

German Christians and Germany's Boundaries

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It was rather as one had supposed. The massive show of solidarity with the CDU in the last election presented by German Catholicism in all its shapes and forms was the last outing before being trundled into the Church History Museum. Much has happened between the General Election last October and the local North-Rhine Westphalian elections in July. Rumour had it that an anonymous article which appeared in the March number of *Wort und Wahrheit* was written by none other than Bernard Hanssler. *Wort und Wahrheit* is a periodical that tends to reflect episcopal opinion; Bernard Hanssler is the priest in charge of the Central Committee of German Catholicism; the article was entitled 'The end of political Catholicism'.

Dr Günther Schreiber has recently suggested¹ that catholic authorities have recognised that some basic re-thinking of the official political attitudes of German Catholicism was necessary. His analysis of the situation raises considerable doubts about the motives behind this reappraisal. It has been much more a defensive reaction to the inevitable break-up of the Adenauer ideology than a genuine attempt to think out for instance, the implications of the Second Vatican Council; much more a withdrawal from a position that was distasteful to democratic opinion, than a realisation of what the church's presence in a modern society might mean. The North-Rhine Westphalian elections were heralded by a pastoral letter stressing the neutrality of the church towards the political parties. The result bore out the tendencies we noted in our last report:² the SPD increased its votes by 6 per cent, and emerged the strongest party, failing by only 1 per cent to gain an overall majority. Adenauer, who had carefully padded out this industrial Ruhr state after the war with catholic regions to counteract the weight of the socialist vote, was furious.

It is not the purpose of this article to conduct a postmortem on political catholicism in Germany. It died of its own pretentiousness; its sickness was the peculiarity of the situation in Germany after the war. The church snatched the power that was offered her and wielded it as long as she could. Adenauer was removed from the political scene, and the ideological view of politics as a struggle between communism and catholicism lost its meaning in normal

¹*Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*. May 1966. 'Katholiken und die neuformierte CDU'.

²*New Blackfriars*. January 1966. 'How progressive is the German Church?'.

political language. The writing was on the wall and catholic intellectuals were spelling it out loud and clear. The question now is what this very active church which echoes with discussions about 'Church and World' can actually do about political commitment. To many political commentators the answer to the question is simply a matter of how long it will take for German Catholicism to realise that the only serious christian thinking taking place in German politics today comes from the Evangelical Church. Recently this Church has been very much to the fore in German political life as the result of its *Denkschrift* – an investigation into the problem of Germany's eastern borders and her refugees.³ Precisely at the moment when political catholicism was disintegrating, this serious Evangelical political contribution was being made. What is more, as we shall show, it involved German Catholicism, very much against its will at first, and may have taught it the lesson it so desperately needed.

The Position of the Evangelical Church

The Evangelical tradition of political involvement is absolutely different from that of German Catholicism. The Evangelical church took time to recover after the war. Its division between East and West Germany, the internal tensions within the church itself, made it necessary that every view be represented. 'If', as Heinz Theo Risse wrote,⁴ 'seen from a confessional standpoint, its lack of unity was a drawback, its polycentric structure started to prove itself a boon for a democratic society. It remained more independent; it remained, more than any other large group, open, more prepared to discuss. In this way, the Evangelical church, just because she is so varied, and carries so many contrasts within her, has become a great force for unity as she is present through Evangelical christians in practically all areas of society, including many out of which catholicism has long since emigrated, or in which it was never present'. Instead of attempting after the war to pose as the one element in German society which had remained untouched by National Socialism, the Evangelical church immediately identified herself with the guilt of the past. This was her moral access to political commitment and this is the gap which German Catholicism has never been able to bring itself to bridge. Gerhard Ottmar, in an article discussing the criticisms levelled against the Evangelical *Denkschrift*,⁵ makes precisely this point. The *Denkschrift* appeared on the twentieth anniversary of the famous Stuttgart 'Confession of Guilt', in which the Evangelical church accepted her guilt for her behaviour under the Nazis. 'This document of political involvement provided the basis of subsequent Evangelical activity – we accuse ourselves that we did not confess

³Eine evangelische Denkschrift; Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn.

