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## WHY DID PROTESTANTS WELCOME HITLER?

by

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The complex and intriguing relationship of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches to the National Socialist regime in Germany has been the subject of intensive historical research in recent years.<sup>1</sup> An enormous body of literature has accumulated on various aspects of the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle), as it is commonly labeled, and the documentary collections and scholarly monographs continue to appear at an astonishing rate.<sup>2</sup> The questions that immediately come to the mind of one who looks at this material, whether scholar or layperson, are: why did Christians in Germany with only isolated exceptions not try to thwart Hitler during his rise to power, and why did the great majority of them either actively support the Nazi regime or at least remain passive in the face of its obviously anti-Christian policies and actions?<sup>3</sup> In the years before 1933 Hitler's virulent anti-Semitic and anti-democratic views were widely heralded and the violent behavior of his party cohorts reported in every newspaper, and thus Germans as a whole certainly had some idea of what to expect if the Nazis did obtain political power. The reasons behind this general public acceptance of Hitler are so complex that they cannot adequately be examined within the confines of a brief essay, but the writer will endeavor to isolate the chief factors explaining the support the Fuehrer received from one major group, the Evangelical (Protestant) clergy and laity.<sup>4</sup>

The German Evangelical church was by its nature a conservative institution. Ernst Troeltsch perceptively commented that "Lutheranism adapts itself most easily to political conditions of a monarchical and aristocratic kind, and to an economic social situation which is predominantly agrarian and middle class." The eminent social philosopher went on to say that it:

... hallowed the realistic sense of power, and the ethical virtues of obedience, reverence, and respect for authority, which are indispensable to Prussian militarism. Thus Christianity and a Conservative political attitude became identified with each other, as well as piety and love of power, purity of doctrine, and the glorification of war and the aristocratic standpoint.<sup>5</sup>

His observations were confirmed by the large percentage of Luther-

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an clergymen who voted for the German Conservative Party in the Bismarckian and Wilhelmian or "Second" Reich (1871-1918), and even more profoundly by the support they gave the German National People's Party (DNVP), the successor to the Conservative Party in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). A person mentioned to the eminent theologian Adolf Harnack in 1928 that "spiritually and sociologically the Evangelical church corresponds with the spiritual and intellectual status of the DNVP," a situation which was true for church administrators, pastors, and laypeople in the local congregations.<sup>6</sup> Another commentator estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of the pastors were members of the DNVP.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the popular jingle of the 1920s—"Die Kirche ist politisch neutral—aber sie wählt deutsch-national"—was right on target.<sup>8</sup>

This relationship was rooted in the early nineteenth century, although some argue that it can be traced back to Martin Luther himself. Indisputable is the connection between pietism and the German national awakening of the Napoleonic years which enabled patriotism to flower under the protective cover of religion and resulted in the creation of a national Protestant church (*Volkskirche*), especially in Prussia.<sup>9</sup> God in Lutheran parlance became less the tender, loving Redeemer and more the God who leads his people to victory—the "Lord of Peoples and Kingdoms," "Great God of Battles," "Almighty Judge and Avenger." The highest place in the divine structure of creation was occupied by the *Volk* and its concrete political form, the nation. The struggle for the *Volkstum* became a struggle for God's order, indeed, for God himself. Service for *Volk* and fatherland consequently was God's service, and devotion to the community was the highest moral demand placed upon an individual. Naturally, the deity was seen as the German God and the people were his elect. His revelation was worked out in German history which meant that political unity, monarchical power, and freedom within a structure of authority were the fulfillment of the divine dictates. The Reformation stress on the justifying power of faith was supplanted by the proclamation of the nationality and its God, and national mission became the new gospel.

In the nineteenth century the church functioned as the integrating and educative force for the society. Public morality was generated by the gospel through an all-encompassing *Volkskirche*, and these values were projected into the *Volk*. A strong monarch-

ical state, rooted in the *Volkstum*, was necessary to bind the individual to the Christian moral continuum that infused the socio-political order and to unite divergent tendencies within the *Volk*. The state was a Christian state when it followed the dictates of Christian morality in executing the purposes of state. The moral continuum motivated the ruler to exercise his power in accordance with those God-given purposes that inhered in the state. The Christian, for his part, recognized God's moral world-order and honored legitimate authority. In a Christian state, religion was not a private matter because king and church worked together to educate the people in the tenets of Christian morality.

