

# The Significance of the Theological Declaration of Barmen 1934 and “Christophobia in Europe” Today

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## Abstract

The article delves into the enduring significance of theological declarations such as the Barmen Declaration of 1934 and their relevance in contemporary discourse, particularly regarding issues like Christophobia in Europe. It explores the historical contexts and theological underpinnings of declarations like Barmen, Belhar, and the Heidelberg Disputation, highlighting their confrontations with oppressive political and ecclesiastical powers. Additionally, it examines critiques of European attitudes towards Christianity by scholars such as Joseph H.H. Weiler and discusses the transformative potential of movements emphasizing the power of the Holy Spirit, such as Pentecostalism. The article underscores the ongoing theological dialogue surrounding liberation, social justice, and the enduring relevance of biblical theology in addressing contemporary challenges.

## Keywords

Despotic politics and corrupted religion, christological and pneumatological orientation, Barmen Declaration (1934), Confession of Belhar (1986), Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Christophobia in Europe

## The Barmen Theological Declaration 1934

The Theological Declaration of the Confessing Synod in Barmen (a district of Wuppertal) on 31 May 1934 is still an event in church history and the history of theology with a worldwide impact. In this declaration, the Confessing Church in Germany confronted

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the National Socialist dictatorship that had existed since 1933. It is also directed against the fatal theology of the so-called German Christians, who wanted to adapt the Protestant Church to Hitler's dictatorship with their "one God—one people—one leader" ideology.

The core of the declaration is a strict focus of theology and the church on Jesus Christ and his testimony in the biblical texts. "*Jesus Christ is the one Word of God that we must hear, trust and obey in life and in death.*" This is what the first "Barmen thesis" says. Through Jesus Christ "we experience joyful liberation from the godless bonds of the world . . ." (2nd thesis). The Christian church testifies that it alone is the property of Jesus Christ, that it "wants to live by his comfort and instruction alone" (3rd thesis). As the "body of Christ," it is a fraternal community that knows itself to belong to a King who is brother and friend, poor and outcast (4th thesis). It lives in expectation of the kingdom of Jesus Christ that is now and finally coming (5th thesis) and in service to his word and work (6th thesis).

The Barmen Declaration is a confrontation with dictatorial political and corrupt ecclesiastical power, a fight against the suppression of freedom and truth through violence and lies. By conducting this confrontation with reference to God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the biblical testimonies, the Barmen Declaration follows the great example of Reformation theology. And it itself becomes a model for other church struggles in similarly dangerous situations.

## **The Confession of Belhar 1982/86**

The confession of Belhar (a suburb of Cape Town) is based on the Barmen Theological Declaration. In it, the "Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa" opposes the country's brutal racist regime and a church dominated by it. In doing so, Belhar expands the strict Christological and biblical-theological orientation of Barmen in terms of Trinity theology. Jesus Christ rules the church in communion with God the Creator and the Holy Spirit. Faith in Jesus Christ and trust in the power of the divine spirit and its liberating and beneficial work of connecting people enable us to confront racist, divisive and oppressive forces in politics and the churches.

Some South African observers reported: As long as we only tried to fight politically and morally against the racist apartheid regime, liberating developments did not succeed. Only when we exposed the political and ecclesiastical machinations and forces in a theologically oriented way did the processes of change begin.

The revolutionary power of a theology based on Jesus Christ and the biblical traditions was demonstrated by Martin Luther in his famous Heidelberg Disputation on 26 April 1518.

## **The Heidelberg Disputation 1518**

The Heidelberg Disputation is also about a peaceful and yet combative debate with oppressive politics and a church that is just as oppressive, based on Jesus Christ and biblical theology.

Luther had initially spoken out against indulgences and the sale of indulgences in sermons. Moved by deep concern, he wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz and his diocesan

bishop of Brandenburg on 31 October 1517, the day we now regard as the beginning of the Reformation: “I deplore the misconception among the people... The unfortunate souls believe that if they only redeem letters of indulgence, they are certain of their salvation. Thus, dear Father, the souls entrusted to your care are being taught to die.” Then Luther’s tone became sharper: “What a disgrace for a bishop if he has not a word for the Gospel and merely lets the noise of indulgences go out to his people.”

Luther had provocatively asked in the accompanying theses: “Why does the Pope not free all souls from purgatory at the same time for the sake of the most holy love”, why are only individual people willing to pay “for the sake of the most disastrous money”? Repentance can only come from the realization of man’s guilt of sin and the grace of God. Both, however, are revealed when Christians “strive to follow their head Christ through the cross, death and hell.”

As it became increasingly clear that the attacks on the sale of indulgences were becoming a public accusation against the abuse of ecclesiastical power and the spread of false religious doctrine, the attacks on Luther intensified. In this volatile situation, Luther’s superiors repeatedly asked him to show consideration for the reputation of the Augustinian Order: “For the other orders were already hooting with joy... the Augustinians had to burn too.” Presumably on 13 April 1518, Luther set off from Wittenberg—initially a long distance on foot—to attend the general assembly of the Augustinian Hermits in Heidelberg on 25 and 26 April 1518.

He had prepared a major, even revolutionary confrontation with the prevailing scholastic and metaphysical theology of his time, which he saw as the basis of the disastrous practice of indulgences. Luther’s twenty-eight theological and twelve philosophical theses were discussed by five doctors of theology in the presence of a large audience.