⁴'Kirchliches Interesse oder säkulare Diakonie?' – *Kontexte*. Band 2; 1966.

⁵*Blätter*. December 1965. 'Zur Kritik an der Denkschrift der EKD'.

our faith more courageously, that we were not more faithful in prayer, that our faith lacked joy, our love was cold', "Did not confess our faith more courageously" – that means, Ottmar comments 'that we failed as christians to declare courageously what the gospel had to say on political, economic, social and ethical questions – for example, the way we treated the Poles. The criticism started to grow within the Church that the neutral attitude of its officials to the actual problems of our people would make a new confession of guilt necessary before long'. Whereas the political attitude of German Catholicism tends to find seriousness in the assertion of its privileges – the propagation of catholic schooling, the morality of family life, and campaigns to wipe the smile off those bikini-clad Mädchen that look down on the faithful from every magazine kiosk, the Evangelical church is interested in the serious political problems of a society in which she is already involved. The one attitude applies principles, the other is interpretative, hermeneutical.

The Evangelical church's *Denkschrift* attempts to interpret a problem that has for some time been growing into a festering sore in German society: the problem of the refugees and the relations of the German people with their eastern neighbours. To appreciate the significance of this document one must understand just how delicate the boundary question has become for German politics today. The dominant theme that runs through the criticisms of this politics is that it is sustaining illusions which are extremely dangerous not only for the health of German society but also for the peace of Europe.

The Boundary and Refugee Problem

Dieter Senghaas, a contributor to *Politik Ohne Vernunft*⁶, shows how complicated the illusions have become. 'We go on thinking that our land which had ceased to be a unified state, which was totally destroyed in the war, whose political potential was eliminated, remains the centre of the world. Even as we lay defeated, starving, despised, we must pay our tribute to the conflicts of a world divided into great powers. We rushed in both parts of Germany into fortified positions of civil war. And we were far from being mere marionettes. It is true, to a certain extent, that we won the admiration of the world. But it certainly did not make us any the less feared that our peculiar mixture of power and delusion reminded the world of dubious traits in our political tradition. We go on imagining that we are the model of the world constellation and all the time our situation becomes more of an exception. We project our situation on the world. While the world around us starts to understand how it can gradually alter the situation, we are always pressing each new experience and perspective into

⁶Rowohlt 1965. This important book collected essays by young members of the universities of Frankfurt, Berlin and Tübingen, who had been working on sociological and political problems under the direction of men like Adorno, Horkheimer, Abendroth, Mitscherlich, and Jens.

worn-out interpretative schemata. We are only capable of understanding the future as a prolongation of the past. We cling to idols and taboos which gradually estrange us from the world'. Whereas in Adenauer's time the illusion served to strengthen political manoeuvre, nowadays political manoeuvre operates to maintain these illusions – illusions which express themselves in territorial claims.

Karl Kaiser, who belongs to a study group in Harvard that has been concerned with the German question, indicated recently the suicidal tendency of this foreign policy.⁷ 'West Germany', he writes, 'has constantly refused to accept the Oder-Neisse line and has insisted that the eastern borders can only be settled, together with the question of reunification, at a peace conference. This means that the other nations identify the question of German reunification with the reappearance of border disputes in Europe, and so with the disturbance of the existing balance of power. When West Germany speaks of German legal claims to lands east of the Oder-Neisse, eastern, and many western Europeans, see in it a territorial claim on an existing European state. When West Germany further claims for the German people the right to self-determination, and the "Right to Homeland" (now taken to mean a supposed basic right in international law), other lands interpret this as a formula which would make it possible for Germans to return into the present Soviet, Polish, and Czechoslovakian territories, and then to exercise their right to self-determination; to vote, that is, these territories back under German sovereignty'. This, as Senghaas points out, tends to strangle any liberalisation that might grow in the Eastern communist countries, and forces them back inevitably on Russian protection and direction. The more threatening the German claims, the less likelihood there is that a relaxed atmosphere can be created in which any sort of claims can be discussed.

