

EDITORIAL

An agenda for evangelical theology for 2022

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'... please something inspiring and thought-provoking, scholarly, yet not too technical, somehow personal and suitable for the entire readership of the journal, a word to the current situation and yet timeless...' No, it is not easy to write an editorial for the *European Journal of Theology*, and certainly not on day 75 of the aggressive war in Ukraine which started on 24 February 2022 and is ever present. Yet I try to do so and will come to this subject which presses so hard on all of us. But let me start elsewhere.

In a few days I will travel to Norway to give academic lectures, teach students, attend a conference and to meet colleagues and friends, old and new, in three academic institutions. What a welcome prospect after two years in isolation due to the pandemic!

One day before the start of the conference is the Norwegian national holiday (to all Norwegian readers: a hearty *Gratulerer med dagen!*; congratulations on the day). I have been before in Norway on this special day and was thrilled. I am not keen on nationalism of any sort, but what I experienced in Oslo was so charming.¹ A long parade of all kinds of musicians, school bands and other groups, dancers and traditional clothing from the different parts of Norway. A long procession to the *slottsparken*, the castle grounds. There the royal family on the balcony of the palace waves to everyone, including me – at least I think and wish to believe that they did. A wonderful way of celebrating the signing of the Norwegian constitution and celebrating it in a way which includes everybody. This celebration is followed by many smaller and larger concerts throughout the city, sausages and ice cream, outside activities and good fun.

For this year's national holiday, my Norwegian colleagues and friends have asked me for a favour. As they wish to celebrate the evening of the national holiday with their family (it is an important day, don't be mistaken!), they asked a German colleague of mine and me whether we would look after the international guests attending the conference. We will gladly do so ... a good (and awfully expensive) meal and then an evening tour through the city centre.

What struck me on reflection was not the national holiday and the prospect of a wonderful day and evening ahead, but the fact that these Norwegians would ask two Germans to look after their guests on the national holiday. In view of the history of the twentieth century this is not to be taken for granted. Yes, the German occupation of Norway from 1940 to 1945 is long over, some or most of it forgotten. Many younger Europeans will hardly be aware of it. But it happened and was hard on Norwegians, harder than the Germans involved in it remember and chose to remember! My own grandfather was in Norway a few times with the German *Luftwaffe* – according to his autobiography it was a combination of a confrontation with the horrors of war and fairly good fun: the latter only for him, not for those occupied. Some of the experiences of Norwegians during this time have recently been interpreted in the remarkable films *Max Manus* (2016) and *Kongens Nei, The King's Choice* (2016).²

It took many years and efforts of healing and reconciliation. Christians and others were involved on both sides. Most Germany never owned up to what happened and what they did (wars and war crimes did not simply 'happen'!), many could not forgive – which from a human perspective is fully understandable. This is not the place to tell the many stories with their many moving details.

And now and here we are, two Germans being asked to look after guests on the evening of May 17th. What a privilege and expression of trust. It did not come out of the blue. In addition to all that many Norwegians and some Germans did to address and overcome the past and which was so crucial, we had met before on several occasions for meals, chats, conferences, classes and study days.³ We came to understand, appreciate and trust each other. As I write, I realise how privileged I am to have had and to have these opportunities in Norway and elsewhere. They are also an obligation. All this took 77 years, the efforts of many people, time to heal and ponder.

And now, after the atrocious wars in former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1999, there is once again aggression, occupation, atrocities, the doomed beginning of yet another spiral of growing and blossoming hatred ... in another part of Europe! And here we stand as evangelical theologians all over Europe – shocked and helpless ... at least at first sight. In the media (more than ever before) we see so many pictures of destruction, atrocities, refugees. We also read more specifically of church buildings which have been destroyed and congregations in the occupied territories and elsewhere which have been dispersed. We hear of colleagues who have been killed or who now serve in the Ukrainian military. We see an endless stream of refugees flowing into the neighbouring countries who extend help and hospitality in admirable ways. Of the millions of Ukrainians on the move, a few hundred women and children have arrived in the small town in which I live, some have come to our local Baptist church. I have seen exemplary hospitality extended by Christians and others to Ukrainian refugees. My brother-in-law and his family have welcomed to their home a Ukrainian lady with two children; my Russian speaking father-in-law has spent weeks assisting Ukrainians finding their way through German bureaucracy and to get the help which they need. With the influx of refugees some of our churches will become more international and intercultural, with all the opportunities and challenges which this involves.

Our governments are involved and seem to be doing the right things – although it is surely disputed and difficult to tell what precisely these 'right things' are at the moment. This is not the place to discuss this. Yes, as fellow Europeans, and even more so as Christians, we are called to welcome refugees, to share our time and resources with them in our own countries, in other countries and first and foremost in Ukraine itself. Many Christians all over Europe are doing this in an exemplary manner, often joined by Europeans of different religions or – typically European – secular orientation. All these efforts are likely to be necessary for months and perhaps years to come.