The core ideas are the theses: He is not rightly called a theologian who perceives and understands God’s invisible nature through his works. Luther accuses scholastic theologians of trying to sneak into “absolute speculations about the divinity.” Rather, he is rightly called a theologian who understands that which is visible of God’s nature and turned towards the world as represented in suffering and the cross. God has turned his humanity and weakness towards the world in Jesus Christ. God wants Him, God, to be recognized through suffering. God wants to reject the “wisdom of the invisible” and replace it with a “wisdom of the visible.”

The theology of the cross is a revolutionary theology. Only in the light of Jesus’ life and the “outpouring” of his spirit on humanity in the power of his resurrection can this revolution be grasped in its full extent. It is directed—as Luther clearly recognizes—against concepts and ideas of God that are only formed in profound speculations and are only accessible to intellectual elites. And it is directed against forms of religiosity that ignore God’s confrontation with the suffering, hardship and manifold self-endangerment of the world and human beings.

The Christological and biblical-theologically oriented theology of the Reformation led to a comprehensive educational movement that was conducive to long-term developments promoting human emancipation and freedom.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Michael Welker, Michael Beintker, and Albert de Lange (eds.), *Europa reformata. Reformationsstädte Europas und ihre Reformatoren* (Leipzig: EVA, 2016; 2nd ed. 2017).

## Christophobia in Europe 2004

Joseph H. H. Weiler, an Orthodox Jew born in South Africa, Professor of International Law and European Law at the School of Law at New York University and at the College of Europe in Bruges, has accused Europe of an attitude of “Christophobia.” In an anxious effort to avoid any public reference to Jesus Christ and Christianity, recourse to Europe’s cultural and spiritual foundations and their creative development are being blocked.<sup>2</sup> The 70,000-word draft of the European Union Constitution, for example, did not dare to mention the word Christianity even once.

In line with Weiler’s observation is the consideration that even conservative defenders of a “Christian Europe” and its “Christian values” often operate with a Christological blank space and without a recognizable biblical education, even if they seem to lament this absence. However, when religious orientation is still a topic, theological foundations are often not included. Instead, a subjectivist piety invokes an indeterminate transcendence, a vague rhetoric of meaning, romanticism of nature or symbolic kitsch. It combines this with an effort to avoid giving offence to secular and agnostic attitudes and to avoid burdening interreligious and ideological openness with confessions. However, there are also deeper theological justifications for these tendencies towards a “Christophobic” attitude.

## The Power of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus Christ

Anyone who only associates God the Creator with a “creation” consisting of nature and the cosmos has a hard time being religious today. The natural sciences occupy these areas competently. According to biblical insights, however, “creation” combines nature and culture, material and spiritual realities. However, there have been and still are many mental blocks to spiritual realities (despite the great power of mathematics and music). Under the influence of philosophies and common sense, the spirit was primarily understood mentally, reduced to thinking, emotion, consciousness and self-awareness or shifted to metaphysical speculation. The invocation of the Holy Spirit was largely paid lip service in theology and piety.

But without the Creator of the spiritual world and without the power of the divine spirit, the true power of Jesus Christ and his divinity cannot be grasped. One cannot then go beyond the good man of Nazareth. With this understanding of Jesus as the good man of Nazareth, however, no convincing Christology can be advocated; rather, in view of the confession of Christ’s divinity, it honestly leads to Christophobia.

The Pentecostal movement and the charismatic movements, which emerged in the twentieth century, particularly in South America, take a different approach and, with around 600 million followers, form the largest devotional movement in human history. They see their vitality and charisma as being based on their focus on the Holy Spirit and its “outpouring” on people, regardless of their gender, race, educational background or other social differences. Many manifestations of the Pentecostal and charismatic

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2. Joseph H. H. Weiler, *Ein christliches Europa. Erkundungsgänge* (Salzburg and Munich: Pustet, 2004), esp. 75ff.

movements appear strange to Western thinking. The distance is reinforced by the observation that, particularly in Latin America, media power, political power and corruption have taken hold of this spectacularly successful religious development.

Nevertheless, a theological sense of the polyphony of divine action is also evident here and elsewhere, which can counteract the reservations about the “outpouring of the Spirit” and also “Christophobia.” It becomes tangible in the enthusiasm spreading in Germany and around the world for words that Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent from his Berlin prison cell to his fiancée and his family at the turn of the year 1944/45:

Wonderfully protected by good powers, we confidently await whatever may come. God is with us in the evening and in the morning. And certainly on every new day.

What are the good powers of God? They are the biblically attested powers of the divine spirit, a spirit of justice, freedom, truth, peace, human kindness and love of neighbour. This spirit is at work in many good living conditions—also in the law, in science, in education, in medicine, in responsible politics and civil society and in many other places.<sup>3</sup> It surrounds and takes hold of people “from all sides”—whether they want to admit it or not.

For Christians, the divine spirit has taken on a clear form in the life and work of Jesus Christ. He comes close to people in his life and work, but also in his suffering and in the power of his resurrection in the spirit. The divine spirit is not a privilege that only belongs to the established churches and established Christianity. Barmen, Belhar and the beginnings of the Reformation make this overwhelmingly clear in their struggle against a corrupted church in the name of Jesus Christ.

### **Author Biography**

**Michael Welker** is Senior Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Research Center International and Interdisciplinary Theology at the University of Heidelberg. He was a frequent guest professor (Princeton, Harvard, Cambridge UK, McMaster, Emory) and gave many Endowed Lectures on all continents. He wrote or edited 50 books and published 450 academic articles ([michael-welker.com](http://michael-welker.com)).

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3. See M. Welker, *In the Image of God: An Anthropology of the Spirit*, Gifford Lectures 2019/20 (2nd ed., Leipzig: EVA, 2021).