

# THE HOLY REICH

Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945

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RICHARD STEIGMANN-GALL



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# INTRODUCTION

Nazism owes nothing to any part of the Western tradition, be it German or not, Catholic or Protestant, Christian. . . .

Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

We will not . . . be capable of ‘thinking the Shoah,’ albeit inadequately, if we divorce its genesis and its radical enormity from theological origins.

George Steiner<sup>2</sup>

The 450th anniversary of Luther’s birth fell only a few months after the Nazi Seizure of Power in 1933. The celebrations were conducted on a grand scale on behalf of both the Protestant Churches and the Nazi Party. One particular celebration took place in Königsberg, the provincial capital of East Prussia. Present for this event were the region’s two highest representatives of the sacred and the secular: Landesbischof Friedrich Kessel and Gauleiter Erich Koch. Koch spoke on the propitious circumstances surrounding Luther’s birthday. He implied that the Nazi Seizure of Power was an act of divine will, as it so closely preceded this special anniversary. He explicitly compared Hitler and Luther, claiming that both struggled in the name of belief, that both had the love and support of the German nation, and that the Nazis fought with Luther’s spirit.<sup>3</sup> Given the occasion, one might consider such a speech entirely predictable, especially because Nazis were eager to elicit support from what was still a very large churchgoing population in Germany. We might therefore disregard the speech as mere propaganda.

We could pay this occasion no further attention were it not for one important fact: in addition to being *Gauleiter* of East Prussia, Koch was also the elected president of the provincial Protestant Church synod. Such a position confirmed one’s credentials as a good Christian as much as Koch’s record in the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische*

<sup>1</sup> “Approaches to the German Problem,” *Partisan Review* 12 (1945), 96.

<sup>2</sup> “Through that Glass Darkly,” reprinted in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London, 1996), 336.

<sup>3</sup> “Luther-Kundgebung im Schloßhof,” *Königsberg-Hartungsche Zeitung*, 20 November 1933 (in Bundesarchiv Potsdam [hereafter BAP] R 5101/23189/83).

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*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) confirmed his Nazism. Yet a question arises: Might an exploration of Koch's church career reveal part of a larger Nazi "fifth column" against the clerical establishment, an infiltration of Christian institutions in order to destroy them from within? After all, on the same occasion, Koch made clear his preference for the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*), a group long considered an offshoot of the Nazi Party who were intent on suffusing Protestant Christianity with the "anti-Christian" tenets of its parent movement. However, contemporaries regarded Koch as a bona fide Christian who had attained his position through a genuine commitment to Protestantism and its institutions. According to a prominent Königsberg theologian and leader of the East Prussian Confessing Church, Koch spoke "with the deepest understanding of our church," he consistently dealt with the "central themes of Christianity."<sup>4</sup> As Koch himself maintained, "Externally, much has changed. But in our church the Word of Christ according to the doctrine of Luther remains. . . . Righteousness, truth and love should guide us, not only at the level of charity but also in the joyful and active struggles for our Protestant confession of faith."<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the war, Koch had gained tremendous notoriety as the Reich Commissar of Ukraine, where he established his credentials as a brutal, ruthless Nazi of the first order. Indeed, he personified Nazi barbarity in the East, playing a leading role in the murder of thousands of Jews and partisans, their deportation to camps, the destruction of their villages, and the virtual enslavement of the remaining Slavic population.<sup>6</sup> By then he was no longer president of his provincial church synod: In fact, he had officially resigned his church membership by 1943. Nonetheless, in his postwar testimony, taken by a public prosecutor in Bielefeld in 1949, Koch would insist: "I held the view that the Nazi idea had to develop from a basic Prussian-Protestant attitude [*Grundhaltung*] and from Luther's unfinished Reformation."<sup>7</sup>

In a movement like Nazism, with hundreds of thousands of members and even more supporters, it may not be especially shocking to discover the occasional isolated individual who could embrace two ideological systems long supposed to be polar opposites. Anomalous situations are found in all political movements. It is one thing for such isolated individuals to exist; it is quite another, however, for them to reach a position of power and dominance within their milieu, indeed to achieve elite status in that milieu. Such was the case with Koch, whose well-known identity as a Christian in no way hindered his career as a Nazi. Indeed, Koch grew more powerful as German society became more nazified. And so the questions multiply: Was Koch an exception? Did other Nazis explain their allegiance to the movement or

<sup>4</sup> Hans Iwand, *Briefe an Rudolf Hermann*, edited by Karl Steck (Munich, 1964), 251–2.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> The magnitude of Koch's brutality is detailed in Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia: A Study of Occupation Policies* (New York, 1957); Gerald Fleming, *Hitler and the Final Solution* (Berkeley, 1984), 120–34.

