

“Are you able to help us get our freedom back...?”

Presentation on the Responses to the Kairos Palestine Document from Germany

Introduction

The Kairos Palestine Document (KPD) “A moment of truth – A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering” was launched in 2009. “Our word is a cry of hope”... and addressed ...”to all the churches and Christians in the world, asking them to stand against injustice and apartheid, urging them to work for a just peace in our region, calling on them to revisit theologies that justify crimes perpetrated against our people and the dispossession of the land.” Then follows the core sentence:

“Our question to our brothers and sisters in the churches today is: Are you able to help us to get our freedom back” ...“to attain justice, peace, security and love.? ” with the additional remark and **”...not to offer a theological cover-up for the injustice we suffer....”**

How did the German Protestant churches and Christians in Germany respond to this cry of desperation? This paper tries to present an overview in a very brief summary and to give a rough idea about the responses from Germany in particular from the Protestant churches in Germany.

Responses from the Churches

Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)

The document was disseminated by the World Council of Churches also to the central office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and to the 20 regional churches (Landeskirchen).

The EKD office of 'Ecumenical Relations and Ministries Abroad' confirmed the receipt of the KPD in February 2010, expressed its solidarity for the sisters and brothers but without reflecting on any further consequences.

The Evangelical Middle-East-Commission (EMOK) of the EKD was dealing with KPD and published a statement that they received the document “with thanks”, wanted to pay “great attention to the content” and intended to take its “concern serious”. In following up the matter a number of questions and reservations were expressed. EMOK questioned whether e.g. “the occupation is the only reason for the desperate situation of the Palestinian people” and demanded urgently “lawful state structures” for the Palestinian society. The chair of EMOK suggested that the document should not be distributed without any further explanations.

The Church Conference representing all regional churches of the EKD adopted the EMOK statement and with this move the EKD more or less closed the discussion.

There was no further effort by the EKD to initiate a discussion on national level or promoting any effort in order respond to the cry of the Palestinians: “Are you able to help us get our freedom back...?”

Regional Churches (Landeskirchen)

A number of regional churches of the EKD - but not all of them – dealt with KPD. Mostly, they passed it on to synod committees or commissions which drafted non-committal texts that were forwarded by the synod without discussion. The Evangelical Church of Palatine launched a working paper designed for local church groups. A move in the right direction. An extensive debate about KPD took place in the synod of the Evangelical Church in Baden leading to a “brotherly-critical Letter to the authors of KPD”. However, the letter shows that in the end even here the advocates of the theological mainstream prevailed. In 2011 the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland released a low-key “proposal for discussion” including a demand for an end of the occupation of Palestine, however, it was never followed up with concrete initiatives of advocacy.

The general theological frame of reference

One cornerstone of German Protestant **church theology** as it has developed after the historic convulsions of the last century is the belief in God's unbroken faithfulness to his covenant with

Israel, the promise of a specific piece of land in the Middle East given to the Jews being an essential element of this covenant. One stresses that the authority of international law has to be respected unconditionally as well as the human rights of Palestinians, but insists as well on the real significance of the ethnocentric connotation of the “promised land”. The relationship between the two assertions is never clarified. The resulting ambiguity allows for vagueness and evasion when it comes to KPD and, eventually, for reasons of political expediency siding with the stronger party in the conflict.

Thus in all statements issued one reads about “God's land inherited by Israel”, “the Jewish land”, “Israel the holy land”, “the land of promise”, “the chosen tribe and Gods covenant with the promised land” and “covenant and land belong together”. No distinction is being made between the religious biblical Israel and the Jewry as a faith community with a long tradition and the state of Israel as a modern nation-state.

The fatal confusion impedes a fair judgement on KPD. One can argue on an abstract theological, - and, perhaps, even mythological level - avoiding the political reality and urgency.

When KPD maintains that there cannot be “any biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringements of our rights...” and pleads: “...not to offer a theological cover-up for the injustices...” the German churches would immediately assent. Yet, they seem to be happy with a way of theological reasoning which justifies their not taking sides with the oppressed, and the question of KPD whether we need not critically re-examine our theology went unheard.

The request for ending the occupation can also be considered from a different view point. Thus KPD argues “...its distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become an occupier just as it distorts this image in the Palestinian living under occupation.” With the occupation Israel is destroying its moral foundation. Interesting enough that this quote did not find any consideration in the German responses to KPD. Nor is it mentioned that throughout the Hebrew Bible the land is constitutively linked to doing justice and not to ethnos.

