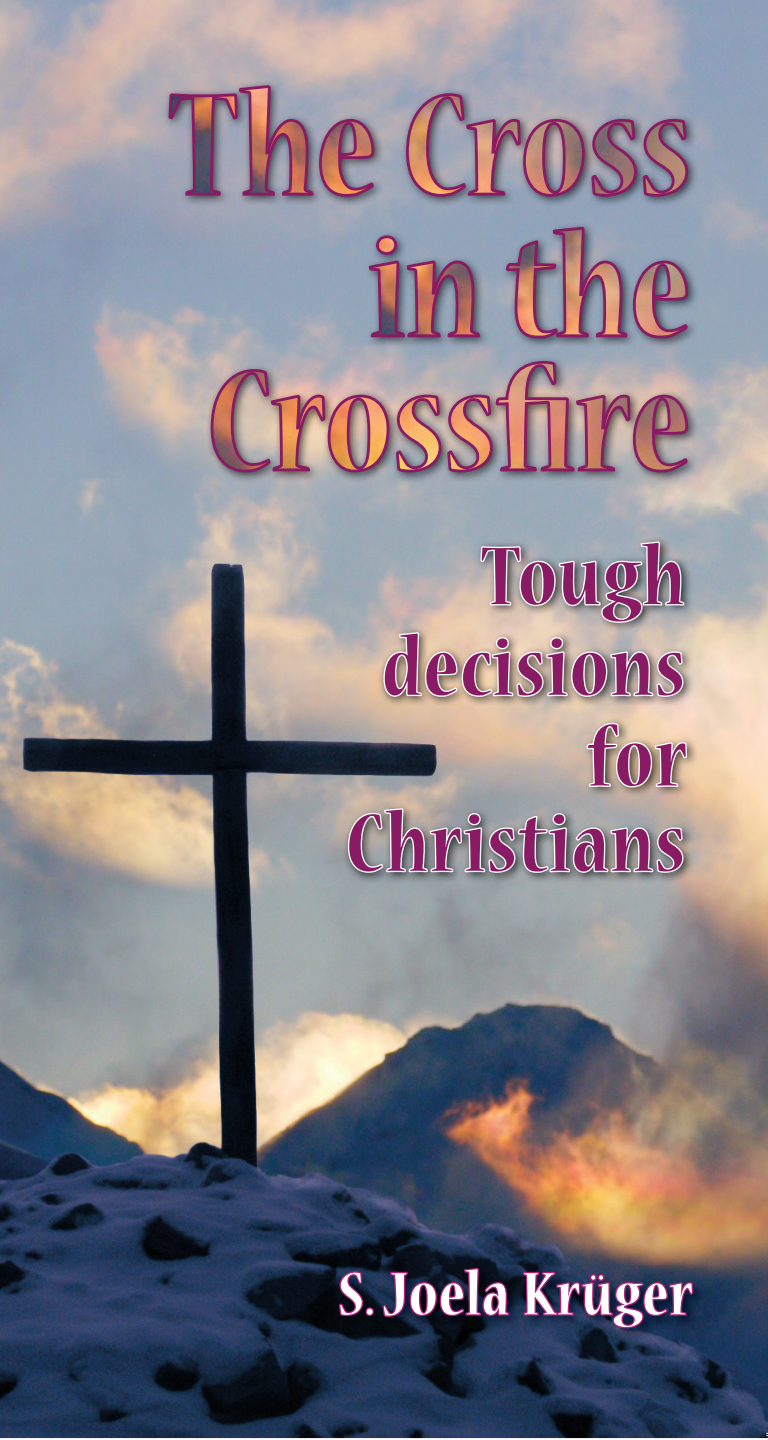

The Cross in the Crossfire
Tough decisions for Christians
S. Joela Krüger

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THE CROSS IN THE CROSSFIRE

TOUGH DECISIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

Few people dared to swim against the tide in Hitler's Germany. Most were simply swept along. Several million church members were deceived, blinded and led astray. Is this alarm bell from recent history shrill enough to rouse us from our indifference? Paradoxically, the sheer horrors of the Third Reich serve to dull its sound.

Yet latent in each of us lies such potential for blindness and deception that neither education, strength of character, nor even living in a Christian culture can guarantee us immunity. In all likelihood we will soon face a time of even greater testing. Will we heed the warning?

Jesus recognizes the true extent of the danger. He sees how easily we are led astray. When the disciples asked him what signs would precede the coming of his kingdom, he did not give them a time frame or a checklist of coming events. He challenged them: "Watch out that no-one deceives you!" (Matthew 24:4).