<sup>7</sup> Institut für Zeitgeschichte (hereafter IfZ) MC 1 (15 July 1949).

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conceive of its goals in specifically Christian terms? And if so, what might this say about the nature of Nazism itself, a movement long believed to be at best unrelated to Christianity, and at worst as anti-Christian as it was antisemitic or anti-Communist?

Nearly all aspects of Nazism have come under revisionist scrutiny in the past twenty years. Debates persist as to whether Nazism was modern or antimodern, progressive or reactionary, capitalist or socialist, middle class or cross class. Even the centrality of antisemitism to the movement has been questioned. However, one important aspect of our understanding of Nazism remains largely uncontested: the belief that, however much Christian clergy welcomed the movement or however much Nazi ideology may have borrowed from Christian traditions, Nazism itself could not be described as a Christian movement. Indeed, it is more often thought to be anti-Christian. Through an examination of the religious views of the Nazi Party elite, including those commonly referred to as “pagans,” this work seeks to reexamine this widely held assumption. In what follows, we explore the ways in which many leading Nazis in fact considered themselves Christian (among other things) or understood their movement (among other ways) within a Christian frame of reference. They drew on Christian traditions to articulate their vision of Nazism – not only to the German people, but more importantly to each other and themselves. In the process, these Nazis entered into a struggle with party pagans over religious meanings in their movement, a contest that ultimately became part of a larger debate about Nazi ideology itself.

To assert that leading Nazis conceived their movement to be in some sense a Christian one, or may even have been believing Christians themselves, may seem to some deliberately provocative if not outrageous. This is not to say that the relationship between Nazism and Christianity has not been a topic of scholarly inquiry; quite the opposite. There is a vast and still-growing literature on the churches in the Third Reich, which has explored the ways in which theologians and Christian clergy who were supportive of Nazism often drew connections between their traditions and Nazi ideology; most obviously with regard to the Jews, but also on a wide range of issues such as Marxism, liberalism, women’s rights, and homosexuality. But the question of how the Nazis themselves possibly thought about such an ideological coupling has not led to a similar scholarship, largely because it is assumed that the response from the Nazis was overwhelmingly negative. Nazi conceptions of Christianity are understood to run a rather narrow gamut, from at worst a complete rejection of Christianity *in toto* to at best a cynical, opportunistic posturing for the sake of electioneering and political expediency. If we liken public pronouncements by Nazi leaders to the words of actors on a stage, and the German public to their audience, it is almost universally held that these actors completely rejected their Christian script after the curtain came down. According to John Conway, still one of the most prominent scholars on this subject, the Nazi movement and its leadership were little more than wolves in sheep’s clothing, placing a “tactical restraint” on their



hatred until they had accrued enough power to unfurl their true colors.<sup>8</sup> Others of Conway's generation arrived at very similar conclusions. However, even among a younger generation of scholars, who have argued that there were disturbing connections between Nazi ideology and Christian traditions of antisemitism or anti-Marxism and who have shown just how deeply sympathetic to Nazism certain churchmen and women may have been, it is widely presumed that the Nazis never reciprocated. As one such scholar has recently suggested, Christian support for Nazism was an "unrequited affection."<sup>9</sup>

Between early and more recent scholarship on the churches under Nazism there is considerable difference. Earlier histories of the churches under Nazism were often quite adverse to suggestions that church traditions could in any way have flowed into Nazism; Christianity, so the argument went, offered nothing but spiritual opposition to the "paganism" and "atheism" of the movement. In other words, the antagonism between Christianity and Nazism was not just institutional, but ideological as well.<sup>10</sup> Such a view was in part a result of the war: The histories of the churches during the Third Reich tended to emphasize those clergymen who opposed the Nazi regime. Whereas former German Christians retained an embarrassed silence, the flood of books on the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*), often written by the historical actors themselves, led to the impression that the position of Christians and their churches toward the Nazi State was one of resistance or opposition.<sup>11</sup> As Karl Barth put it even before the war was over, Christianity was separated "as by an abyss from the inherent godlessness of National Socialism."<sup>12</sup>

A growing number of scholars have, for several years, unearthed growing evidence that points to a rather different conclusion. The debate on the collusion of the German churches under the Third Reich, which began in serious academic terms in the 1960s with Guenther Lewy's *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* and Gordon Zahn's *Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, continues today with no apparent abatement. Particularly with regards to antisemitism, church traditions and the ways they fostered support for Nazism are undergoing unprecedented scrutiny. The policies and actions of the Vatican, both

<sup>8</sup> John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (London, 1968), 15–16, 140.

