizations and fellowship organizations, most of which are today united in the Gnadauer-Verband, an organizational structure holding all the dozens of pietistic groups and mission organizations loosely together.

For nearly 350 years, the Pietist movement has transcended national and confessional boundaries (*Übernational und Überkonfessional*) to make unquestionably vital contributions in the edification of the believers, not only in the realms of Bible ministry, preaching and religious education, and literature and hymnology, but also in the

field of social outreach in numerous areas and in mission at home and abroad. Above all, it has created within the individual believer a deep personal awareness (*Selbstbewusstsein*) of his relationships with God. But it is precisely the *praxis pietatis*, as manifested in his works, in which the Pietist finds a defense against the criticism that his faith is too subjective and based too largely on emotionalism. He thus fails to recognize or appreciate the extent to which his own inner experience (*Erlebnisgehalt*) replaces Christian dogma and is elevated to become the criterion of truth and the norm according to which everything, spiritual or non-spiritual, is judged. The experience of rebirth (*Wiedergeburt*), the central theme of three and a half centuries of Pietism – whether it be interpreted according to the formula of Spener, “Are you still reborn?” (*Stehst du noch in der Wiedergeburt?*), of Francke, “Are you converted?” (*Bist du bekehrt?*), or of Zinzendorf, “Do you see and feel the Crucified One?” (*Siehst und spürst du den Gekreuzigten?*) – creates in the individual such a strong conviction of his own inner newness (*Evidenzbewusstsein*) that not only is he enabled to overcome his fear and failures but often logic and even common sense are eliminated in the process. The Pietist who is clearly branded by *Wiedergeburt* is free from the world and able to concentrate on developing his own inner life.

According to Pietistic theology, the “inner life,” the indwelling Christ, will result in not only a better man but also in a better church and ultimately in a better world (*Weltverwandlung durch Menschenverwandlung*). However, this individualism and subjectivism, this personal overemphasis on the *imitatio Christi*, forces the Pietist to live in a peculiar combination of humility and pride, self-abasement and self-exaltation, submissiveness and a tendency to negativism, a reluctance to assume political

responsibility and the readiness to criticize. Each Pietist became his own prophet, priest, and king, prompting Karl Barth to conclude that “for the Pietist, man himself came to be a sacrament.”

Pietism, the executor of the Reformation and the reconstructor of early Christianity, was never according to its own evaluation, a united or structurally organized phenomena. It is rightly called an independent movement of spiritualism (*Frömmigkeitsbewegung*). The following statement expresses, even today, the Pietists’ position towards the official church: “We are in the church, if possible with the church, but never under the church.”

Let me now focus on some characteristics of the evangelical/Pietist as related during the time of Nazi Germany and, to some extent, even today.

From the beginning of Spener the Pietists had always a “hope for better times,” a chiliastic trend that Pietism shared with the early church. An overemphasis on eschatology was, and still is, a basic emphasis and many of the developments in Pietism have to be theologically and psychologically interpreted in the light of its future expectations (*Zukunftserwartung*). For Luther and the Reformation the emphasis was on justification based on Romans, whereas the Pietists had a tendency to focus on the books of Revelation and Daniel.

It is of great significance that for Pietism the evangelization of the Jews is closely connected with, or even a part of, eschatology. Spener’s concept of the conversion of the Jews and their insertion into the Christian community was far reaching. Spener saw in the conversion of a Jew, just as in the born-again (*Wiedergeburt*) experience evidence of

God's direct intervention (*Heilsereignis*). He approached the Jews not with a strictly Messianic claim but rather he attempted to present the gospel to Jews on their own terms as law, as in the Sermon on the Mount, and holiness, not in contradiction to the Mosaic Law and the holiness concept of the Old Testament but in harmony with them as part of God's total plan of salvation. The conversion and baptism of the Jews were seen as a model for the born-again experience (*Wiedergeburt*) of man as a factual evidence that through rebirth man can be changed completely. In later years many mission organizations of the Pietists to the Jews became much more aggressive in confronting the Jews with the direct Messianic claim. It seems, however, that the Jewish question, the conversion of the Jewish people was and still is like a barometer in Pietistic eschatology. Today, a large segment of the evangelical/Pietistic groups pray daily for the conversion of the Jews as a nation and the total liberation of the holy city of Jerusalem, believing that this is an absolutely required event before God's Kingdom can come. Anything interfering with the conversion of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem is to be rejected or condemned. They believe that all support for Israel today, in whatever form, helps the process of the immanent conversion of the Jewish nation. With the mission of the Jews stands or falls to a large extent their belief in Christ's power (even within themselves) as well as their hope for Christ's final victory and soon-expected return.