Blinded by over-confidence

Jesus knows our weakness. He also knows the strategies of the one he referred to as the prince of this world, a murderer and a liar from the

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beginning. Typically, this murderer clothes his lies in impressive language, camouflaging his strategies with a show of good intention. Christian vocabulary and the Christian concept of loving one's neighbour suit his purposes perfectly.

As believers, we do not generally consider ourselves susceptible to deception – and that is what makes us so vulnerable. Living the lie of self-deception, we are easy prey for deception from other sources. We have all the right answers, mentally distinguishing between Bible passages to be taken literally and those we consider outdated or figurative in the light of contemporary scholarship. We take particular care to avoid anything that could smack of fundamentalism.

What would Jesus' perspective be? In John 9:41 he says, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." Do we want to face our blindness and be healed of it? The choice is ours.

Truth – the best protection

The only effective safeguard is love for the truth, as we see in 2 Thessalonians 2:10. Our natural bent towards self-deception will be corrected as we dare to face reality. Each new painful revelation drives us to the cross, whether it concerns ourself or our family, our church or our fellowship, our home town or our country. Only at the cross can the truth be transformed into grace. An increased sensitivity to the truth enables us to see through the thickening fog of deception around us, as we come into closer unity with the King of Truth.

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Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37). Our ability to hear his voice depends on our love of the truth.

Atoning sacrifice or misconception?

With his education, Paul could have taught on a number of themes, yet he "resolved to know nothing … except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Although he wrote a stirring chapter on the significance of the resurrection, his real passion and the focus of his teaching was the cross. Considering the high intellectual standards of his readers in the church at Corinth, this was expecting a lot, even then. Things haven't changed. 1 Corinthians 1:18-19 could have been written today: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written [Isaiah 29:14]: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'"

Whether it fits our mindset or not, the fact remains that God in his wisdom took the stone that the master builders had rejected and set it in place as the cornerstone (Psalm 118:22).

The past two centuries have seen many able minds, in theological faculties and elsewhere, wrestling with this "foolishness". Even in mainstream denominations there is a growing trend to question whether the crucifixion can be seen as an atoning sacrifice, or at least to minimize the offence of such a concept.

Prominent clergy have recently made some startling statements. "I believe in the forgiveness of

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sin, but I do not believe that Jesus died for our sin." [1] – "Jesus did not need to die for God to be reconciled with us and to forgive us. In fact this assumption constitutes one of the greatest misconceptions in the history of Christianity." [2] And a leading churchman remarked, "Many people find the idea that God requires a blood sacrifice for our reconciliation off-putting. It confuses their concept of God." [3]

An official statement by the *Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau* also took the line that there is no need for the "metaphor of an atoning sacrifice" in order to explain the significance for salvation of Jesus' death. Contemporary theology could, however, still accommodate this theological concept.[4]

From a human point of view, all this is understandable. Surely we should welcome any attempt, after 2000 years, to do something about "the greatest misconception in the history of Christianity"? Yet in other parts of the world 200 million Christians are willing to suffer for this "misconception". Each year between 90,000 and 175,000 Christians go to their deaths because Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross mean more to them than their own lives, whereas we Western Christians are counted among the blind for whom Jesus is often worth little more than "thirty pieces of silver".

Conformity or renewal?

Why don't we pray in earnest for a renewal of our first love for Jesus so that we can share the spirit of the martyrs from our own churches? One of these was Pastor Ludwig Steil, who died in Dachau on

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17 January 1945. Beginning theological studies as a young man of twenty, he wrote, "It is my daily prayer that I will not only speak of God and act 'by virtue of my office as an ordained servant of the Church', but also preach by the Spirit of God and serve in the strength of his authority." Later he wrote, "Christianity has inoculated so many Christians against Christ. Hiding behind traditions, outward forms and rites, they shield themselves from his demands." As early as 1938, Steil was implicated in criminal proceedings on five separate counts arising from his comments concerning the anti-Christian dictatorship. When things were getting really tough his wife expressed her support with the remark, "If they do come for you, at least we know that the Church's main sin has been keeping quiet when it ought to be speaking out." [5]

As long as Jesus is perceived merely as an example, or as a great teacher or prophet, we will see neither changed lives nor controversy. The offence comes with Jesus, God's Son, dying a criminal's death on the cross. "For God was pleased … through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). If we are not prepared to accept that Jesus is the Son of God who died in our place as a sacrifice for sin, the crucifixion simply becomes a brutal act of violence and oppression. Many Muslims see it this way. The belief that God has a son and that his son was crucified is blasphemous and abhorrent to them. In the light of this it doesn't take much theological training to work out that Allah cannot be the father of Jesus Christ.