The basic document for these claims is the Potsdam Agreement, which, to quote Walter Eucher's contribution to *Politik Ohne Vernunft*,⁸ 'German politics has managed to turn into the *Magna Carta* of German unity (unity within the borders of 1937): the right of the Sudeten Germans to self-determination and homeland, although, in fact, its aim was the destruction of German power, and the substitution of allied control. There was not the slightest hint that the Four Powers intended to reconstitute conquered Germany within the 1937 borders at a future peace conference'. At the very least the Potsdam Agreement in its formal acceptance of the expulsion of the Germans, indicates a *de facto*, if not *de jure* recognition of the Oder-Neisse line. A member of Erhard's cabinet, Seebohm, is not even content with the 1937 borders. At Whitsun 1964 he demanded in Nuremberg 'The handing back of the Sudeten homeland territories that have been robbed from us'. 'Such language', Eucher comments, 'in government-subsidised mass

⁷'Die deutsche Frage – rekapituliert' *Frankfurter Hefte*.

⁸'Der permanente Selbstbetrug – Zur Deutschlandpolitik der Bundesregierung'.

meetings with uniformed Youth Groups, flags, drums and fanfares – here is German politics, German tradition, true to nature’.

Any discussion of the Polish-German question must necessarily include the refugee problem. The refugees stand guard over this area of discussion. Anyone who dares to enter it without officially accepting the claims of the refugees runs the danger, as the writers of *Denkschrift* have discovered, of being man-handled, often brutally. It is impossible to escape the refugee problem in West Germany. Every town seems to have its refugee quarter. Many refugees are quite happy to settle down in their new surroundings, and would not dream of going back, even under favourable conditions. The children of refugees, and that includes men and women in their forties, do not talk of their homeland in the east. The problem concerns rather the old who cling to their memories, join refugee organisations which hold mass meetings and bring out newspapers which fight for their rights, and fan up hatred against the present occupiers of their homeland. These organisations have an enormous influence on the political parties. Their thinking has a very unpleasant right-wing extension. A refugee paper,⁹ for instance, which denounced the *Denkschrift* on one page, was, on the next, wholeheartedly supporting Ian Smith’s attempt to subjugate the coloured population in Rhodesia. Reinhard Henkys, who recently made an extensive survey of the refugee newspapers,¹⁰ comments that they have much in common with the *National-Zeitung*, the official organ of the neo-Fascist NDP. Organised resentment, bitterness at national defeat, humiliation at loss of territory, legal claims for its recovery, a pathological sense of Vaterland – all these were constitutive elements in Nazism, and nowhere can they be better observed today than in the mentality of the German refugee organisation. All this arises out of a general sense of frustration at having to live under illusions, and this is shared by German society as a whole. Frustration is breeding nationalist sentiment. The NDP is doing very well at the polls. Nobody dared challenge these illusions; there was no group in Germany capable of saying out loud what so many German intellectuals were thinking. The CDU was committed to them as its own child; the SPD was afraid of losing votes.

The Denkschrift

The Evangelical Church took the risk. ‘The Evangelical church in Germany’, the *Denkschrift* begins, ‘which as a church community is placed in the field of political tension between East and West, views with growing concern the fact that the wounded relationships between Germany and her eastern neighbours have even now, twenty years after the end of the war, hardly begun to heal. One cause of this is the occupation of the German territories to the east of the Oder-

⁹*Das Ostpreussenblatt*. 18th December, 1966.

¹⁰‘Die Denkschrift in der Diskussion’, which appeared in *Deutschland und die Östlichen Nachbarn*. Kreuz-verlag. Stuttgart, 1966.

Neisse line by Russia and Poland, and the expulsion of millions of Germans out of these territories'. The foreword goes on to indicate the pastoral nature of the refugee problem. 'She considers herself duty bound, both because she is responsible for these people, and because of her commission to help in establishing peace between nations, to go into these problems and consider ways of solving them. She could not and will not presume to take over the task of professional politicians, but she can hope to make a contribution in bringing objectivity to the discussion, in helping to form judgments, and thereby to remove some of the present tensions and to prepare ways for political action'.

The *Denkschrift* recognises the hardships which the refugees have suffered. 'A quarter of Germany's 1937 territories fell under foreign administration. This was a blow to the historical consciousness of the German people, a loss of a large field of German culture, and also a very serious loss to German protestantism'. It discussed the problem of the refugees in society and the church with a sympathy that makes the subsequent attacks on the authors incomprehensible.