Almost all reactions of the German churches tried to refer to the main features of German protestant church theology. First and foremost, one wants to prove that one is not only sympathetic towards Israel but agrees with the Israeli narrative of the history of the conflict hardly ever criticising its present political and religious self-understanding. On the other hand, although sympathy is expressed in words towards the fate of the Palestinians, their interpretation of the political situation is met with suspicion: “The concern of KPD is touching us.” but “...we do not share the theological arguments and the subsequent consequences expressed in the document.”

Some specific issues

Apartheid

KPD is using the word 'apartheid' (...asking Churches and Christians...to stand against injustice and apartheid...) in describing one of the features of systemic and structural oppression. It witnesses to the connection between racism and the oppression of occupation. With this clear wording KPD also refers to the 'Kairos Document' (KD) launched by a prophetic South African (SA) group of engaged Christians in 1985 calling on the ecumenical community to recognize the devastating racial political and economic structure of the country. Kairos SA was a prophetic document articulating a moral imperative and a tool in the struggle against oppression and occupation. It had a strong biblical foundation expressing a confessional stand. KPD links up to this theological position.

Most reflections of the regional churches did not pay much attention to this very important reference. Even the EMOK paper in its statement declares that the reference to the situation in South Africa under the apartheid regime is not applicable and “problematic” because it can be interpreted as an “ideological” position. A regional church declares KPD linking “Zionism to racism

and the State of Israel close to the apartheid state of South Africa” is “improper” and “politically misleading.” Apparently the churches overlook the fact that KPD in using the word apartheid referring to the UN-Apartheid-Convention and apparently the German statements deny the seriousness of this problem. Also the age-long and complete disregard for international law and international solutions by the state of Israel does not play any role in the German reflections. With the description about the results of the occupation (oppression, separation wall, confiscation of land, Israeli settlements, arbitrary arrests and detention, stealing of water resources, humiliation, expulsion, collective punishment, economic hardship, deprivation of freedom) KPD tries to highlight the effects, destruction and fragmentation of human, social, economic and political life of the Palestinian society. The rather obvious and not at all deniable problems do not really find emphatic responses. Even critique is raised that the description given is very much “one-sided”, does not recognize the “complexity of the situation” and presents a “mono causal” picture. More often than not the Israel narrative is repeated. One even complains that a “confession about their own guilt” by the Palestinians is missing. One pastor, chair of the Christian-Jewish dialogue of one of the regional churches, says that the occupation “is of course not at all desirable but basically as a fact cannot be avoided.” Another Theologian claims that “to declare Israel an apartheid state is unbearable.”

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)

The state of Israel - not the Jewry - is aimed at in the KPD appeal to the ecumenical and international community “to engage in divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott” as a means of “peaceful non-violent resistance” For the German churches this public appeal is not at all “acceptable” and across the board rejected. Their position refers to the historical experience with the Nazis' racist program “don't buy from Jews”. By referring to the German history the BDS call is almost silenced. Avoiding the BDS the churches overlook the fact that during the Nazi time this policy pursued was to exclude, humiliate and destroy the life of one section of the population on a racial basis. Whereas the BDS movement is meant to enforce justice, freedom and self-determination for all members of the society in Israel and Palestine according to universal human rights. For the Palestinians boycott is also a manifestation of their right to decide the terms of their own struggle and their own freedom. German churches on reflecting this hot issue did not enter the discussion that non-violent resistance as such is a right guaranteed by international law as expressed by Article 1(4) of Protocol 1 (additional to the Geneva Conventions). Criticism is levelled against BDS but Kairos Palestine rarely evokes any alternative suggestion in advocating their call. Interesting enough EMOK argues “We recognize that 'Kairos' indicates that it is time for action.” But there is no mention in which ways the church itself could express its solidarity in supporting the urgent demand: “Are you able to help us get our freedom back...?”