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Is the cross becoming an undesirable symbol even in Christian circles? Certainly the image of the crucified Lord seems to be more than our present generation can stomach – once again he is "one from whom people hide their faces" (Isaiah 53:3). Yet for all who have come to know Jesus personally and experienced his transforming power, the cross becomes the focal point of their lives. As we turn our eyes on our crucified Lord and consider the price he paid to redeem us, the cross becomes our source of strength in this life and comfort at the approach of death.

Obstacle to unity?

The cross is the symbol of our salvation but also of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. It is this claim to uniqueness that is the stumbling block on the path to a unified world religion: a stumbling block that can never be removed. The interfaith movement will ultimately see Jesus Christ crucified as a hindrance to unity and world peace: the offence of the cross will somehow have to be side-stepped.

Legitimate efforts to work together towards global peace can involve dialogue between religions. But when interfaith prayer is included, our natural desire for peace and harmony with all people of goodwill becomes the focus. Peace with God takes second place. A compromised interpretation of the cross of Jesus is the price paid for a broader basis of mutual understanding. It is here that today's open-mindedness and tolerance turn narrow and intolerant. The tipping point comes

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when Christians put their faith first and refuse to deviate from the truth of the Gospel.

Marcel Rebiai, founder and leader of the *Community of Reconciliation*, has worked among Jews, Muslims and Christians for the last twenty years. He knows what he is talking about when he says, "I am willing to sit down and listen to anyone who wants to share their faith and convictions with me – on condition that I too can present the Gospel of my crucified Lord without toning it down." [6]

If there is to be genuine unity among Christians, our crucified Lord must remain the centre of our faith and our lives. This is how the old barriers of mistrust and suspicion will be broken down. The one flock of the one Shepherd will gather at the foot of the cross, joining together in an all-out effort to save others from the darkness of this world. They will work for his kingdom to come and his will to be done.

Among those aiming for unity, the two strands are still difficult to tell apart. But sooner or later it will become evident that they are headed in opposite directions. The unity of true believers will lead to the completion of the Great Commission, and will prepare the world for Jesus' second coming. In contrast, the unity of a global human family is a requirement for the emergence of a World Religion in conjunction with World Government, and will prepare the way for the appearance of the Antichrist. We are entering a crucial phase.

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Falling or rising

Jesus was, is and always will be "destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against" (Luke 2:34). The time has now come when more and more Jews are welcoming him with the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 23:39). Yet ever since the early days of the Church, attitudes between Christians and Jews who believe in Jesus have been troubled by theological fallacies that have marred relationships. An agreement was reached in Acts 15, but the situation was eventually reversed and the Church taken over by Gentile believers.[7]

In our times, Ecclesia is beginning to see her own blindness. She is beginning to recognize her Jewish roots in the light of Romans 11 and to see the Jewish people as her elder, firstborn brother. Jews who have found Jesus as their Messiah are being grafted back into the olive tree as natural branches. This is a process we need to support, playing our part in it as the younger brother. Otherwise the time may come when we are no longer spared and our own branches are cut away from the olive tree. So let us work and pray for this vision of Jewish and Gentile believers growing together. Then God's original purpose will be accomplished, and he will "create in himself *one new man* out of the two, thus making peace, and in this *one* body reconcile both of them to God through the cross" (Ephesians 2:15-16, emphasis added).

As we draw nearer to the time of Jesus' second coming, it is his cross that will unite or divide us. How we perceive the cross will determine our

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future, and none of us will be able to dodge the issue indefinitely. For each of us personally, there will be a "falling" or a "rising".

The pleasure-seeking lifestyle of our consumer society – avoiding or rebelling against troubles, pressures and unpleasant situations – programmes us for "falling". But by learning to carry our cross we will grow strong as we discover that the Lord is there to help us. "Rising" will be a joyful reality for us here and now in the 21st century. We will know "the cross that lifts up my head … the joy that seeks me through pain", as the old hymn puts it.

Shifted emphasis

At the same time the cross is being marginalized in more subtle ways. In 1 Corinthians 1: 22-23 we read, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified." By nature most of us fall into both categories. We have just described the educated "Greeks". But what is meant by "Jews" looking for miraculous signs?

It's easy to get discouraged because today's Church seems to demonstrate so little of the authority Jesus gave his disciples. Where are his promises? Painfully aware of our powerless Christianity, our helplessness in the face of illness and suffering, we are on the lookout for any sign of God at work. We are enthusiastic when "something happens", when we see proof that Jesus is victorious and reigns supreme. After all, he is no longer on the cross: he is risen and we are on the winning side!

