

George Faithful

Atoning for the Sins of the Fatherland:

The Gendered Nationalism of the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary

In my book, *Mothering the Fatherland*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, I analyze how the penitential practices of a group of Protestant nuns in Germany were rooted in their understanding of collective German national guilt in the aftermath of the Third Reich. Those with some prior familiarity with the group may know them as the Evangelical or *Evangelische* Sisterhood of Mary. I will refer to them throughout by their original name, the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary. While the book discusses the sisters' gender and nationalism separately in the context of the sisters' repentance and theology of collective national guilt, I will move beyond this in the present discussion to demonstrate how the sisters' gender and nationalism relate to each other. Specifically, I will argue that the sisters' anti-German nationalism represents a means for the members of the sisterhood to reify their counter-cultural roles as women in post-World War II Germany.

In 1947, two years after the fall of the Third Reich, a few young women formally established the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt, Germany. The first sisters had all been members of the same Lutheran women's Bible study since the mid-1930s. Their leaders became the sisterhood's founding mothers. With a doctorate in religious psychology, Mother Basilea Schlink was charged with discerning the theology and mission of the group. A former social worker, Mother Martyria Madauss, undertook the pastoral care and day-to-day operations of the sisterhood. This fledgling group of about a dozen quadrupled by the mid-1950s and exceeded one-hundred by the mid-1960s, at which point the sisterhood had established an expansive motherhouse and retreat center, which they named *Kanaan*. By the mid-1970s, they had established a dozen branches worldwide, including one in Phoenix, Arizona.

Under Schlink's leadership, the sisterhood sought to repent for Germany's sins in the Holocaust. The sisters understood that Germans were collectively guilty for the mass extermination of Jews, as initiated by Hitler. This vision of collective guilt had its foundations in the nationalist rhetoric Schlink had imbibed since her birth in 1904, her interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and in the public debates in the German Protestant churches about German national guilt in the years after the Third Reich.

It is in German nationalism that the roots of Schlink's nationalism are clearest. Since at least as far back as the Protestant Reformation, the German *Volk* or "people" was different from other peoples, in that it was defined by having a common language and culture, rather than by a political nation-state. Indeed, it was not until the late 19th century that Germans had a Germany to call their own, and even then, the German *Volk* extended far beyond its boundaries. As a result of this nationlessness, German nationalism imbued the concept of the German *Volk* with a sense of common destiny and duty. For the purposes of this presentation, I am defining nationalism as an ideology that elevates the welfare of one nation above all others. By the early 20th century, some German thinkers even ascribed moral agency to the *Volk*. Schlink herself spoke of the German *Volk* in such terms, with the difference that, rather than speaking of the victory and glory of the German *Volk*, she spoke of its guilt and shame.

In Schlink's writings, she ascribed her understanding of the German *Volk* to her reading of God's dealings with the people of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. God sent his prophets to the people of Israel, calling them to repent. If they failed to repent, he would discipline them. She perceived that the time of Israel's suffering was over. The German people, on the other hand, needed to repent, lest it face destruction. Just as God had called the prophet Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh, so now Schlink believed herself to be among those calling Germany to repent of its sins

against God and against God's people, the Jews, lest the German people be destroyed. God had a plan for each people, but his loving plans for the people of Israel were preeminent. Schlink may have borrowed language and ideas from German nationalism, but because of her Christian Zionist reading of scripture and of history, she inverted its priorities.

Rather than reject nationalism altogether, Schlink rejected German nationalism in all its forms, elevating instead the welfare of the Jewish people above that of her own, placing her solidly in the sphere of Christian Zionism. By framing her message of the guilt of each *Volk* in national-ethnic-religious terms – Germans were, by her definition, German Gentile Christians – she reaffirmed German nationalist definitions of nationhood. Schlink's nationalism was anti-German, but it was a nationalism nonetheless.

As a German, Schlink deferred to Israel. Keep in mind that this founding mother and resident theologian of the sisterhood defined Israel as synonymous with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible, with the world's Jewish population – again, defined nationally, ethnically, and religiously – and with citizens of the newly formed State of Israel, at no point distinguishing between these arguably distinct groups.