<sup>9</sup> Susannah Heschel, "When Jesus was an Aryan: The Protestant Church and Antisemitic Propaganda," in Robert Erickson and Susannah Heschel (eds.), *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis, 1999), 81.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on the churches under Nazism is vast and still growing. I make no attempt here to provide a comprehensive overview. Some of the more prominent works in the earlier apologetic vein are Hans Buchheim, *Glaubenskrise im Dritten Reich: Drei Kapitel nationalsozialistischer Religionspolitik* (Stuttgart, 1953); John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (London, 1968); Beate Ruhm von Oppen, *Religion and Resistance to Nazism* (Princeton, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> Besides the works previously cited, there is Hubert Locke (ed.), *The Church Confronts the Nazis: Barmen Then and Now* (New York, 1984) and, more recently, Theodore Thomas, *Women Against Hitler: Christian Resistance in the Third Reich* (Westport, CT, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, "Protestant Churches in Europe," *Foreign Affairs* 21 (1943), 263–5.

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during the Third Reich and long before it, are currently receiving the preponderance of this critical attention.<sup>13</sup> However, the traditions of the Protestant Churches have also been revisited for the ways they sanctified Nazism and have been shown to have been much closer to the Nazi regime.<sup>14</sup> Several scholars have demonstrated the ambivalent and often positive stand that even members of the Confessing Church took toward the regime.<sup>15</sup> We have come to realize with growing empirical certainty that many Christians of the day believed Nazism to be in some sense a Christian movement. Even in the later years of the Third Reich, as anticlerical hostility grew, churchmen of both confessions persisted in their belief that Nazism was essentially in conformity with Christian precepts.

However, this same body of literature has argued with a notable degree of unanimity that Nazi leaders were not themselves believing Christians, however much they may have “borrowed” from Christian traditions in erecting their own policies. Still the only comprehensive work to explore Nazi attitudes toward Christianity in detail is John Conway’s *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, which argues unequivocally that the Nazis held Christianity in the sharpest contempt. Later generations of church historians do not differ in their basic estimation of a Nazi rejection of Christianity – at least among its ideological elites – even as they have gone much further in implicating Christian churches for their institutional and ideological support of the movement. When church historians ask how there could have been a pro-Nazi element within German Christianity but not a pro-Christian element within Nazism, two types of argument predominate among their explanations: Either such Christians deceived themselves, or they were not truly Christian. The works of Klaus Scholder and Conway illustrate the first approach. Assessing the fact that the Confessing Church made frequent

<sup>13</sup> John Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York, 1999); David Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Antisemitism* (New York, 2001); Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965* (Bloomington, IN, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Again, this is a vast literature, incapable of being summarized. Prominent examples include Robert Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, 1985); Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Cologne, 2001); Ernst Klee, *‘Die SA Jesu Christi’: Die Kirche im Banne Hitlers* (Frankfurt a.M., 1989); Björn Mensing, *Pfarrer und Nationalsozialismus: Geschichte einer Verstrickung am Beispiel der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirchen in Bayern* (Göttingen, 1998); J.R.C. Wright, *Above Parties: The Political Attitudes of the German Protestant Church Leadership 1918–1933* (Oxford, 1974). An excellent overview can be found in Robert Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, “The German Churches Face Hitler.” The collection of essays Ericksen and Heschel have edited, *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, provides the best compendium of current English-language research on the topic.

<sup>15</sup> Shelley Baranowski, *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elites, and the Nazi State* (Lewiston, NY, 1986); Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York, 1992) (title notwithstanding); Wolfgang Gerlach, *Als die Zeugen schwiegen: Bekommende Kirche und die Juden* (Berlin, 1987).

