

Ilsegrit Fink: A Biblical View of Responsibility

I

To start us off, here are a few brief thoughts, to be supplemented in our discussion, on the word and term “responsibility, bearing responsibility”.

1 In the Christian occident [“christliches Abendland” is a standard term in German Christian and historical thought, Protestant as Catholic, encompassing all those areas of (largely western) Europe where Christianity took hold by, say, 700 AD, and if one looks at the original six countries of the EC, then the next nine, one sees that with the admission of the more recent ten, this traditional concept of what makes Europe is fulfilled – hence the major problems of Turkey ... Translator], the terms “responsibility”, “being held responsible”, originate from late medieval legal language. It refers to deeds already committed. Any adult can be challenged to justify his/her actions in front of a representative of the legal community: before God and the human community. He/she has to abide by the judgement of church and state – or even bow before it. One form of church jurisdiction that was to have grave consequences was the inquisition.

2 In our day, responsibility possesses a triple relationship: 1) somebody is responsible for something in regard to a person or 2) to an institution. Today this can refer to the past as well as 3) to the future. However, the outcome – the result of active responsibility – is uncertain, because these three relationships represent, at the same time, multi-causal conditions under which a responsibility that has been undertaken may be unsuccessful.

3 Ever since the Enlightenment in the Christian occident and the acceptance of civilian society, responsibility is no longer tied to the authority of God and to the way the churches understand responsibility. The concept of autonomy of thought means that every person is responsible to himself and to society. The law codifies the mandatory evaluation of what is good and what is evil. All aspects of the bringing up of children aim at instilling these evaluations in us, and at shaping each individual’s conscience. This applies to families, schools and cultural institutions. One’s own conscience is looked upon as the personal authority which either agrees with the law, or comes into conflict with it.

4 The bearing of responsibility is an aspect of life that needs to be learnt: it is not innate. It requires a consciousness of, and ability to enter into, conflict. Responsibility is tied to knowledge, insight, understanding and personal preparedness to stand up and be counted. Because of these connections responsibility can no longer be demanded as an act of obedience, as “Christian societies” used to do, using the authority of the church as their backing.

5 It is possible for the individual to exercise responsibility in different contexts, at the same time. This leads to conflict because of decisions which have to be weighed up against each other. Responsibility is not only tied to a personal moral conviction, but it can also be influenced by the mood of the moment. A decision of the conscience, in personal responsibility, may also stand in opposition to prevalent jurisdiction, e g resistance against fascism or today “Asylum in the Church” [allowing people whose applications for asylum were refused to live for extended periods of time in the sanctuary of the church – this was a major issue in Germany in the 70s and 80s – Translator].

6 Personal responsibility may very well stand in opposition to public opinion. In particular for young people with strong emotional ties to a group, a personal decision based on conscience may well appear as a challenge to the group, with the potential for conflict, e g their personal position

in questions like that of rejecting foreigners, antisemitism and the decision whether to do military service or not.

7 A broad, controversial discussion of the topic of responsibility is under way. Today it is a little-known fact that before the official “sufferance” of the first Christian congregations by the state under Emperor Constantine (325 AD), the refusal to serve in the army was part of Christian responsibility. It was considered “irresponsible” to accept the “Pax Romana” as a means of creating peace through the sword, by swearing a military oath as an individual. As the Christians saw peace as the fruit of justice, they did not accept Roman society because it kept slaves, nor their army.

8 As an example for the fact that the topic of responsibility requires a thorough discussion, I quote from Brockhaus Encyclopedia, Volume 23, 1994 [Brockhaus is **the** general encyclopedia in Germany, and has been for generations – Translator]: “Responsibility”: “ ... as the moral conscience of mankind has not grown at the same rate as his ability for action (Walter Jens), the question arises whether in the light of this insight, this alone is sufficient reason for him to be responsible for the consequences of his actions, as he will not desist from doing things ... However, this does not free those responsible for decisions from, within the framework of their historically grown environment, doing everything conceivably possible to recognize dangers arising from their decisions and to bear these in mind”. In the Brockhaus, the very next item is “Ethics of Responsibility” with the remark that Max Weber introduced this concept for an ethics which, between the “ethics of attitude and those of success” teaches us how to put into practice, in a concrete situation, decent behaviour in a responsible manner ... The category of decency – thus it appears to me today – is a norm the discussion of which is a highly complex matter, as it includes religious, cultural and party-political aspects right down to the incompatibility of differing practices.