The political social study of the refugee problem is typical of recent Evangelical thinking. It is matter-of-fact, it enters the political scene and examines it expertly. 'It is the first condition of responsible politics to be clear about the facts'. Questions like the possibilities of finding work and housing, and the fitting of this cultural group into a different society, are carefully considered. At the same time the *Denkschrift* indicates a deeper problem: the tendency to think that the refugees are somehow a sick minority that must be fitted into a normal society. 'The truth of the matter is that the disruption created by National Socialism, the collapse of Germany in 1945, the catastrophe that befell the eastern territories of Germany have shaken the whole German nation in its cultural and moral roots. It is true that the last twenty years of economic recovery have been remarkably successful, but this economic success, and the contemporary prosperity-state way of thinking has not managed to secure these roots'.

The refugee problem is the problem of the sickness in German society. The *Denkschrift* then goes on to discuss the position of the lands to the east of the Oder-Neisse. It quotes with approval Walter Görlitz: 'When we try to understand Polish politics we must be quite clear about the fact that the provisional Polish government took over a devastated plundered East Germany that had been completely destroyed. It was a dreadful situation for a government. Poland had lost about six and a half million people in battle, through murder, hunger, starvation, deportation, etc. . . . The Polish government stresses again and again that the possession of its new western territories is a matter of life and death for it. This is not a question of communists and non-communists, state against catholic church. Cardinal Wyszyński declared that the fact that the western territories of Poland are part of the Polish mother land is irrevocable'.

Meanwhile 'public opinion in West Germany is fed by a sense of legal injustice; it feels that the annexation of these territories and the eviction of millions of Germans is a breach of the 'Right to Homeland' which belongs to all nations and groups of people. The restoration of the 1937 boundaries has become a matter of national honour and the maintenance of the historical and cultural possession of our people, and is demanded as a clear right in law'. The whole argument has hinged on the absolute nature of 'Right to Homeland', and it was an indication of the shape of things to come when the *Denkschrift* stated: 'The service of this *Denkschrift* must be to advise caution in applying arguments from international law. It is less developed and shows, in its certain and lasting norms, weaker contours than civil law. The clarification of the legal situation and the solution of the conflicts would be much nearer if all sides could replace mere wishful thinking with well-founded legal arguments'. 'Before the treaty is decided upon, the German people must make up its mind if it ought and wants to sacrifice itself for its feeling that its rights have been violated. As a result of the terrible injustice that was done to the eastern peoples, and especially to Poland, in the name of the German people, we must start to think about the compensation that we might give for the rights we violated. We must face up to the unavoidable question, that, if not a political, then an international law objection might be raised against a German claim for the total restoration of its eastern territories. The inheritance of an evil past places upon the German nation a special responsibility to respect the vital rights of the Polish people and to give it the land it needs for its development'.

The specifically theological section of the *Denkschrift* develops its analysis within a dialectic between two groups of theologians both of whose views it examines sympathetically. 'The one group puts a much stronger emphasis, in its ethical thinking, on the reality of a world determined by sin. For it, the structural form of fallen existence belongs to the order which God gave and preserves. Regard for the order stems the power of sin, and leads the conscience in each concrete case. In the other group it was denied that moral decisions could be orientated to given "order-principles," or an unchangeable existence-relationship to the world. It says that the "order-principles" leave gaps in which man can withdraw from total allegiance to the lordship and claims of Jesus Christ. The preaching of concrete christian obedience must displace the search for a fixed system of norms'. The first group is criticised for its tendency to leave the world as it is. 'It fails to apply the power of reconciliation which springs from the heart of christian faith. It even justifies inaction and appeals for support to the will of God'. The second group tends to be too arbitrary. 'The anchoring of the ethical and political decision in the centre of faith leaves little room for differing points of view within the christian community'. 'These conflicts about ethical principles have been passionately discussed amongst us, especially in

the question of nuclear weapons'. The *Denkschrift* inclined to the first group of theologians. In the case of the 'Right to Homeland' debate, for instance, the *Denkschrift*, while acknowledging Luther's claim that this is one of the gifts God gives to mankind, points out that this can be exaggerated and become quite meaningless in a mobile society. It can also be a positive hindrance to a refugee trying to settle down in a new country. 'Theologically, man does not have an unconditional right to homeland'.