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Yes, this is the truth. But when we overemphasize it, focussing on victory to the exclusion of the cross of Jesus – when signs, wonders and fulfilled promises are not balanced by cross-bearing and discipleship – our teaching becomes lopsided. The problem can be rooted in unbalanced exposition of the Bible, or in shallow biblical knowledge. Sometimes outward circumstances are a factor. In our understandable desire to lower the threshold for the "unchurched", we play down anything that could hinder people from receiving the Gospel. But if media and music groups end up visually obscuring the cross, a spiritual shift of emphasis can result.

No neutral ground

Let's face it: there is no battle-free zone. We are undergoing training for the times ahead. We need to grow in strength, alertness and discernment.

Today we are reaping what has been sown. Over the last few decades we have gradually become accustomed to tuning out uncomfortable topics in our outreach. Immorality, adultery and abortion are among the issues avoided for fear of putting off new members. The long term consequence is that sin and hell become taboo subjects.

So far we have been free to opt for such tactics, but increasingly they are being imposed on us. A "gender mainstreaming programme", promoted by the UNO and supported by numerous NGOs (non-governmental organizations), is being enforced – without democratic legitimization – by means of "top-down" strategy. The unclear ter-

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minology is a deliberate part of the strategy. The aim is to introduce "gender justice", overthrowing established gender roles and opening the possibility of further options. In simpler terms, "gender mainstreaming" means that the differences that by nature distinguish man and woman, father and mother, are now considered negotiable. Gender identity is a matter of personal perception. The ultimate objective is to put same sex partnerships on a par with traditional marriage and families, with the same legal privileges. No matter how tolerant the arguments sound, the hidden agenda is the breakdown of the family unit. The end result will be the breakdown of the nation.

This constitutes a further step towards the legalization of sin. Speaking of sin is on the way to becoming a punishable offence. After all, it involves a value judgment. Anyone daring to use the term could be discriminating against someone else and offending their feelings. The consequence could well be a fine or even prison. This bleak future has already begun.

Hell-fire preaching was yesterday – and that's well and good. But now we are seeing the opposite extreme, for there is no neutral ground. Fun has long since taken the place of fear. Hell is presented as a place of amusement, as entertainment, as "cool". The devil promotes hell – Jesus warned us of it.

Doing away with sin and hell is in fact a triumph for hell. Next on the agenda is the cross. Though it is still accepted as a symbol, its real meaning and the spiritual power it represents are rejected and hated. The time may yet come when anything that reminds us of Jesus' atoning sacrifice will be

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banned. Global networking and the increasing potential of monitoring and surveillance systems are already leading us as Christians to a time of decision, if we are serious about our faith. There will be little room for hangers-on.

Wanted: fireproof Christians

So what can we do to prepare?

If we want to experience the life-transforming power of the crucified Lord, we must start by admitting that we are hopelessly lost and in need of salvation. He can only deal with sin that has been faced up to and brought to him – not "mistakes" that we explain away and excuse. As we ask the Holy Spirit, he will show us where we are blind by nature. He is the Spirit of truth who will lead us into truth and freedom. He transforms timid people-pleasers into strong witnesses for Jesus who will stand firm, refusing to flee from today's endtime battlefield.

Dr. Theo Lehmann, a tried and tested pastor and youth evangelist from East Germany, said of his own experiences, "After spending so many years under a communist regime, it's great to be living in a free, democratic country, not facing discrimination or persecution for my faith in Jesus. But I believe this is just a God-given breathing-space … We should use this time to get ready for what is ahead, when it won't be 'cool' to be a Christian, but unsafe. Fireproof Christians will be needed, grounded in the Bible and ready even for labour camp."[8] It doesn't take much self-knowledge to

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realize how quickly our strength gives out and we run out of love. This is when we need Jesus. He does not demand the impossible of us, only what he himself won for us at Calvary: suffering love.

Coming from God – returning to God

The apostle John gives us a helpful insight into Jesus' attitude as he began his Passion. Jesus loved his own to the last. He knew that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet (see John 13). Here we see Jesus' strong sense of identity, the source of his dignity, power and authority. He knew exactly who he was as he began his Passion. Public humiliation was preceded by a private demonstration of his humility. This is how our own path of suffering will begin. Great deeds have small beginnings: in the family circle, in the work-place …

Jesus knew where he came from, and so do we. To all who receive him as Lord of their lives, he gives power to become children of God. However difficult some of us may find our personal background, we have been born of God. This is our identity, dignity and unique worth. We belong to the Father!