Is there anything that we as theologians can do *in addition* to these things (not instead!), both now and in the future? A number of ideas come to mind, surely, there will be others.

Many of us are trained and experienced in providing pastoral care, some of us have special training in various forms of therapy, perhaps even in trauma therapy. We can apply these

experiences and expertise directly or in supporting and training those who assist refugees in different ways. We can use our influence and the opportunities many of us have as we write and preach to encourage and challenge our congregations and churches to keep up the good work of helping and extending hospitality over a longer period of time.

A number of other issues need to be kept in mind as we ponder and preach: In a time of rife propaganda and a media war fought on many sides, we are called to think carefully and critically to address the rise, renewal and growth of hatred and what can be done against it at an early stage. Christians are people called to love truth and to love their enemies. We need to be aware of the subtle and overt changes in the way many Europeans have taken to the language of war, violence and hatred. There are the various attributions of guilt and conceptions of enemies, both old and new. Perhaps naively, I admit, and as an expression of my helplessness and also my determination, I have listened much to the music of Peter (Pjotr Iljitsch) Tchaikovsky and other Russian composers in the last weeks to remind myself that Russia and the Russian people must not be reduced to their current president and their military, its aggression and war crimes⁴ ... although as a German, I am not in a position to address war crimes on Ukrainian and Russian soil. Or perhaps I should do so precisely as a German who carries the burden of history.⁵

There is increasing insecurity in the societies of Europe and among its Christians in view of rising prices (or the threat thereof), the threat of shortages of food and energy, and of a nuclear war. In Germany the deep-seated, irrational German *Angst* is resurging in full swing,⁶ which is so strenuous for us and those who deal with us. Unlike during the Covid pandemic, Germans are not predominantly concerned with buying toilet paper. This time many stockpile oil and flour...

Reminiscent of the atmosphere during the height of the Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century, we see an upsurge of apocalyptic thinking and scenarios of impending doom, both among Christians and secular people. We are called to discern the signs of the time and are called to do so with sober judgement and hope. Within the Christian community in Europe we as theologians are called to his task, more than anyone else. If we do not address some of these issues, others, less qualified and with less consideration, will readily do so and are already doing so.

During and after the present war we can and should use all the contacts we have for sharing information, concrete help, encouragement and bridgebuilding. Perhaps we can use some of the contacts which came into being over the years through FEET, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, and other Christian bodies.

What does theology have to offer?⁷ At first sight, perhaps not much... However, there is a long tradition of Christian ethics, including reflections on the evil of war and its limited legitimacy to achieve political goals (a debate which came to be associated with the term 'just war') and many other aspects of political ethics. Crucial issues, forgotten or suppressed for decades, are back on the agenda; our governments and the people who elected them need to position themselves. What competence and sound judgement do we theologians have to offer as we are re-thinking traditional and new positions on the different aspects of

war and warfare, for instance the legitimacy and need of delivering heavy weapons to Ukraine?

In addition, there are centuries of reflection on the nature of peace, its establishment and on reconciliation (which in theological discourse is often reduced to the relationship between God and humanity) between individual people and entire nations, of charity and sharing. What is the relationship between peace/reconciliation and reparation and restitution?⁸ How can centuries of discussion in theological ethics guide people in the search for justice and the foundations for a lasting reconciliation? If there is little which an *evangelical* theology, in particular, has to offer on these issues it is also telling and inviting reflection and correction, both now and in the future.⁹ For all of us, there is much to draw on in the long, and far from naïve, traditions of the Mennonites and other so-called historic peace churches.

And there is not only a legacy of reflection, but we also have shining examples of people who courageously made efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation and were in some measure successful; think of people like the Lutheran bishop Nathan Söderblom of Sweden (1866–1931).¹⁰ During and after World Wars I and II, a number of Christian leaders sought for peace and reconciliation. How were they and other Christians involved in government/national endeavours in their countries? Which resources and networks were they able to draw upon? How did they draw upon the Bible, the rich resources of the teaching of different churches and their experiences in the early stages of the ecumenical movement? What were the contributions of the World Council of Churches which gained momentum after 1945 in these processes? What were the experiences of ordinary Christians in the different countries and how did they go about in striving for peace and reconciliation?¹¹ If not we, who else is aware of this heritage and able to draw on it, a heritage which we may have neglected ourselves as we took peace for granted and gladly, and perhaps naively, followed the lure of false promises (for a biblical parallel, see 1 Thess 5:3)?