The result was that the state and church mutually supported one another, but it was not a "state church" in the sense of a state-authorized church. Each princely-ruled state and free city possessed a *Landeskirche* (territorial church) which encompassed the entire population, and the ruler was the *summus episcopus*, the supreme governor of the church. The church was ultimately responsible to God, but the prince was the highest authority in churchly affairs. This was a vestige of the Reformation era *cujus regio ejus religio* principle, but in practice by the nineteenth century most states had mixed Protestant-Catholic and even Lutheran-Reformed populations. During the Second Reich there were 32 separate *Landeskirchen*, a number which shrank to 28 in 1919 through the consolidation of some small Thuringian churches. The largest and most powerful of these was the Old Prussian Union Church, an organizational merger of the Lutheran and Reformed churches carried out by King Frederick William III in 1817 which contained one-half of all the German Protestants.

These *Landeskirchen* received state help in collecting church taxes as well as direct subsidies to support schools and pay officials. Most churches were governed by a synodical-presbyterial system paralleled by consistorial organs that were occupied by clerical bureaucrats who received authority from the king. The structure was still authoritarian, although the ruler in fact seldom directly interfered in church affairs. In turn, the clergy loyally supported the militaristic, nationalistic and imperialistic actions of the state which culminated in war in 1914. Lay people were schooled in the virtues of obedience to authority, patriotism, and cheerful acceptance of one's lot in life.

The churchmen carried this heritage with them into the Weimar Republic and demonstrated an almost implacable hostility

to the new order. They bitterly resented the November Revolution, the forced abdication of the Kaiser, the "dictated" Peace of Versailles, and the prominent role of liberals, socialists, and Catholics in the political life of the fledgling republic. They held it responsible for all the ills of Germany and called for the restoration of the traditional union of throne and altar. They objected to the separation of church and state spelled out in the Weimar Constitution, although in reality the position of the church suffered little harm. The *Landeskirchen* were accorded the status of a juridical person, which meant their decisions were legally binding. They now administered their own affairs through a complicated episcopal-synodical system, and created an overall body (the *Kirchenbund*) which represented the interests of the constituent churches and assured they would have ample political clout. The church taxes, public subsidies, and property tax exemptions continued, and agreements were negotiated with the various state governments which kept the churches involved in education but freed them from legislative control over their internal affairs. Because this structure was so firmly under the control of conservatives, little was likely to change.

The clergy readily identified with nationalists of all types in deploring the lack of national feeling, refusing to accept moral responsibility for the war, and calling for Germany's regeneration. They repudiated democracy, arguing that state authority came from God and could only be exercised properly by a monarch who was responsible to the historical values of the *Volk* and to God. They maintained that a parliamentary government was beholden to the people, not God, while individual and party egoism dictated its actions and it simply catered to man's selfishness and natural desires. Because the atomized individual had no commitment to the commonweal, democracy inexorably degenerated into dictatorship like in the French and Russian Revolutions, unless it were held together by the scarcely veiled interests of a plutocracy. Churchmen also railed against a host of other contemporary evils, such as sexual immorality, lower birth-rates, easy divorces, penal reform, modern art, materialism, Bolshevism, and atheism.

Moreover, the state's official neutrality toward all churches underscored the hollow reality of the *Volkskirche* as a truly all-encompassing community. The majority of those for whom the church claimed to have spiritual responsibility really had little to do with its institutional life. Thus, churchmen directed their

frustrations at the so-called "night watchman state" which they regarded as a "religionless" polity, one that was incapable or unwilling to appreciate the public role of religion. They longed for an authority, an *Obrigkei* to use Luther's term, a new German Reich that would take away the disgrace of the past and in league with the *Volkskirche* would bring about the desperately needed national renewal.<sup>10</sup> As one contemporary critic of the church bitterly lamented:

Modern Lutheranism has found itself supplying the nationalistic robber and plunder instincts with an ideological-religious superstructure, instincts which it so interprets as to make it not only possible but a moral duty for the pious Christian to follow them.<sup>11</sup>

With views like these, it is no wonder that the Nazis found the Evangelicals to be fruit ripe for the picking.

Lutheran theology provided the conservatives in the Evangelical church with useful doctrines to help shore up their stance. A Luther "renaissance" took place in Evangelical circles during the two decades prior to 1933 which was a reaction to the excessive rationalism of German academic theology. More emphasis was placed on the supernatural, transcendent, and irrational side of Christianity, and Luther was rediscovered as a great man of faith. Particular attention was paid to his polemical works and those ideas that might serve as ammunition in the struggle against democratic-Marxist ideas. Hence, a neo-Lutheran figure like Emanuel Hirsch of Göttingen, one of the most dedicated pro-Nazi "German Christians," referred to the Wittenberg reformer as the "eternal German," the symbol of the metaphysical religious nature of the German soul, and out of him came the other great figures who unfolded the German genius. According to Hirsch the Reformation was "the German understanding of Christianity," in which was revealed the hidden power of the *Volk* soul and the inherited blood of the race. Luther was transformed into a patriot as well as a prophet.<sup>12</sup>

The most frequently invoked Lutheran doctrine in the discussions of the period was that of the "two kingdoms."<sup>13</sup> Briefly, Luther had more or less taken over the medieval concept of the "two swords" and suggested that God has two ways of governing or ruling the world: the spiritual power—the theological use of the law and gospel in the church through the preaching office—and the worldly power—the civil use of the law in political institutions through reason and the sword, voluntary and coerced cooperation.