Coming to the problem of the relationship between Germany and Poland the *Denkschrift* points out that 'without mutual respect and without the will to begin again on the basis of reconciliation, international peace is unthinkable. Working for this peace depends on establishing the best possible order. Theology accepts the possibility of establishing such an order, but it must be added that Evangelical ethics does not accept that there is any unchangeable order for this world. We are always concerned with an historical order, not with an order existing in the world in some unchangeable form. It will only be possible to realise a provisional order for human society that needs constant improvement, that is to some extent bearable, an order which, in the development of historical and social relationships, must go on being tested and revised'. The *Denkschrift* brings up, as its own distinctive contribution, the concept of guilt. It recognises the terrible guilt which Germany carries for the Second World War, but makes the important qualification that this guilt does not stand in isolation. 'Guilt is interwoven across nations . . . But we must never forget that all the guilt of other nations cannot explain away nor wipe out German guilt. The recognition of political and historical guilt has its bearing on present day political activity. It would be very shortsighted to demand a new German policy in the east that was exclusively based on German penance. A one-sided guilt complex would not create a viable order; it would only sow the seeds of new conflicts. The guilt of other lands would be passed over: nations would be divided into good and bad'. 'We must be ready to carry the consequences of our guilt and to make good for the injustice that has been done: that must be an important element in German foreign policy towards our neighbours in the east'.

The *Denkschrift* ends: 'It is not the job of theology to formulate political aims and solutions; but theology serves politics in stressing the moral and human conditions for a politics that serves mankind and the maintenance of peace. In this the church should not be frightened of investigating the sources of political errors and negligence, or to speak clearly to the conscience. The discussion of 'Right to Homeland', and Germany's attitude to the east suffers under an imprudent pathos and is insufficiently factual. The church must stand for the careful testing of the basic questions. Our foreign policy has become hard and immobile. What is really important is that a

new atmosphere should be created in which steps towards reconciliation can be taken'.

Catholics and the Denkschrift

Writing in the December number of the *Frankfurter Hefte*, Walter Dirks asked the question: 'Did the *Denkschrift* committee ask for the backing of the catholics? It certainly has not managed to get it subsequently. Its effectiveness would have been enormous if the parties and the government had been confronted with an ecumenical word from both churches. The private support of individual catholics is no substitute. The catholic church in Germany owes the Evangelicals an answer'. Just how far German Catholicism was from paying up became clear enough in the months following the *Denkschrift's* appearance. As Risse indicates,¹¹ German Catholicism is so tied up with the establishment that it is not only unwilling, but also imaginatively incapable of criticising basic government policy. In actual fact the whole *Denkschrift* episode has been something of a headache for German Catholicism. At first it seemed quite harmless and was worked over by the machine as just one more piece of left-wing propaganda – with a certain reserve because of ecumenism. It totally failed to understand the seriousness of the *Denkschrift*. The *Denkschrift* appeared on the first of October, but was deliberately held back till the protracted squabbles about the formation of the government should be settled. *Echo der Zeit*, a catholic weekly, jumped the gun and published an article under the heading: 'Separate Protestant Foreign Policy?'¹² – with the comment, 'The *Denkschrift* will perhaps remind many of the protestant backing for Schröder and the differences of opinion which have arisen over the foreign policy he is attempting in the east'. Professor Wolfgang Schweitzer commented:¹³ 'In other words it wanted to let loose a storm against the *Denkschrift* which would harm Schröder (a Protestant)'. It was unfortunate, to say the least, that a catholic newspaper should have opened the campaign against a genuine christian attempt to make a contribution to peace; but it set the tone for the subsequent catholic reaction: a failure to see what the *Denkschrift* was really trying to do, and an interpretation that remained within the well-worn categories of catholic political apologetics.