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declarations of loyalty to Hitler, Scholder suggests that “the great majority of the churches persistently refused to see the consequences.”<sup>16</sup> Conway similarly argues for “the almost incredible blindness of churchmen to the spread of Nazi totalitarianism.”<sup>17</sup> Doris Bergen typifies the second approach. As one of the few to examine seriously the views of the German Christians, Bergen has demonstrated that her subjects were not part of a cynical Nazi strategy, as is often assumed, but were sincere adherents of their church. At the same time, however, she contends that the German Christians were “ultimately non-Christian,” based on their racism and antifeminism.<sup>18</sup> These two components of Bergen’s argument are problematic, even irreconcilable; only false-consciousness theory allows us to contend that millions of sincere Christians could create a non-Christian movement. Bergen’s argument is reinforced through use of analytical categories like “canonicity,” which set the bar sufficiently high to prohibit the German Christians from passing the test of true Christianity. Such concepts, however, do not constitute a reliable gauge, as others whose Christian credentials are undisputed would similarly fail to pass. Such an analysis is not peculiar to Bergen, however, but reflects a wider assumption about the German Christians, and by extension about Nazis who may have been active in church life: Even while they adhered to all the requisite criteria for Christian religiosity – church attendance, baptism, communion – they still served to destroy Christianity, whether or not they actually knew it.

Aside from church history, intellectual history is another field in which connections between Christianity and National Socialism have been pondered and the relationship deemed – from the Nazi point of view – at best nonexistent and at worst adversarial. Some forty years ago, Fritz Stern suggested in his classic study *The Politics of Cultural Despair* that Nazism could trace its ideological origins back to apostate German intellectuals, who sought to create a new national religion, one “which hid beneath pious allusions to . . . the Bible a most thoroughgoing secularization. The religious *tone* remained, even after the religious faith and the religious canons had disappeared.”<sup>19</sup> Stern, and many scholars after him, sought the roots of Nazi ideology in serious intellectual–historical terms (albeit in a distinctly deterministic fashion), but insisted that those lineages were not only un-Christian, but anti-Christian. Traditional intellectual history of this period posited a Nietzschean “death of God” as the originating moment of Nazism. In this conception, Nazism is understood to have served as a replacement

<sup>16</sup> Klaus Scholder, *A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle* (London, 1989), 109. See also his magisterial *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 2 vols. (London, 1987–8).

<sup>17</sup> Conway, *Persecution*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 192.

<sup>19</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1974), xxv (emphasis in the original).

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faith (*Religionsersatz*) for a defunct Christianity. Here was no argument about a residual Christian discourse influencing a later generation of National Socialists; whatever discourse remained was, according to this view, used with self-awareness and cynicism as a way of masking the anti-Christian comportment of the new *völkisch* national religion that Nazism was supposed to have embodied. George Mosse, in his *The Nationalization of the Masses*, made a similar argument, stating that the Nazis, like their intellectual “forefathers,” poured a new secular wine into the old Christian bottles: “For the National Socialist this basic form could not be abandoned, but should simply be filled with a different content.”<sup>20</sup> Within the conceptual framework of “political religion,” Michael Burleigh echoes this view when he claims that Christianity’s “fundamental tenets were stripped out, but the remaining diffuse religious emotionality had its uses.”<sup>21</sup>

We know from recent scholarship that in fact much of the *völkisch* and racist content of Nazi thought found a receptive home among particular varieties of Christian belief well before the arrival of Nazism and even before the turn of the twentieth century. As Wolfgang Altgeld demonstrates, ideas of a popular “national religion” had found resonance within Protestant circles as early as the Wars of Liberation.<sup>22</sup> As he has recently put it: “In Germany, the idea of the nation and nationalism [is] in the first analysis the fruit of certain intellectual, and not least certain theological, developments in Protestant Germany.”<sup>23</sup> Helmut Walser Smith unveils the religious dimensions of German nationalism in the *Kaiserreich*, specifically pointing to the ways in which Protestantism was cast as the natural expression of German nationhood.<sup>24</sup> Whereas the conventional view among ecclesiastical and intellectual historians portrays the relationship between Christian and national identities as innately one of tension, requiring negotiation and contestation to maintain itself, these scholars show how the relationship between being Christian and being national was marked more by synthesis. Beyond nation to race, Rainer Lächele argues that ideas of a specifically *völkisch*–racist religion had resided within the templates of German Protestantism by the turn

<sup>20</sup> George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York, 1975), 80. See as well Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London, 1985); James Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (Stanford, 1980); Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York, 2000), 256.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Altgeld, *Katholizismus, Protestantismus, Judentum: Über religiös begründeter Gegensätze und nationalreligiöser Ideen in der Geschichte des deutschen Nationalismus* (Mainz, 1992), especially 165–181.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfgang Altgeld, “Religion, Denomination and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in Helmut Walser Smith (ed.), *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1800–1914* (Oxford, 2001), 52.