Summary of the churches' response

Assessing and responding to documents issued by brothers and sisters of the worldwide ecumenical churches the following three-step-approach has proven to be helpful: See- Judge - Act. From this point of view the official and institutional position of the churches in Germany can be summarized as follows:

German churches express their solidarity with Judaism witnessing to God's faithfulness towards his chosen people. Driven by a guilt-complex resulting from the holocaust the state of Israel is unconditionally supported. This is linked with the unquestioned acceptance of the narrative of the Israeli victimhood in regard to its history and present. Though the “cry for hope in the face of despair” is heard but at the same time rather strong reservations are formulated over against the facts on the ground as presented by KPD. It is obvious that the institutional church does not really see and perceive what is going on in Palestine; that in the face of innumerable legal and human rights violations and abuses, the UN issued scores of resolutions that holds Israel accountable but to

no effect. Furthermore the Israel government is intent on destroying every political entity in the West Bank and Gaza and turning the Palestinians into a marginalized, fragmented people. The historian Baruch Kimmerling calls this 'politicide'.

Even a reproach is formulated: the KPD is “dramatizing the situation”. One has the impression that the representatives of the German churches know better what is going on in Palestine and even paternalistic tunes are not being avoided. The impression appears that KPD is discredited as theologically unsound and politically unacceptable. By studying the German churches responses in regard to “Act” one gains the impression that a low profile and an uncommitted position is preferred. Convincing suggestions showing their willingness and solidarity to participate in the struggle are more or less missing. Even the worsening oppression does not provoke any bold or clear action and to get involved in an long-term advocacy process is not reflected. The German theologian Bonhoeffer once said: “Truth is concrete. Ending up with generalities one remains entrapped in untruth.”

Some regional churches expressed their willingness to continue the support of programmes and projects already in place implemented in partnership with local churches and institutions in Palestine which hopefully will contribute to a just peace in the region.

It should be noted that the very popular and well attended biennial event of the German Protestant churches - *Evangelischer Kirchentag* – has up to now not taken up in its program the KPD challenge as a timely and urgent matter by offering an in-depth political and theological discourse. They argue that the Christian-Jewish dialogue, which unquestionable is important, should not be disturbed. They also claim to have touched the issue of Palestine in various ways.

Remarks concerning the German context

In regard to Israel and Palestine the official German churches and their representatives operate very carefully and in a restrained manner avoiding any risk and daring discussions. This is very much in line with the general political mainstream of the country. Therefore the churches reactions, discussions and papers dealing with KPD reflect this feature and are coined by the following background:

Historical liability

The historical responsibility towards the holocaust and its implications - the “guild-complex” - plays an eminently heavy role. This history does not allow any harsh critique towards the state of Israel. Since Israel claims to be in its self-understanding a “Jewish state” any critic levelled towards its policy and devastating human rights record is immediately coined as anti-semitic. And of course no-body wants to be an Antisemite.

Christian-Jewish dialogue

After the Second World War and under the impression of the Holocaust the German churches and Christian communities started a honest and serious dialogue with members of the Jewish community. This inter-faith dialogue was undertaken to break down old barriers of fear and mistrust between the two communities and to overcome the theological Antijudaism entrenched in much of the church history. This project of penitence and self-critiny resulted in a profound and deep discourse touching theological and ethical reflections about the Old and New Testament and its meaning for the Christian church. This process led to a deeper understanding about the two faiths and coined in a new way the relationship between the two faith. The fruits of this effort should not be touched and disturbed by the political Palestinian agenda resulting in accusations and subsequently feared de-legitimation of Israel. Facts about the occupation and the KPD appeal calling for solidarity for their fate are not welcome. The Reformed Church in Germany states that KPD “endangers the laborious results of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.”

Marc Braverman states: “The Christian impulse for reconciliation has morphed into theological support for an anachronistic, ethnic nationalist ideology that has hijacked Judaism, continues to fuel a global conflict, and has produced one of the most systematic and long standing violations of human rights in the world today.”

Israel narrative

Israel skill-fully repeats and propagates its narrative about the foundation of the state and its policy during the last more than 60 years. It presents itself as a age-long victim of the aggressive hostile Arabic nations and of course the Palestinians are part of the show. Therefore one should expect that Israel intends to deal with 'terrorists' and anything possible needs to be done to guarantee the security of the state. This view is officially rather uncritically swallowed by most of the German Government and church representatives.