The official Würzburg catholic weekly, '*Die Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*' brought out an article entitled 'Left-wing Protestantism' which commented on the reputations of the members of the committee that produced the *Denkschrift*.¹⁴ 'The German public wants to know in which direction the leading men of the Evangelical Church are going'. It tells us. Professor Raiser of Tübingen 'well known for his

¹¹*Norddeutscher Rundfunk*. 1st December, 1965; Kontexte op. cit.

¹²*Echo der Zeit*. 17th October, 1965.

¹³*Blätter*. November, 1965.

¹⁴'Linksprotestantismus'. 19th December, 1965.

agitation in favour of abandoning our claims in the east. Professor Dietrich Goldschmidt, who in January 1959 took part in a student congress in Berlin against nuclear armament. He sat beside Easter march¹⁵ officials, and representatives of the Christian Peace Conference (an international communist cover-organisation centred in Prague) . . . The public now knows that a small group of left-wing protestants have succeeded in getting control of the key positions in the Evangelical church and using these positions to propagate their politics against the will of the majority of church-goers'. This article is printed on the back of a photograph of the last procession of the conciliar bishops into St Peter's.

In subsequent weeks *Echo der Zeit* carried on the campaign, inviting comment from politicians all critical of the *Denkschrift*, assiduously quoting every sign of Evangelical criticism and offering no space whatsoever to sympathisers. And so the story would probably have tapered off with the *Denkschrift* discredited as tendentious left-wing propaganda, had it not taken a startling new turn which suddenly involved German Catholicism. On the 18th of November the Polish bishops wrote their famous letter to the German bishops and within three weeks the Germans had replied.

The Letter of the Polish Bishops

Walter Dirks described the Polish letter as 'a blow that made German Catholicism at least make the effort to take the *Denkschrift* seriously'. Reinhard Henkys sums up the catholic reaction¹⁶: 'It seems as though catholic political circles were quite unprepared for the hands that the Polish bishops stretched out to them. At least the first four weeks after the appearance of the *Denkschrift* were taken up mostly with bitter criticism. There was not the slightest sign that they expected, or were prepared for, a christian discussion with the Poles'. He goes on to quote Risse – 'The catholic politicians were so concerned with repeating the German legal position over the borders that they just could not see the real intention of the *Denkschrift*'. The situation had its irony. German Catholicism was being challenged to make the very gesture it had refused to recognise in the *Denkschrift*, and, to make matters worse, was being forced out of its lethargy by the *Denkschrift* itself. The catholic press and the bishops in trying to extricate themselves from this embarrassing situation only got themselves more entangled. It was repeatedly denied that the letters had anything whatsoever to do with the *Denkschrift*.¹⁷ Whatever the truth of

¹⁵The German equivalent of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

¹⁶*Norddeutscher Rundfunk*. 8th December, 1965.

¹⁷Everything seems to tell against the German bishops' claim that the exchange of letters had been under consideration for some time. Caught off-balance the bishops hurriedly and carelessly came out with a denial of any *Denkschrift* influence, and now we have the Polish Bishop of Breslau (who is said to have drawn up the Polish letter) in an interview in *Stern* (24th April, 1966) categorically asserting that the Polish bishops were stimulated by the *Denkschrift* to initiate the correspondence.

the matter may be, it showed a lack of generosity, and, in the way it was argued, bordered on the ludicrous. For instance, the Polish bishops included an explicit reference to the Evangelical church in their letter – ‘Please greet and thank our German Evangelical brothers who are trying to find with us and you solutions for our difficulties’. Only the *Echo der Zeit*¹⁸ could fail to see the reference to the *Denkschrift* (In trying to show that the Polish letter was directed not only to the German Catholics but to the German people as a whole, it commented, ‘The greeting for the Evangelical Christians cannot mean anything else than this’). The German bishops certainly did. Their reply is guarded and mean – ‘We are glad to fulfil your request to communicate a special greeting to our Evangelical brothers in Germany’. One might have expected a qualifying clause identifying themselves with the spirit, if not acknowledging the causality of the *Denkschrift*.

