

MARTIN NIEMÖLLER

Noted theologian and President of the World Council of Churches Martin Niemöller gave the keynote address at the dedication of Barbour Library Sept. 21, 1964.



Martin Niemöller was born Jan. 14, 1892 in Lippstadt, Germany. The son of pastor Heinrich Niemöller, Martin did not immediately follow in his father's footsteps. As a young man he joined the Imperial German Navy, rising to the rank of commander of a German U-Boat during WWI. After the war, Niemöller resigned his commission and turned to the study of theology at the University of Münster from 1919-1923. After completing his studies, he became the pastor of a church in an affluent suburb of Berlin.

Like many citizens in post-WWI Germany, Niemöller was a committed nationalist who initially supported the Nazi Party. His differences with the Nazi Party began with the "Aryan passage," a policy which restricted non-Aryans from becoming members of institutions, including churches.¹

First they came for the communists and I did not speak out because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Finally, they came for me and there was no one left to speak out.

- Martin Niemöller

In response to Nazi meddling in church affairs, Niemöller helped establish the Pastors' Emergency League (PEL) in September 1933, which resisted the Nazi government's racial policies in regard to clergy. The PEL was the forerunner of the Confessing Church, whose members, including Karl Barth, were critical of the Nazi regime.

Niemöller's criticism of the government resulted in his arrest July 1, 1937. He was interned in concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Dachau until being freed by Allied forces on May 5, 1945.

The time spent in the camps deeply affected Niemöller. He turned away from anti-Semitic beliefs and called on Christians to confess their guilt for not resisting the Nazis more strongly.² Some of those feelings were expressed in a document known as the Stuttgart

Declaration of Guilt, which was issued in October 1945 by a German Protestant church council.³

Niemöller became a dedicated pacifist who worked for disarmament and reconciliation of nations until his death March 6, 1984.

Check out other works by Niemöller.

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, s.v. "Martin Niemöller," accessed August 28, 2014, <http://0-www.britannica.com.innovative.pts.edu/EBchecked/topic/414633/Martin-Niemoller>.

² Philip A. Potter, "Death of Martin Niemöller," *Ecumenical Review* 36, no. 3 (July 1984): 342.

³ "Martin Niemöller," Wikipedia, last modified August 21, 2014, accessed August 29, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niem%C3%B6ller.

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