We know where we come from and we know where we are going. We don't need to worry about the future. Our home is ready and waiting for us. We know our destination – and we are expected!

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If God's angels rejoice over every sinner who repents, how much more will they rejoice when a pardoned sinner comes home to the Father.

Our path through life is clear, for Jesus said, "I am the way". He has promised that where he is, his servant will also be. He gives us the strength to persevere. For all the grace and blessing we know in his fellowship, he never left us in any doubt that it will be a path of suffering. But no matter how tough things may get, we have the sure promise "that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

We are approaching the final stages of God's plan for this present age, and in his word he has already given us all the help we need to come through in victory. In Revelation 12:7-10 we read of a battle in heaven, with God's opponent graphically described as "the great dragon … that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." Then verse 11 follows: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." For us too, these are clear directions.

Threefold power to overcome

We overcome by the blood of the Lamb. Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them" (John 6:56). For Jesus' followers this is no "hard saying", but a deep mystery. As the branches remain in the vine and the life-sap courses through them, so we too

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are sustained by Jesus' sacrifice, not least through Holy Communion. Here we share in the riches of heaven which he won for us.

We overcome by the word of our testimony. This does not mean a testimony that is cheap or vague. It means that we acknowledge a crucified Jesus Christ, that we believe in Holy Scripture in its entirety, taking God's commandments as our standard. Clearly, this could mean loss of employment, harassment, slander, fines or imprisonment.

Revelation 12 continues: "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." This is about a love that is willing to die! We are no strangers to hatred that is willing to die. Suicide bombers have demonstrated it with sickening frequency. But Jesus has redeemed us and set us free to love as he loved us, to forgive and love our enemies. Love like this is from God and cannot be destroyed by physical, mental or spiritual suffering, no matter how severe the pain. Those who love Jesus are like a seal over his heart (Song of Songs 8:6) and cannot be separated from him. He gives them the strength to keep his command, "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:12-13)

The only permissible weapon in this spiritual war is a love that is prepared to die. No other love can strengthen, heal, encourage, sustain and comfort.

By nature none of us possess the qualities we need for this kind of battle. But his grace is sufficient for us, for his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). The needier we are, the more wonderfully he will supply our need. If we rely on him for help, we will not be disappointed. We

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will say with Paul, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' [Psalm 44:22] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:35-37). And, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

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How can we prepare?

(see also Strong in the Time of Testing by M. Basilea Schlink)

- Read **God's Word** every day. Store it not just in your memory but in your heart. Cultivate a deep love for the Bible. Apply it to your life now, so that it will be a source of strength in times of suffering or persecution.

- In difficult situations, **rely on God's almighty power to help**. Don't give in to worry, but trust in the Father's tender loving care. He will never give us more than we can take. As pressure increases, trust will become second nature to us, and God will be there to help.

- Learn to bear weakness, pain and illness in faith in the **power of Jesus' blood** – his strength will carry us through, even if greater tests come our way in the future.

- When life seems hard to understand, practice **accepting God's will**, consciously surrendering your own and saying, "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are all your ways, and in the future your judgments will also be true and just" (see Revelation 16:7).

- Get the **right perspective**. Focus on Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, who was acquainted with grief. He alone has won the battle with Satan and sin.

- **Lead a life of prayer**. Prayer will be our refuge when we feel lonely and forsaken. Jesus will draw close and heaven's glory will surround us.

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- **Overcome your fear of giving offence.** Learn to please the Lord. Seek love and affirmation from him, not from people.

- **Bless** those who hurt or wrong you. Show them God's love in thought, word and deed. This will put you on the right track for future dealings with those who seek to intimidate you. By looking on them with mercy, you will be at peace even in suffering.

ENDNOTES

[1] Rev. Burkhard Müller, 10.2.2009, Westdeutscher Rundfunk

[2] Dr. Horst Gorski in his Good Friday sermon, 14.4.2006, www.predigten.de

[3] Professor Peter Steinacker, *ideaSpektrum* 25/2008

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[5] Jost Müller-Bohn, SIEHE, ICH SEHE DEN HIMMEL OFFEN, *Briefe und Berichte christlicher Märtyrer 1933–1945*, p. 79ff.

[6] *COR-Journal, Eine Publikation der Gemeinschaft der Versöhnung,* Mai 2008, Nr. 79 (www.gdv-cor.ch)

[7] More on this theme at www.tjcii.org

[8] *IdeaSpektrum,* 22/2004

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