Raison d'Etat

The German chancellor Angela Merkel as well as the parties forming the present coalition government have declared that the security of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” is Germany's *Raison d'Etat* ('Staatsräson'). This creates a climate which does not really allow any serious criticism of Israeli politics. Restitution agreed upon after the second world war and the subsequent complete and unquestionable support, loyalty and complicity ranks very high in the political agenda and official German circles. Trade of arms, modern submarines at discount prices or even donated, close cooperation with academic institutions, commercial trade and commerce and every biennial joint cabinet-meetings have in the last 60 years created very close ties. Israel's age long systematic human rights violations, ignoring international treaties and justifying all activities are only occasionally met by the Government with critical remarks but without applying any consequences to the brutal military oppression.

When the topic of Israel and Palestine appears on the agenda of public meetings a very heated discussion can be expected. This first of all shows a very genuine interest in the issue. But the arguments soon narrate the Israeli position and people defending the KPD are being accused of being completely biased and antisemitic. But slowly the picture and mood in public is changing and particularly after the last Gaza war people recognized that something is going wrong. However this has not yet made an impact on German politics and the mainstream of the churches.

All this has to be taken into account if one wants to understand the deplorable reactions of the German churches to KPD. Membership and leadership of the churches are not only reacting under the impact of a “guilt-complex”. The leadership has always been rather sensitive with regard to the “Staatsraison”. Undeniably, it is important to continue reflecting the meaning of historical legacies, at any rate, one of the dimensions of the holocaust, and the sincerity of any individuals struggling with this legacy is not at all questioned. But clearly, the reactions of the German churches to KPD are influenced by a desire to toe the line of the state. Any critique will have to deal with this.

Reaction from church-based organisations, grass-root movements, action groups and other organisations in Germany

Whereas KPD on the official church level was received without much empathy and the core question posed was not addressed at all (“Are you able to help us get our freedom back...?”). Church groups at grass-roots, grass-root movements and actions groups started to pay attention to KPD with the conviction that the urgent cry of the Palestinian Christians and churches should not be overheard. To mention just a few of these initiatives:

Jerusalems-Verein, a mission based society, has recognized the importance of the document for the

Palestinian society and the ecumenical movement. It calls for an end of the occupation and refuses to accept that land claims can be based on biblical-theological arguments.

The Council of Churches Baden-Wuerttemberg (ACK) launched in 2010 a comprehensive study guide to KPD and included a report of delegates of the ACK on a visit to Palestine. The synod of the regional church (Evangelical Church of Wuerttemberg) recommended the study guide to the parishes.

Theological working group Ostfriesland expressed its solidarity with the KPD and concluded that there is only one option: "...to stretch out the hand and help."

Pax Christi, a well known catholic organisation, welcomed the document and appreciated the theological arguments leading to BDS. The organisation in the meanwhile has started a campaign "Occupation tastes bitter" in support of BDS....

The **Ecumenical Accompaniment Program for Palestine and Israel** (EAPPI) strongly supported the request raised by KPD "come and see...".

The **Forum Friedensethik** (*Forum on the Ethics of Peace*) in the Evangelical Church of Baden organised seminars on KPD with Mitri Raheb and Jeff Halper and stressed the importance of the KPD paraphrasing a famous phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer : "Only those who cry out for the Palestinians stand in true solidarity with Israel."

International Fellowship of Reconciliation - German branch (*Internationaler Versöhnungsbund - Deutsche Sektion*) "is impressed and touched by the theology 'love of peace' and the concept of non-violent resistance and recognizes that KPD represents an important contribution towards peace-building activities.

The **Kairos-Palestine Solidarity-Network** - a faith-based network - was launched in 2012 in Germany. It was initiated in response to the uncommitted, lukewarm and half-hearted reaction of the institutionalized churches in Germany on all levels. The network is a forum to exchange information, to raise awareness, plan and coordinate activities. The network working under the umbrella of **Kairos Europe** has published in 2013 an elaborate guide-book which is helping interested groups and individuals through reflection and background information to understand KPD. Recently the **Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz** (Evangelical Church of the Palatinate) launched a KPD guide-book designed to promote the reception and discussion in parishes and groups.

Due to the rather hesitant and reserved response by the official church grass-root movements and action groups related to the church but not being part and parcel of the official structures or working outside the churches recognized the apparent deficits in responding to the call of the Palestinian sisters and brothers. They questioned the official position, took up the matter, started studying and promoting KPD and got involved by building up networks. By spreading the message, organizing public events, developing educational tools the movement is challenging the churches and keep the issue alive and going.

It shows that initiatives are able to respond. In this way movements can become agents for change and there is still hope that the German churches could cease to side with the oppressor.