The individual Christian will himself suffer injustice and bear witness to justice, but for others he is expected to protect their rights and express political love of the neighbor.<sup>14</sup> This teaching had its roots in the New Testament and Augustine, but it had not been regarded as one of the major aspects of Luther's theological corpus.

In the nineteenth century, however, German Lutherans made a strong bifurcation between the realm of public and private concerns. The conservative or confessional spokesmen looked upon the authority of the state as central, because they felt that only through the state could order be maintained in human society. They pointed to the revolutions of the period—1789, 1830, 1848—as examples of disorder and the harm that flowed from it. They argued that the state and its distinctive character was an "order of creation," instructed Christians to fulfill their vocations (in the Lutheran sense of an occupational calling) within the framework of the state, and not interfere in its workings by offering prophetic admonitions about its behavior. Religion was the domain of the inner personal life, while the institutional and external, the public, so to speak, belonged to the worldly power. Redemption was exclusively the province of the church, while the law, determinative for the external conduct of human affairs, was solely the province of the state. Although Luther had taught that both realms served one another and were under the same God, the practical effect was that law and gospel were divided and the outer and inner lives of the faithful followed different directives.

While confessional theologians focused on questions of authority and order in the Christian's public life, liberals were concerned with the autonomy of social institutions and the natural order. The church was seen as an invisible spiritual association that had nothing to do with the secular world. In economic affairs, only economic considerations determined what was normative; in politics the power relationships of nations, considerations of domestic order, and public law were determinative. This in effect placed laissez-faire economics, monarchical government, and Realpolitik beyond the scrutiny of the gospel. Instead of promoting the interaction of the spiritual and secular realm and enabling the leavening effect of a Christian social ethic, liberal theology served merely to give legitimacy to authority. Religion was a private matter that concerned itself with the personal and moral development of the individual. The external order—nature, scientific knowledge, statecraft—operated on the basis of its own internal logic and discernible laws.

As Hertz summarizes the situation:

Whether the state was seen as the authoritarian guardian of the public order or as an autonomous institution of national power, in both instances Christians as Christians, whether collectively or individually, had no apparent choice but submission.<sup>15</sup>

A few excerpts from the works of these theologians will serve to illustrate this point. Christian Ernst Luthard, a confessional, wrote in 1867: "The Gospel has absolutely nothing to do with outward existence but only with eternal life, not with external orders and institutions which could come into conflict with the secular orders but only with the heart and its relationship to God."<sup>16</sup> The liberal Rudolph Sohm, speaking to a convention of the main Christian social action group, the Inner Mission, asserted: "The Gospel frees us from this world, frees us from all questions of this world, frees us inwardly, also from the questions of public life, also from the social question. Christianity has no answer to these questions."<sup>17</sup> Another liberal, Wilhelm Hermann, declared in the 1913 edition of his book on ethics that the state was a product of nature and that it could not be love but only self-assertion, coercion, and law. It could, however, serve as an agent for the moral purpose and should be utilized for that. Once the Christian understood the moral significance of the state, then "he will consider obedience to the government to be the highest vocation within that state. For the authority of the state on the whole, resting as it does upon the authority of the government, is more important than the elimination of any shortcomings which it might have." If the Christian was unable due to his moral scruples to carry out the command of his government, he would not preach revolution but gladly suffer the consequences of his disobedience. "For the person who is inwardly free, it is more important [that] the state preserve its historical continuity than that he obtain justice for himself."<sup>18</sup>

By defining the state as an order of creation, one could in effect ignore questions about the level of justice in the public order. There was no witness to the power-state or the social injustice of the new industrial order, and the church limited its exercise of social responsibility to charitable institutions like the Inner Mission. The Erlangen church historian Hermann Jordan declared in 1917 that the state, the natural order of God, followed its own autonomous laws while the Kingdom of God was concerned with the soul and operated separately on the basis of the morality of the gospel. By this teaching which neatly divorced the Christian from the natural

life, Luther, so Jordan alleged, "maintained the pristine purity of both, preserved the Gospel from confusion with secular interests, and protected the state from the hypocritical application of evangelical motives in what is really its own proper sphere." Hence, Lutherans could regard the state "as the highest form of human obligation on earth, something to which the Christian can dedicate himself wholeheartedly and for which he must sacrifice himself."<sup>19</sup>