II

It is only now that I reach the topic with which I have been tasked, “A Biblical View of Responsibility”.

1 These are propositions which came into being in decades of critical readings of the Bible, together with others, in the context of the theology of the Confessing Church, known as Bekennende Kirche (BK) during the years of fascism in Germany. [Bekennende Kirche was that group within the Protestant Church that never bowed to the Nazis, with many paying the ultimate price - Translator]. Leading names are Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Since the 1980s the up-to-date discussion within and about liberation theology, in particular in Latin America, has become more and more important for me.

2 Unfortunately, it is the metaphors of Bible interpretation rather than context and content of the Biblical texts that shaped the Christian occident. The consequences of this remain serious to this day. Lack of knowledge and erroneous interpretations of Biblical texts acquired – because they found a place in standard literature – an authority that it is hard to challenge. Even the Reformation managed to re-interpret only in the territories of the Protestant regions, and eventually the decision about Catholic or Protestant Bible interpretation was made, in the principalities of the German-speaking world, by military force. But in the face of today’s extreme militarization of the continents and the growing gaps between rich and poor and the unscrupulous destruction of nature for commercial gain, all churches are challenged to reconsider their traditional sermon of the responsibility of all who have been baptized.

3 I will now quote five examples of misinterpretations of Biblical texts, committed in order to serve given interests. If we wish to exercise our responsibility as Christians in our day, we have

to make an effort to acquire the personal ability to make judgements in matters of interpretation. Conferences like this one are a great help and at the same time a challenge.

a The connection between Man being created in God's image, and his responsibility according to 1. Genesis 1.24. In the text, the responsibility for mastery of this earth is explicitly given to Man and Woman jointly. However, this is one of the crucial differences between the religion of Israel compared to other religions and cults of the seven centuries before the birth of Christ. God's speech has been handed down, in several instances and unambiguously, in the plural. The disadvantaging of women in respect of church and society is the result of a twisted interpretation of the report about creation, directed by given interests. The "sixth day of creation", by taking over the Roman system of patriarchy, was knowingly re-interpreted in the growing church, which came to be as a Christian state church. The equality of men and women as a demand of creation is confirmed by the equal right to rest with God on the Sabbath day. For political expediency this "rest" was reduced, even by those in charge of the Reformation, to attendance at church services (see what Luther has to say about the demand to hold the holidays sacred in his "Little Catechism"). Thus the church was not prepared to defend, by a correct interpretation of the Bible, an equal right to resting on a Sunday, for that would also have concerned all slaves and serfs, as well as the "strangers" living temporarily among us.

b The second report of creation, which actually came to be 500 years earlier, but which appears on the first page of our Bibles, experienced an extension which is important as far as social history is concerned. The "day of rest for all" has been placed, as the seventh day of creation, into the protecting responsibility of mankind: being allowed to rest with God is considered a human right for all. In order to practise this, one day of every week has been set aside. The guarantee for this human right is the experience of the Hebrew slaves, liberated from Egypt. They are tasked with guarding a precious part of the creation of the world. But the Christian churches did not manage – setting themselves apart from the Jewish Sabbath – to decide in favour of this emancipatory practice of a weekly day of rest for all servants, maids and strangers. (Deuteronomy 5, 12-15)

c Concerning the text 1. Samuel, 8, 6 ff. The democratically elected elders of the twelve tribes of Israel (i.e. before the foundation of the state!) demand of their judge-cum-prophet Samuel that he place a king over them. They practise a voluntary disenfranchisement. Their reason: "We want to be like all the other nations", and: "Let him lead our wars". Samuel refers to their point of view as a fundamental error: "The king will lead his wars and will lead you, whom God liberated from the slavery of Egypt, back into slavery". 1. Samuel 8, 19 tells us of the voluntary resignation of the elders from the collective and very complicated form of responsibility in the union of the twelve tribes with its explicitly elected representation. They give up the responsibility of, together with their Liberator-God, developing totally new, liberating structures for politics and every-day life. They should not have built up monarchic structures, but only legal ones. But they demanded of Judge Samuel that in his authority as a prophet, he, please, make the ancient royal model of oppressive exploitation mandatory for them. In the text we read that Samuel, confronted with the request of appointing a king for the people, responded with the crushing remark: "If then they call to me, because of the oppression – I will not hear them". This text with its negative evaluation of governance by kings in 1. Samuel has been deliberately ignored in the body of Christian tradition.