Cardinal Jaeger of Paderborn, back from the Council, ‘emphasised emphatically’ at a Press Conference, ‘that the bishops of both countries were only concerned with the religious question. In the human and brotherly atmosphere of the Council private discussions were already under way in the Third Session between Polish and German bishops. That the publication of the exchange of letters came after the controversial Evangelical *Schrift* does not mean that there is any connection between the two’. The Bishop of Essen, at his Council Press Conference, said ‘The letter from the Polish bishops has no connection whatsoever with the Refugee *Denkschrift* of the Evangelical Church. It was simply a coincidence’. He enlarged with the now famous story – ‘It all began with a Coke in Rome’¹⁹ – of how he had sat beside a Polish bishop for three years on one of the commissions. ‘We often used to drink a Coke together in the intervals. By such brotherly discussion the possibility of an exchange of letters was first discussed.’ Werner Beutler, writing in *Werkhefte*²⁰ suggests that not only the *Denkschrift*, but also the Pope played a part in getting the exchange of letters going. ‘This places the German bishops in a very strange light. Not only were they incapable of responding to the Evangelical invitation, but they were not in a position to help the Pope (in his plans to visit Poland); instead they were pushed into activity by the Pope, and, most painful of all, by means of the Polish bishops’. ‘Nevertheless,’ he concludes, ‘we will hope that the movement which the Evangelical *Denkschrift* has started, and which the Catholics have joined in such a strange round-about way, will begin to make itself felt in our politics.’

There has been a softening of the Catholic position. They are happy to be associated with the general spirit of forgiveness and reconcilia-

¹⁸9th January, 1966. ‘Die Frucht von Neun Jahren’.

¹⁹The title of the report in *Welt am Sonntag*.

²⁰*Werkhefte*. January, 1966. ‘Evangelische Denkschrift und katholische Bischofsbriefe zum deutsch-polnischen Verhältnis’.

tion. But there is still little sign that they have seen the point of the *Denkschrift*. *Wort und Wahrheit*, for instance, comments on the Polish-German situation in its January number admitting that 'the Evangelical church has led the way courageously with its *Denkschrift*', but accuses it 'of having made the mistake of getting too involved in purely political questions', and makes the strange objection that it has become an object of dispute. 'The way which the Polish and German bishops have chosen promises perhaps to achieve more'. The exchange of letters 'exclude legal and purely political questions as far as possible'. 'The bishops did not act as "amateur politicians", but as pastors of the one People of God.'

Three Characteristic Positions

Now that the dust the churches have raised, as 'amateur politicians' or 'pastors of the People of God' has started to settle, it is time to ask what exactly has been achieved. Three churches in quite different circumstances, within three months, made their characteristic contributions to one of the gravest problems in Europe today. The *Denkschrift* represents the power and courage of Evangelical political commitment. Essentially it was a lay document, produced by a committee on which laymen were well represented under the chairmanship of a layman and functioning rather like a Royal Commission, hearing expert opinion from all sides and drawing up its own report. There can be no doubt that it has had a profound effect on German politics. 'There are glimpses', writes Professor Harold Rasch,²¹ 'which show that the dawn is breaking in higher regions when the Ministry for German Affairs works out a study, for the appropriate parliamentary committee, of the *Denkschrift* of the Evangelical church. This is only a small beginning, but it is a beginning.' It will certainly no longer be possible to talk about the Oder-Neisse line in quite the same way.

The letter of the Polish bishops represents a quite different attitude to political commitment. The theme that runs through its melodramatic presentation of Polish history is 'Polish equals catholic'. Whereas the *Denkschrift* analyses the present state of German society, the Polish bishops analyse events from ecclesiastical history. The long procession of emperors, dukes, popes, national saints and their pilgrimages is enough to set more than sensitive communist teeth on edge. The Polish claim to the Oder-Neisse is asserted unequivocally. There is no hint that this territory might be the subject of negotiation. 'And despite everything, despite this almost hopeless situation, we call on you most reverend brothers: let us try to forget. No polemic, no cold war, rather the beginning of a dialogue. It seems to us that the time is ripe for such a dialogue on the episcopal level so that we can grow to know each other better – our national customs, religious worship, the way we live which is rooted in the past.' And so the

²¹*Blätter*. March, 1966. 'Erschöpfung im taktischen Spiel'.

letter ends with the much quoted: 'In this most christian and at the same time very human sentiment we stretch out our hands to you, granting forgiveness and asking for forgiveness; and if you, German bishops and fathers in council, clasp our outstretched hands then we with a quiet conscience can celebrate our thousand-year anniversary in Poland in a christian manner.'