<sup>24</sup> Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870–1914* (Princeton, 1995).

of the century.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, *völkisch* thought had emerged within established Protestantism even sooner. As Wolfgang Tilgner and Robert Ericksen have observed, the particular theological construct of *Schöpfungsglaube*, a departure within mainstream German Lutheranism, presaged the same kinds of *völkisch* theories for which the Nazis would later become infamous.<sup>26</sup> Looking to ideology instead of theology, Günther Brakelmann has shown how closely political Protestantism could “overlap” with Nazism on a range of issues.<sup>27</sup> Exploring broader European intellectual trends, historian Maurice Olender has gone so far as to argue that the racialism that would come to its extreme conclusion in Nazism was born of the debates which emerged in biblical criticism in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Outside of the European context, historians have pointed to very similar connections between religion and racist politics in the modern world. Work on the ideological roots of the Ku Klux Klan and “Christian Identity” in the United States and the Apartheid system in South Africa says much about two societies whose histories are notable both for their intense Protestant identity and often virulent racism.<sup>29</sup> However, as with the literature on the churches, we have an incomplete coupling. Whereas Nazism’s direct or indirect indebtedness to Christianity is debated in terms of intellectual precedents, this literature has not widened its scope further to reconsider the question of whether the Nazis themselves may have recognize these traditions and, if so, how they may have inherited and reproduced them.

This discrepancy is particularly evident in scholarship on antisemitism, the third major locus of inquiry in which we see a discussion of the relationship between Christianity and Nazism. The question of the origins of Nazi antisemitism has of course garnered a vast and still-growing literature.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Rainer Lächele, “Protestantismus und völkische Religion im deutschen Kaiserreich,” in Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus Ulbricht (eds), *Handbuch zur ‘Völkischen Bewegung’ 1871–1918* (Munich, 1999), 149–63, here 152.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfgang Tilgner, *Volkstheologie und Schöpfungsglaube: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes* (Göttingen, 1966); Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*. See as well Karl Kupisch, “The Luther Renaissance,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1967), 39–49.

<sup>27</sup> Günther Brakelmann, “Nationalprotestantismus und Nationalsozialismus,” in Christian Jansen et al. (eds.), *Von der Aufgabe der Freiheit: Politische Verantwortung und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1995), 337–50.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> For South Africa, see T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley, 1975), and Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven, 1985). For the United States, see Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, 1994); David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865–1965*, 3rd ed. (Durham, 1987); Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Just a few of the many important works include Hermann Greive, *Geschichte des modernen Antisemitismus in Deutschland* (Darmstadt, 1983); Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Antisemitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political*

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The long-standing question about the influence of Christian antisemitism on later racial or Nazi antisemitism has recently been the topic of renewed and intense disagreement.<sup>31</sup> Generally those who argue against such an influence contend that the unprecedented brutality of Nazi antisemitism took it outside the parameters of previous Christian forms and was qualitatively different from them (many of these scholars also tie their position to a larger critique of the concept of a German *Sonderweg*).<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, a growing number of historians are beginning to rethink earlier assumptions that religious antisemitism played no part in the formation of its racialist counterpart. For instance, Peter Pulzer writes in the introduction to his revised classic study on the subject: “I am more strongly convinced than I was when I wrote the book that a tradition of religiously-inspired Jew hatred . . . was a necessary condition for the success of antisemitic propaganda, even when expressed in non-religious terms and absorbed by those no longer religiously observant.”<sup>33</sup> Although this rethinking is gaining currency in recent scholarship, it has suffered from an important drawback: It almost never takes the Nazi ideological elite into account, as their views are usually regarded as proof that the movement was anti-Christian. Rather than presenting direct empirical evidence of a connection, scholars of this school frequently confine themselves to a homology. For instance, Jacob Katz argues that “[M]odern antisemitism turned out to be a continuation of the premodern rejection of Judaism by Christianity, even when it renounced any claim to be legitimized by it or even professed to be antagonistic to Christianity.”<sup>34</sup> Even though Saul Friedländer has suggested that Nazi antisemitism contained a religious element (as explicated in his concept of “redemptive antisemitism”), this portion of Katz’s argument is in his view “excessive.”<sup>35</sup> Convinced of Nazism’s ideological indebtedness to Christian antisemitism, other scholars, such as the theologian Richard Rubenstein, concur that the Nazi movement was nonetheless anti-Christian, based again on the statements of Nazis themselves. Unable to overcome this empirical stumbling block, Rubenstein can