In addition to all that needs to be done now at the practical level, let me suggest that we start or continue to address these issues from an evangelical perspective. Let's use to this end the established formats we have, such as conferences, research projects and journals, including the *European Journal of Theology*. As the editorial board of this journal we invite contributions on all these questions – even if the situation is (and likely will continue to be) complex and even if contributions on this subject will be more 'work in progress' reports than definite voices and solutions. Let's bring to this and other tables our variegated expertise, theological and otherwise, and our experiences in the many countries of Europe, with their different histories, memories, cultures and denominations and search for the answers that are so urgently needed.

Moreover, let us use every opportunity to meet each other, to listen to each other, to restore relationships and to build new ones. Here all of us are encouraged and called to be involved and let us share our resources to enable such encounters. For those directly involved on the receiving end, this will require courage. It will be a long and painful process and a demanding spiritual exercise (Rom 12:17-21). For others it will require humility and the willingness and courage to face up to what was and is being done by their country and in their name, whether they agreed to it or not. Much of this will hardly be possible without

the resources provided by the Gospel of Jesus who died for us while we were still sinners (Rom 5:8) and calls us to love, even our enemies (Matt 5:43-44) and gave the most impressive examples of such an attitude in his own death (Luke 23:34; 1 Petr 2:21-25). For all others it will involve prayer, support and time. For me a moving example of one response along these lines is the short video clip of Ukrainian women sharing food with captured Russian soldiers.¹²

In May 1945, few people would have imagined that one day Norwegians would invite their German colleagues to celebrate May 17th, the national holiday, with them, never mind to look on their behalf after other international guests on that day. This could not have been enforced at all. It took so much on the side of all Norwegians. And it took time. In view of the slow developments in the aftermath of World War II, many of us will probably not live long enough to see the peace and reconciliation again for which many Europeans, East and West, struggled for decades and which they achieved, at least in some measure and in some parts of Europe. However, it is my hope and prayer that one day Ukrainians and Russians will reach out to each other, learn to come together again, trust each other again, cheered on and assisted by the other people of Europe ... and I would be so delighted to know that evangelical theologians somehow contributed to this in a meaningful way. I also hope that other Europeans, and European Christians in particular, find ways of initiating, encouraging and supporting such processes in striving for peace, reconciliation and justice ... in the spirit of service, accompanied by prayer and generous material support.

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Notes

1 For an impression of the celebration see

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5NpIXtJKh8&ab_channel=PeterSweden (accessed 07/05/2022).

2 For the complexity and severity of the occupation see R. Crott, L. Crott Berthung, *Erzähl es niemandem? Die Liebesgeschichte meiner Eltern* (Köln: Dumont, 2012).

3 During my years as secretary of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in the early 2000s, I regularly sent conference invitations also to theological institutions in Norway – my very first encounter with them.

4 According to some sources, a vast majority of the Russian population supports the war; see

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-do-so-many-russians-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine> (accessed 10/05/2022); on the difficulty of obtaining reliable numbers see

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/04/06/do-russians-tell-the-truth-when-they-say-they-support-the-war-in-ukraine-evidence-from-a-list-experiment> (assessed 10/05/2022). Thus, it is not simply 'Putin's war'. Of course, many ordinary Russians have to rely solely on state-controlled media for their news.

5 See, for example, J. Hürter (ed.), *Notizen aus dem Vernichtungskrieg: Die Ostfront 1941/42 in den Aufzeichnungen des Generals Heinrici* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2016).

6 For a popular analysis see S. Bode, *Kriegsspuren: Die deutsche Krankheit German Angst* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2016).

7 See the first contributions in the context of this journal and FEET in the Spring 2022 newsletter of the Fellowship, see <https://feet-europe.org/newsletter> (accessed 07/05/2022).

8 One of the several criticisms of the work of the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) on the human rights violations during the Apartheid era is that, while a good measure of truth came to the light and some measure of reconciliation was achieved, the *Commission* did not fulfil the high expectations because issues of reparation and restitution were not sufficiently addressed and met. The members of the commission were given the power to grant amnesty to perpetrators, but were not empowered to implement reparations to their victims; for one assessment see D. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2012); see also <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commission-South-Africa> (accessed 07/05/2022).

9 See the ministry and the resources of the *Peace and Reconciliation Network* (PRN), which is a commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, <https://www.reconciledworld.net> (accessed 08/05/2022). One recent publication is T. Faix, J. Reimer, G. J. van Wyngaard (eds), *Reconciliation: Christian Perspectives – Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Interdisziplinäre und theologische Studien 4; Münster: LIT, 2020).

10 See J. Jonson, *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

11 See the moving portrayal of a Scottish Roman Catholic priest in the international film production *Merry Christmas* (2005, producer Christophe Rossignon).

12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch3uPbEWMrY&ab_channel=news.com.au (accessed 07/05/2022).