Because of its sinfulness, Germany needed a spiritual elite to intercede on its behalf. These “priestly souls,” as Schlink called them, were defined by their self-sacrifice. Although in Christianity the priesthood has traditionally excluded women, Schlink's expressed her vision for a spiritual priesthood with gender-inclusive and female metaphors.

Priestly Christians were to embrace the love of God the Father with the simplicity and trust of small children. They were to lay aside their pride and ambition, holding on to God's promises

even in the face of suffering, apparent defeat, and the temptation to despair. Such was the trusting faith of children.

They were to fully devote their energies, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually, to the service of Christ as his brides. This was in keeping with the long tradition of spiritualizing the marital love depicted by the Song of Songs, a form of spirituality which has seen variants in both Judaism and Christianity. These bride souls would give up their all in order to fully pursue their beloved.

Their sacrifice was to be motherly. They were to give up their lives as Christ did. The iconography Schlink chose to express this was the medieval motif of Christ as mother pelican, graced with a cruciform halo, pecking her own breast to draw blood, with which to feed her young. This image appears on the cover of Schlink's book about priestly souls and on a stained-glass window she commissioned in the motherhouse chapel opposite the crucifix.

Priestly souls were also to look to the Virgin Mary, who devoted herself to heeding God's call, from the moment the Angel Gabriel announced Christ's birth, following her son into the despair of Good Friday, persisting in faith though doubt pierced her heart. The ideal soul would emulate her.

In short, according to Schlink, true Christians were called to be child-like, bride-like, motherly, Mary-like servants of God, regardless of whether such individual Christians were male or female. The self-sacrificial repentance of priestly Christians transcended gender. God called such Christians to intercede on behalf of their sinful nation. Indeed, only such believers, who had purified themselves in repentance, had the power to intercede as priests on their nation's behalf and have any

hope of God hearing them. Even women could serve as such spiritual priests. Germany needed such Christians; otherwise, it would surely face the destructive wrath of God, according to Schlink.

Now, the heart of the matter. Deference was inherent in Schlink's anti-German pro-Jewish nationalism. She deferred to Israel. Similarly, deference was inherent in Schlink's female and gender-transcending paradigms of ideal repentance. The deference to God she exhorted from her followers was absolute. Make no mistake: neither form of deference served as a reification of the traditional notion that women must be submissive. Rather, I maintain that these twin forms of deference served as a "covert strategies of empowerment," to borrow the phrase from Alison Weber. In their radical deference to Israel in their nationalism and to God in their repentance, the Sisters of Mary were up-ending socio-political and theological norms and, in so doing, empowering themselves as women.

Rather than embrace a path toward political victory for Germany, the sisters elevated themselves as prophetic leaders, heralds of Germany's manifest political and spiritual defeat. In their assertion of Germany's second-tier status – as all nations apart from Israel were in their eyes – they presented themselves as the spokespeople of God and of God's people, the Jews. By defining themselves as those worthy of advancing this message and that mission, they defined themselves as Germany's spiritual elite.

In the characteristics of that elite, as outlined by Schlink, the virtues of bride, mother, and child were synonymous with the virtues of a true priest. While Schlink and the sisters turned to sources outside of their community to articulate this vision, notably the Bible and medieval Catholicism, they defined the ideal Christian on their own terms. While it would be simplistic to suggest that the sisters easily met their own criteria, by living lives of extreme devotion, they bore

the outward signs of living the sort of lives that they exhorted from others. One might accuse them of severity, but not of hypocrisy. They not others were the ones who defined righteousness for their community and they lived in light of that definition.

Empowered by their nationalism and by their penitential lives as women, the members of the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary embodied a gendered nationalism. Their ideology was gendered in the sense that it was superficially self-deprecating but ultimately served to empower them as women. By prostrating themselves before God as sinful, they made themselves holy in the midst of an unholy and lost nation. Schlink and the sisters rejected the fundamental premise of the Third Reich. They found victory in submission to God, not in military triumph over their political enemies. Their rejection of physical marriage and motherhood represented a repudiation of the Nazi cult of motherhood, in which a woman's value to the German *Volk* was defined by her fertility. As celibate women, they, who had been last in the eyes of the Reich, were first in their vision of the Kingdom of God. As a form of Christian Zionism and in the context of their woman-empowering repentance, the sisters' nationalism was gendered in the reversals it contained.