*Antisemitism in Germany and Austria*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1988); Reinhard Rürup, *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur ‘Judenfrage’ in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen, 1975); Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich 1870–1914* (Ithaca, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> See, among others, Olaf Blaschke, *Katholizismus und Antisemitismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Göttingen, 1997); Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley, 1990); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, 1990); John Weiss, *Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, see Jonathan Frankel (ed.), *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939–1945: Continuity or Contingency?* (Oxford, 1997), in which the majority of the contributors emphatically argue for the latter option.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Pulzer, *Antisemitism*, xxii.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Katz, *Prejudice*, 319.

<sup>35</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York, 1997), 85.

argue only that the movement as a whole was paradoxical.<sup>36</sup> Among the questions this work will explore is the meaning of Christian antisemitism for Nazis themselves and whether they may indeed have recognized the intellectual indebtedness that Rubenstein insists on.

In this study, the ideas of a select few within the movement are not regarded as the sole locus of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. Nor do I subscribe to the view that Hitler himself somehow ranks as a bona fide intellectual, a man of any singular ideological innovation. Hans Mommsen has rightly argued against the intentionalists' "Hitlercentric" interpretation of Nazism, thereby rejecting postwar efforts to off-load as much responsibility on as few people as possible. But the baby of an ideological investigation need not be thrown out with the bath water of resting total blame on Hitler alone. As with the rank-and-file of the Nazi Party, Hitler's own worldview was not created in a void, but rather was the product of a particular sociocultural context, one shared with a great many other party leaders.

This work therefore goes beyond past practices of concentrating solely on the supposed forefathers or designated high priests of the movement to incorporate a wider range of party opinion. At the same time, however, it is essential to concentrate on those Nazis whose ideological credentials were beyond reproach. Whereas zealous Nazis existed in all ranks of the party, only those who displayed ideological commitment by "working towards the Führer" could achieve elite status.<sup>37</sup> For this reason I focus chiefly on the religious views – enunciated in both public *and* in private – of not only Hitler and his immediate circle, but also of the *Reichsleiter* (national leaders), *Gauleiter* (district leaders), and those operating explicitly as ideological or educational leaders, either independently or in party organizations. In this way we can avoid an "exegetical focus on Hitler's and other Nazi leaders' immediate ideas,"<sup>38</sup> and at the same time rectify what Jane Caplan has termed the "massive imbalance between the intensive, almost obsessive rereading [of selected Nazi ideologues] on the one hand, and the neglect of their alleged ideological confrères on the other."<sup>39</sup>

In Chapter 1 I investigate those Nazis who insisted that Christianity played a central role in their own lives and in their movement. Many of them articulated this belief through the concept of "positive Christianity." More than just a cynical ploy for winning votes, the proponents of positive Christianity maintained that their antisemitism and socialism were derived from a Christian understanding of Germany's ills and their cure. This development

<sup>36</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 1992), 31. Arguing in a somewhat similar vein is Franklin Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (New York, 1962).

<sup>37</sup> For more on this concept, see Ian Kershaw, "'Cumulative Radicalisation' and the Uniqueness of National Socialism," in Jansen et al., *Von der Aufgabe der Freiheit*, 323–336.

<sup>38</sup> Geoff Eley, "What is Cultural History?," *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 34.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Caplan, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians," *Central European History* 22 (1989), 275–6.