It is hard to see what possible political significance can be attributed to this letter in itself. If this is primarily a question of the restoration of brotherly friendship between bishops, one may well ask what has been happening all these twenty years since the end of the war. It is hard to see why normal relationships between catholic bishops should depend on the purgative of the Council and stray meetings at its snack bars. The political solution lies with the Polish government, and the bishops should have employed a language that their government could listen to. Instead, as events have shown, they merely upset the Polish authorities with their arrogant assertion of catholic nationalism.²²

Whatever the motives and internal effectiveness of the Polish letter may have been, its timing was, even if accidental, perfect. At last we were able to hear the authentic voice of the German episcopate. They were forced to stand up and say what they, not the CDU, felt about Polish-German relations. The letters bring out all the niceties of national ecclesiastical distinction. The Polish letter was ebullient, stormy, full of national spirit and naivete. The German reply was precise, smart, a progressive clerical cut. What would they have written if they had taken the initiative? Instead their letter had to react to the points the Poles raised. 'Christian Europe' – Adenauer's favourite formula – is substituted for the catholic nationalism. There is just that degree of theological polish one would expect. The Polish address, 'Right reverend brothers in the Council', comes back as 'Right reverend colleagues in the bishop's office', and the new theology develops into a solution of the Polish-German problem. 'When we bishops, as was made plain in this Council, will be first and foremost a college of pastors who serve the People of God, and when we lead our part-churches (Teilkirchen) in this fashion then the shadows which lie over our two nations must soften'. The letter does not say how this collegial friendship is going to reach the deep political resentment which exists between Poland and Germany. One cannot escape the feeling that this is an exclusively upper-class friendship – Princes of the church cementing a friendship in Rome which will somehow involve their subjects. The one positive contribution is an interpretation of the thorny question of the German claim of 'Right to Homeland'. 'We must say to you in all love and honesty: When these Germans speak of "Right to Homeland", they do not, with a few exceptions, imply any aggressive intent. Our

²²The Bishop of Breslau in the *Stern* interview blames the trouble on the heavy-handed way the West German press treated their letter.

Silesians, Pomeranians and East Prussians mean that they lived lawfully in their old homeland, and that they feel themselves bound to this homeland. They understand that a new generation has grown up in these territories who would think of this land which was given to their fathers as their homeland'. The interpretation was generous: too generous to be true, one feels, unless, of course, as has been suggested, it was meant rather as a warning to the Refugee Organisations of how they should think, than as an interpretation of how they are thinking.

It is hard to see what *Wort und Wahrheit* means by suggesting that the exchange of letters might achieve more than the *Denkschrift*. Stripped of its hagiography, its nostalgia for a catholic past, its episcopal paternalism, and the general terms in which christians are wont to express their friendship with each other, we are left with a pretty vigorous expression of Poland's national claims and a tendentious, if welcome, interpretation of what the refugees mean by 'Right to Homeland'. The general tone is benevolent; on both sides there is a will to forgive and forget. Perhaps, one begins to feel, the Bishop of Essen was right. This kind of warm brotherly affection is exactly the sentiment that goes with a Coke in St Peter's. This is the way people brush aside political differences when they are striking up friendships in a bar. Unfortunately this problem is a hard political fact that threatens the peace of Europe, that is having a profound effect on the countries of eastern Europe as well as West Germany, and that must be analysed and discussed in hard political terms if progress is going to be made towards a Peace Treaty. It was the exceptional service of the *Denkschrift* that it demonstrated convincingly that this political activity must include the christian concepts of reconciliation and confession of guilt. Whereas one hopes the catholic bishops in all lands will manage to live in collegial friendship with each other, one must turn to the *Denkschrift* for the positive, political contribution. The range of this contribution stretches out beyond the German problem. How often do we hear politicians owning up to guilt? Might not this sort of language, for instance, be appropriate, positively helpful, actually life-saving, if it started to be honestly applied in Vietnam?