

## Niemöller, Martin

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and ecumenist, grew up in Lippstadt and Elberfeld as the son of a pastor influenced by nationalistic Protestant ideas. After completing his secondary school education, he became an officer in the navy. During World War I he saw action in various capacities and at the end of the → war was a submarine commander. After the war he began an agricultural apprenticeship but then in 1919 began studying → theology in Münster. In 1920 Niemöller participated voluntarily in putting down the revolt of the so-called Red Army of the Ruhr. After passing his church examinations, he became the manager of the Westphalian → Inner Mission in 1924, and in 1931 he accepted a pastoral position in Berlin-Dahlem.

Niemöller consistently rejected the creation of the Weimar Republic and voted for the National Socialists as early as 1924, welcoming Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 and remaining loyal to Hitler even later. Nonetheless, from the beginning he opposed the efforts of the → German Christians to bring the Protestant church into organizational and ideological conformity, doing so publicly beginning in May/June 1933 as a member of the board of the Young Reformation Movement and as adjutant of the designated Reich bishop Friedrich von Bodelschwingh.

After the victory of the German Christians, Niemöller founded the Pastors' Emergency League in September 1933, whose more than 3,000 members (up to the end of 1933) rejected the "Aryan paragraphs" in the church as being contrary to the confession, pledging themselves instead to base

their own proclamation exclusively on the Bible and the confession. This Emergency League formed one of the most important sources for the emerging → Confessing Church, within which Niemöller represented the uncompromising position of complete dissociation from the Reich church, which was dominated by the German Christians, in accordance with the resolutions of the Dahlem Synod, held by the Confessing Church in October 1934. As such, and as the leading representative of those known as the Dahlemites, he came into conflict not only with the church policies of the state but also with those in the Confessing Church who were prepared to make confessional concessions to the politics of mediation advocated by Hanns Kerrl, Reich minister for church affairs (from 1935). The result was a split in the Confessing Church itself.

Despite his increasing isolation, Niemöller felt increasingly prompted to criticize the church policies of the Nationalist Socialist regime (→ Fascism), and thus he became a symbolic figure of church resistance. He was arrested in 1937, and although he was also quasi-acquitted in 1938, he nonetheless remained in custody in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen as a "personal prisoner" of Hitler, with whom he had already had an argument during a reception of German church representatives in January 1934. Niemöller unsuccessfully applied for active military service in 1939, and for a time even considered converting to Roman Catholicism because of the inner turmoil among Protestants. Apparently as an incentive to do so, he was transferred to Dachau in 1941 to be with three Roman Catholic priests. In 1945 Niemöller was liberated from the hands of a liquidation commando in South Tirol.

Niemöller occupied various positions of leadership in the newly formed Evangelical Church in Germany, including deputy council head (1945-49) and head of the Foreign Office (1945-56), but he was thwarted by confessional and territorial inertia in his attempt to implement a basic structural reform. From 1947 to 1964 he was president of the Hesse-Nassau regional church. He undertook numerous trips on behalf of ecumenical concerns and international understanding and in 1961 was elected one of the presidents of the → World Council of Churches. Despite this international recognition, however, Niemöller remained a disputed figure, especially because of his persistence in pursuing the topic of guilt commensurate with the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (1945) and the → Darmstadt Declaration (1947), his occasional polemical critique of the escalating cold war and of the nuclear arms race, and his trips to Communist countries.

Niemöller, who changed from a militaristic national Protestant into a → pacifist ecumenist, kept a certain distance from academic theology, considering simply → piety and straightforward → discipleship oriented toward the → Sermon on the Mount to be much more important. He considered the → Barmen Declaration (1934) to be a kind of summation of theology, against which confessional peculiarities were either secondary or anachronistic.

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