These ideas were developed further by a group of theologians in the 1920s and 1930s—Professors Werner Elert and Paul Althaus, Erlangen; Emanuel Hirsch, Göttingen; Friedrich Gogarten, Breslau and Berlin; a journalist, Wilhelm Stapel, Hamburg—men who became identified with the pro-Nazi "German Christian" faction in 1932-33.<sup>20</sup> They argued that there is a two-fold revelation of God, law and gospel. Law is God's original revelation in creation, and it suffices to teach man to serve God and order his life morally. Among the orders of creation are marriage, parenthood, family, clan, state, race, and *Volk*, and these are governed by the divine law. Further, God as creator is known in the lives of nations and in history. As the Lord of history he speaks to man in the laws of earthly existence and in all human obligations. The original powers of human life are revealed in blood and soil, in the history and fate of one's particular nation. Inherent in the *Volk* is a divinely prescribed natural constitution, a *Nomos*, which is the customs, organic laws, and values that distinguish one people from another. This primordial constitution is referred to by these writers as the *Volksnomos*. Every people, even the Jews, has such a *Nomos*, and it is the source of morality for the society.

God, however, also manifests himself in Christ as the Redeemer. The gospel, the message of Christ crucified to redeem lost mankind, does not deny or change the content of the law, but rather affirms and fulfills the law's claims. Christ forgives man for transgressing the law and enables him to fulfill its demands in the future. Although each national *Nomos* finds its fulfillment and redemption in the gospel, it is not abolished but continues to be valid and authoritative. Because the gospel does not transform or stand opposed to the law rooted in the *Volk*, it is apolitical. The gospel makes no demands upon the state and is not determinative of its moral character.

Few theologians today would look upon this conception of law as authentically Christian, since it finds divinely prescribed law in the realm of nature as well as in the Bible, and regards the

former equally as valid as the latter. But, by cutting law loose from its traditional biblical and Christian moorings, it opens the way for God's law to be redefined along nationalistic and racial lines. What happens is that the *Volk* becomes the ultimate source of law and the church simply shares the ethos of the *Volk*. The Nazis could be welcomed as a manifestation of God's law at work, and Christians would demonstrate their faithfulness to God by their dedication to blood, the nation, and whatever political movement which sprang from *völkisch* roots. The Nazi movement could make a total claim upon man, but this would not be regarded as in conflict with God's claim upon the individual person because the Christian faith is concerned only with the gospel, with life eternal. As a result, the only sphere open for the gospel was the inward man, and the gospel's moral aspects were reduced to such things as will, conscience, motivation, and attitudes. To give an example of where this could lead, a statement was issued by a group of Erlangen theologians on September 25, 1933, among whose signers were Elert and Althaus, which defended the notorious "Aryan paragraph" decreeing the dismissal of Jewish clergy from the Evangelical church. One phrase read: "In union with Christ there is in the sight of God no difference between Jews and non-Jews. But the equality of all Christians as children of God does not abrogate biological and social differences."<sup>21</sup> In other words, if the Nazis issued discriminatory legislation against Jews, Christian equality could be declared inwardly but the believer could not take outward action against the state which was operating autonomously in accordance with the provisions of God's natural order.

The two kingdom doctrine was summed up particularly well in articles three and four of the Altona Confession, a declaration issued by a group of churchmen in the Hamburg suburb on January 11, 1933. The signers asserted that God created the various states and authorities (*Obrigkeiten*) "for our benefit, whether or not they please us." Christians have the duty to serve the state diligently and are called on "to obey the authorities. The state has the God-given right to use force to obtain respect and the duty to gain authority through its various actions." The subjects (*Untertanen*—the regular word for citizens, *Bürger*, is not used in the document) have no cause to rejoice when the authority is weak. They would only suffer when they live in a condition where authority is absent. The Altona pastors forthrightly stated: "We

reject the teaching that the state rests upon a 'social contract.' . . . Whoever speaks in such a fashion does not know that God deals with us through the state."

The document went on to discuss the duty of the state to promote the general welfare of its subjects and affirmed the right of the state to defend itself by armed force. When necessary those treaties which endanger its existence should be resisted and broken, because "the life [of the state] is greater than anything else man might set up on his own." In language ringing with passion the signers proclaimed:

God has created us as Germans and Germans we will be. As every nation has the right and obligation to exist, so we Germans have this. Whenever our Germanness (*Deutschsein*) is threatened, the German authority has the assignment from God, *Volk*, and state to preserve this sense of national existence.<sup>22</sup>

Less than three weeks later their longings were fulfilled by Hitler's accession to power.