Schlink's rejection of human male authority played out in the sisterhood's independence from external ecclesial structures. A Methodist pastor, Paul Riedinger, was the one who had encouraged Schlink and Madauss to pursue the formation of a religious order during the twilight years of the Third Reich. Riedinger himself was a member in a brotherhood of celibate Protestant pastors. Schlink later dubbed him the "spiritual father" of her sisterhood. Yet on his deathbed in 1949, Riedinger also exhorted Schlink never to submit to male authority in her leadership of the sisterhood. She obeyed – another covert strategy of empowerment. We must remember at this point the circumscribed roles in which women in the Protestant churches in Germany found themselves in the post-war period. This was after a period of brief prominence during the war, when male

pastors were in increasingly short supply and women leaders, especially pastors' wives, stepped in. The place of female church leaders was tenuous throughout most of the 1950s. In this context, countless male church leaders attempted to guide Schlink's sisterhood away from its self-perceived vocation. Some wanted to fold the sisterhood into a broader, ecumenical fellowship. Others sought to guide the sisters into diaconal work, which stood at odds with their twin emphasis on evangelism and contemplation, both of which were defined by a call to repentance.

The clearest expression of the sisters' independence has been their construction of *Kanaan*. Independent of official Protestant church authority structures, Schlink and her sisterhood created a space for themselves on the margins. They received significant criticism, both because of their monastic vocation as Protestants and because of their independence as women. Nonetheless, they succeeded in building a sizeable motherhouse, retreat center, and prayer gardens, which together constitute *Kanaan*.

The same inverted nationalism and gendered penitence that define Schlink's writings and the practices of the sisterhood mark the landscape of *Kanaan* as well. *Kanaan* is an alternate Israel and an alternative to Germany. It is a Christian Zionist retreat center, permeated with references to Christ and to Zion. With its own Sea of Galilee, River Jordan, and Mount Tabor, this is the sisters' own private Holy Land. But, with its Garden of Jesus' Suffering and Mount of the Beatitudes, it is highly stylized and Christianized version of that land.

Kanaan is also a place for repentance. At the Chapel of Jesus' Suffering, the sisters commemorate Good Friday at a worship service every Friday. They save their joyful celebrations of Jesus' resurrection for Sunday morning at their larger Jesus Proclamation Chapel. The Garden of Jesus' Suffering dominates nearly a quarter of *Kanaan's* outdoor spaces. Sisters and visitors alike can

sit, contemplate, and pray on benches before sculptures and reliefs depicting Christ at various moments in his progress toward the cross. These depictions vary from traditional to beardless. The relative masculinity of images of Christ is in flux. As a place for repentance, *Kanaan* provides spaces for repentance and, thus, personal empowerment for any who would enter and, especially, for the community of women who call it their home.

Schlink and the sisterhood's nationalism and repentance have come at a price. Some former members of the group attest to the austerity of life as a sister. In particular, some claim that the formal practice of weekly rebuke of younger sisters by older sisters creates a culture of defeatism. Apparently, younger sisters do not have the opportunity to defend their actions and motivations in this process, but must endure while their elders highlight their shortcomings. This practice of the Chapter of Faults is not unique to the Sisterhood of Mary, but seems to be a common reason for complaint among those who have left the group.

Perhaps the lack of external accountability leaves the leadership of the sisterhood in danger of certain excesses. In light of the sisterhood's gendered nationalism, it is equally plausible that the weight of responsibility that they have sensed has heightened their zeal, bringing some to their breaking point, the fate of their nation resting on their shoulders.

Post-World War II Europe was an awkward setting in which to be German, a Christian, and a woman. The members of the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary resolved the tensions that they perceived between their nation's recent past and their faith by crafting an ideology that elevated them even as it denigrated Germany – as it well deserved to be treated for killing God's people. For Schlink and for her sisterhood, only earnest repentance could atone for the sins of the Fatherland. Those adopting the attitudes of women and children were the only ones suited for the task. They

were citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, establishing a stronghold for their king this side of the hereafter.