## INTRODUCTION

is explored through Nazi conceptions of Jesus, the Bible, and Germany's religious past. Whereas public utterances are explored, private writings and utterances made behind closed doors are given even more weight. In Chapter 2 I explore the hope among the positive Christians to bridge the sectarian divide between Protestants and Catholics in Germany. Although positive Christianity was never an attempt to create a practicable "third confession," discussions about its relevance to sectarianism in German society help reveal basic attitudes about the two established faiths. As is shown, the sectarian divide in German society could also cut through the Nazi Party; more surprisingly, however, several nominally Catholic Nazis actually showed greater preference for the ideological substance of Protestantism over their own original faith. As is shown in Chapters 1 and 2, those aspects of the Nazis' religious views that have conventionally been seen as the hardest to reconcile with Christianity – such as the end of confessional schools or the rejection of the Old Testament – in fact found expression within bona fide varieties of Protestantism. In Chapter 3 I explore the "paganists" of the movement, those who espoused a radically anti-Christian faith and whose religious views have usually been regarded as hegemonic in the party. I demonstrate that their religious agenda in fact brought them into conflict with many people in the party's leadership. Through a close reading of their major works, I also demonstrate that their detachment from Christianity was partial and ambiguous. Their conceptions of Christianity revealed a consistent appreciation for Protestantism in particular.

Having explored Nazi "text" in the first three chapters, in the remaining chapters I explore Nazi "action": in other words, how Nazi rule after 1933 conformed with or departed from Nazi ideology before 1933.<sup>40</sup> In Chapter 4 I examine the first years of the Third Reich and explore how Nazi understandings of their major policies fit within a Christian framework. Christian and anti-Christian themes, as well as ongoing party member activity within religious bodies, are examined to delineate lines of continuity and change, to determine how widespread Christian and paganist identities within the party remained. In Chapter 5 I deal with church–state relations in the Third Reich from the state perspective, focusing on the attempt to establish a Protestant Reich Church that would unite the splintered state churches under the authority of a Reich Bishop. Through an analysis of their involvement in this undertaking, I demonstrate that leading Nazis put great stock in the strengthening of institutional Protestantism, above all as a "bulwark" against the Catholic Church. In the process, they permitted a surprising freedom of expression for members of the Confessing Church. In Chapter 6 I explore the Nazis' claims that a kind of Christian ethic guided them in defining their social policies. I do this by examining the ideological and institutional

<sup>40</sup> The conceptual distinctions between fascist "text" and "action," between "essence" and "process," and how this corresponds with the "movement" and "regime" phases of fascism, is brought out very well in Robert Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998), 1–23.



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relationships between the churches' and the Nazis' social networks. Three areas of social policy important to both state and church are explored here: eugenics, women, and youth. Chapter 7 extends the investigation of the Nazis' religious views and policies into the latter years of the Nazi State. In the wake of the failed attempt to create a Reich Church came a wave of measures aimed against church affiliation in the party. In this chapter I also look at the pivotal role played by leading anti-Christians in their attempt to expunge Christian influence from Nazism. The polycratic infighting that took place over the policing of Nazi ideology reveals that Nazism, as a whole, although increasingly hostile to the churches, never became uniformly anti-Christian, displaying instead deep ambivalence and contradiction by the end.

In this study I attempt a critical rethinking of the nature of Nazi ideology and practice and seek to uncover a dimension previously overlooked by scholars of the period. Both the Nazis and their historians have viewed the movement through many frames of reference. I seek to add an additional layer of interpretation rather than replace or reject previous interpretations. To the many ways Nazis identified themselves and their movement – nationalist, socialist, scientific, racialist – many attached the label of Christian as well. While I chart the personal religious feelings of Nazi leaders, I seek foremost to explore the ways in which Nazis claimed their movement and its ideology were related or unrelated to different strands of Christian thought. In a somewhat different context, Geoff Eley has suggested that in fascist ideology “certain beliefs and practices came to reproduce themselves under radically changed circumstances,” thereby becoming “subtly transformed in the very process of renewal.”<sup>41</sup> In this study I attempt to demonstrate how radical new circumstances present in Germany after 1918 effected the reproduction and transformation of certain Christian traditions within the Nazi movement. I also disclose the contested nature of religious meaning in the movement, one that spanned nearly the entire period of the party's history, and reveal how this shaped larger debates within the party about ideology and its oversight. I do not examine the reception of the German masses to the Nazis' religious claims or how pivotal those claims may have been to the broad social consensus the Nazis attempted. Nor do I seek in a deterministic or monocausal fashion to place the origins of Nazism in a simplified, static concept of Christianity. Rather, I suggest that, for many of its leaders, Nazism was not the result of a “Death of God” in secularized society, but rather a radicalized and singularly horrific attempt to preserve God *against* secularized society.

<sup>41</sup> Geoff Eley, “What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Traditions or a Crisis of the Capitalist State?,” *Politics and Society* 12 (1983), 63.