Another aspect of Pietism was the stress on education especially with regards to the extensive cultivation of the language of the middle and lower classes. Since education was regarded as primarily for edification the Pietistic schools were not pedantic in their emphasis, rather, the stress was on public-spirited activities (*Gemeinnützigkeit*). For this reason the learned and the aristocratic language, Latin and French respectively, were

replaced by the national language, German. The Pietists emphasized the use of the language of the common man especially if one wanted to reach the masses and bring the Gospel closer to their daily life experiences. Language was seen as a creative power given to man and through its use in a Pietistic framework (especially in the edification literature), it was elevated to become the expression of the inner essence of a nation, to the point that the mother tongue became something religious and divine, almost like a sacrament. The German language became the heart of the nation.

The idea was, basically, that human speech is a part of creation and on the same level as the rest of creation; therefore, God Himself is the prime source of language, especially since He Himself was revealed in the Logos. One can see clearly how the emotional, subjective, and mystical feeling of the Pietists was involved in the development of the “sacrament of language”. Although the leaders of the Enlightenment also stressed the use of the German language, they did not reach the heart of the people to the same extent as did the Pietists, for whereas the Enlightenment stressed the intellect and logic, the Pietists reached into the heart, into the inner being of the individual, and stirred his feelings and hopes for a better future.

The importance given to music, hymnology, and art (*Kunstfrömmigkeit*) is in itself an indication of the extent to which the Pietists’ religious enthusiasm and their emphasis on the expression of one’s own inner feelings has influenced society as a whole. The Pietistic inner experience on the individual level was transferred to the national level and the German language which had previously been linked with the national character only in an academic sense now became the vehicle for the expression of the inner being of the nation (*Volkscharakter* and the *Volkssoul*). It is precisely here, in the awareness of

the German language, and the consequent shaping of the German *Volk* character and its religious conscience (*Volksreligion*) that the Pietistic influence can be seen more than in any other field. The religious value placed on the German language and culture, and the awe with which they were regarded, the view that education of the inner man would eliminate social distinctions, and the new self-awareness and sense of individual importance, combined with the religious enthusiasm of the Pietists not only to lay the groundwork for German nationalism, but even to carry it through to completion.

Pietism contributed yet another idea in the development of nationalism; namely, that of revival. On the individual level, the Pietist recognized that man has to be confronted with the Gospel as an answer to his lost, sinful condition, until the moment at which *Wiedergeburt*, the second and real birth, takes place. In the denial of one's own will, God's presence is experienced in a subjective manifestation and man can live in victory. This pattern of revival – rebirth, self-denial, holiness, and victory – the only valid pattern of life ever recognized by the Pietists, was transferred from the religious to the secular realm and there further developed in various details by the so-called enlightened Pietists.

The entire patriotic revival seems to have been modeled after the Pietistic concept of the conversion of the individual. Because of the sins of social distinction, indecisiveness, lack of loyalty and responsibility, distrust and lack of faith in the nation and even in authority itself, the nation as a whole was aware of its weakness and longed for fulfillment, for the realization of the dream of the “inner fatherland”. This recognition of sin and the longing for fulfillment led to the rebirth of the nation, and as the national

spirit overcame the people, their enthusiastic and mystical self-denial resulted in the achievement of a national holiness.

The concept of the “Fatherland” – the place where you belong – that you can claim your own – became very important. The land of the fathers was and still is of extreme value. It provides identity and security.

In Pietism/Evangelicalism there was also a tendency towards perfectionism and absolutism. A tendency reinforced by the belief in the inner experience of the individual, the perfect Christ within him. This attitude combined with a sense of responsibility to educate and evangelize, and the emphasis given to the divine in the German language, culture, and Fatherland, led to the belief that Germany was superior to all other nations. It was believed that whatever came from Germany must be great and noble. Germany was considered to be the pulse of Europe. The Pietistic concepts of industry and social consciousness, of marriage and family life, of the vitality and importance of youth, and of blind obedience to spiritual advisors, to mention only a few, all helped to advance the cause of German nationalism.

Pietism, in imparting to German nationalism its own unique characteristics, was to a large extent responsible for shaping the mind of the German nation, particularly at the time when the collapse of the lukewarm Weimar Republic had brought about a national malaise and frustration. The defeat of World War I was viewed as a disruption of the model of revival – rebirth, self-denial, holiness, and victory – and an expectation of something even greater was simmering beneath the surface. The Pietistic patriotic self-awareness now had to be re-awakened, a new inner experience had to take place, the God

of the nation Himself would have to step in; if not, all previous developments, achievements, and blessings would remain incomplete or even be regarded as failures. There was thus of necessity a renewed hope for the rebirth of the German people, nationalistically and religiously, and many expected that a new national movement would mean renewal and salvation for Protestantism. The hope of renewal became a reality in the spring of 1933, when the new leadership promised to take away the disappointment and disgrace of the recent past and to establish a perfect structure with holy freedom and lasting victory, a new millennium. Hitler, the man of the hour, became a prophet, especially to those deprived by inflation and unemployment; the German masses rejoiced.

At the beginning virtually all Pietistic groups supported Hitler and the few warning voices were not heard. When the Nazis began to put their Holocaust philosophy into practice it was too late and total disaster was on the way.