d In the text indicated above, the military, preparation for war and the leading of war are named as interests of the king rather than as interests of the people. The fact that, in the Christian occident, the royal insignia claimed to be "given by the grace of God" should have allowed itself to be subjected to critical measurement against the standards of this text. The fight of the churches against democracy and their defence of monarchy was, and still is, not Biblically justified. But trusting in the fact that there was ignorance of the Bible in congregations and populations, the interests of monarchs could be supported with the aid of the churches in the 18th and 19th centuries, right to the end.

e As a fifth example of irresponsible interpretation of the Bible, propagating uncritical obedience and supporting the stabilization of the hierarchies of state and church, let us briefly reflect upon the largely unknown text Jeremiah 23, 25 ff. It can serve as detailed proof for the fact that the faithful in Israel, five hundred years before the birth of Christ, were not only expected to cope with religious criticism, but it was considered to be a veritable duty of theirs to be able to tell true prophets from false ones. The salient point here is the facing up to responsibility in the judgement of historical events. What does the hope for piece look like after Juda's crushing defeat by the Babylonians? It is a public controversy between the prophet Jeremiah and the priests and prophets serving (in utter poverty) in the temple in Jerusalem. God makes Jeremiah offer public criticism of priests and prophets, because they hush up the political defeat by over-hasty hopes of peace. Jeremiah has to announce that the priests and prophets, preaching their dreams, make the people forget God's name. There should never have been inquisition by the church, which publicly burnt critical spirits like Jan Hus (Prague) at the stake because of his criticism of the church, uttered as a theologian and principal of the university. But criticism is part of responsible thought about that which possibly even today still serves to make us forget the name of the Liberator-God, because of the way the Christian message is broadcast. This practice of critical responsibility should be part of the nature of God's people. A thorough process of learning is a precondition for our personal consciences being committed to history and to the present.

Summary: If we enquire about Biblical responsibility, today this also means the careful collection of information about how people think in those continents where Christians are the descendents of peoples colonized by the Christian occident. I would like to quote a very recent example which, as far as the topic of responsibility is concerned, is of great importance to me because for one, the delegates of the World Council of Reformed Churches spent ten years discussing and working very hard on it. In view of the slave trade, which had done very lasting damage to their peoples, if it hadn't even exterminated them, they wished to ask the rich nations how, in our day, they apply Biblical responsibility to neo-colonialism and the practices of its trade in human beings. The text which the 24th General Assembly of the World Council of Reformed Churches in Accra/Ghana published in joint responsibility and ratified, is a commitment to taking responsibility in Biblical commitment, now. "On the occasion of the General Assembly ... we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast, where millions of male and female Africans were herded together, sold and exposed to the horrors of suppression and death. The cry, "never again" is exposed as a lie by the fact of today's trade in human beings, and by the continuing suppression by the world's economic system ... Today we are willing to enter into a commitment based on our faith: ... (27) That's why we say "No" to that theology which claims that God stands only on the side of the rich, and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys fair relationships – gender, race, class, disability, caste. We reject that theology which claims that human interests were allowed to dominate nature ... We confess our sin, that we have misused creation and that we have failed in our task as protectors and preservers of nature! ... " I beg all participants of this conference to read the detailed text from Accra with care, for to me it appears to be a helpful example of exercising Christian responsibility. It is now our responsibility to deal, in a responsible manner, with this text, which it took ten years of careful work to produce.

Final remark Because of the shortness of time at our disposal I dared employ an aphoristic style, and that is why I look upon the discussion which will now follow as a part of my deliberations which is of equal value and not just as a few "amendments".