Deeply rooted in the German Evangelical experience was anti-Semitism, and the Nazis took every advantage of this in their endeavors to secure ecclesiastical support for the movement.<sup>23</sup> As Richard Gutteridge underscores in his study of Protestant anti-Semitism, there were really two varieties of this odious doctrine—one that was racial, nihilistic, and secular in nature, and the other a religious version founded upon a sincere but badly misinterpreted scriptural conception of a disloyal people who were accursed by divine decree. The Nazis succeeded in uniting these two otherwise widely divergent strains, so that churchmen accepted the bogus theories presented as *Rassenkunde* (racial science), while Nazis proclaimed Christ as the greatest anti-Semite of all time.<sup>24</sup>

The trail of Christian anti-Semitism in Germany reaches back into the nation's medieval past, and Martin Luther was very much influenced by this heritage. On several occasions he said that although the Jewish nation was rejected by God, many Jews could and would be converted as individuals if Christians showed sufficient love and compassion. But as the hoped for flood of conversions failed to materialize and some who had become Christians returned to their old ways, the reformer became increasingly bitter and hostile. In his last years he saw it as his task to warn Christians against the insincerity and blasphemy of the Jews who apparently had become unconvertible. The explosion of his wrath came in two tracts written in 1543, *On the Jews and Their Lies* and *Schem*

God's people  
not national  
or racial

*Hampthorpe*. The language in both works was unbelievably intemperate, as he castigated Jews as vampires, blasphemers, thieves, usurers, and devils incarnate. He urged such measures against them as burning down their synagogues and schools, destroying their homes, burning their sacred books, banning teaching by their rabbis, curtailing their movements, depriving them of money obtained through usury, and expulsion from the country. His parishioners were advised to be on guard against Jews and to give them no form of neighborly assistance so as not to encourage them in their wanton deeds. Because of their stubbornness God was about to subject them to the most horrible punishments, but they still refused to repent and thus were condemned to hell.<sup>25</sup>

Luther's anti-Semitism was, however, purely theological in character. The Jews had turned their backs on the salvation offered by Christ and thereby subjected themselves to divine wrath. No amount of human tolerance or kindness could ameliorate this situation, because they had consciously and repeatedly rejected the one Savior, sold themselves to the Devil, and were relegated to eternal fire. The church of Christ had replaced the Jews as the chosen people of God, leaving them as an outcast, alien body with no place in German Christian society unless they would turn to the Messiah whom they had spurned. Although Luther's antipathy to the Jews was religious, not racial in character, there is no doubt that he had sown the seeds of hatred, and his writings would be exploited by vicious anti-Semites in the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

Modern Christian anti-Semitism in Germany grew substantially during the last third of the nineteenth century, especially as Jewish emancipation was not followed by genuine assimilation into the Christian society. Adolf Stoecker, a prominent preacher in Berlin who was sincerely concerned about the moral and material condition of the working classes, tried to promote social reform from above. He founded a political organization, the Christian-Socialist Workers Party, and confronted the Marxist Social Democrats head on, but his endeavors met with failure. He also lashed out against the liberal, cosmopolitan Jews whom he felt were a corrupting influence in society. He alleged there was a "frivolous, godless, usurious, and deceitful" element among them that had sold out completely to materialism and were dragging down the rest of society. Many churchmen at the time condemned Stoecker's increasingly immoderate diatribes, but his ideas did receive a sym-

thetic hearing in some quarters and they unquestionably prepared the way for the flowering of the more radical, racial anti-Semitism.<sup>27</sup> Respectable writers, such as Paul de Lagarde, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, helped to disseminate a mixture of religious and racial anti-Semitic ideas during this period, and a great many Lutherans imbibed these along with *völkisch* views.

With the loss of World War I a torrent of anti-Semitism inundated the country. The Jews were blamed for all of Germany's misfortunes, and Jew-baiting became the stock-in-trade of the right-wing parties in particular. Because the clergy were so tightly linked to the DNVP, anti-Semitism permeated the Evangelical churches like a virulent cancer. One study of the Evangelical press during the years of the republic cited by Gutteridge revealed that the popular weeklies read by the middle and lower class Protestants were so nationalistically oriented that they regarded Jewry as the natural foe of the Christian-national tradition, and availed themselves of every opportunity of preaching the Jewish responsibility for the collapse of the Christian and monarchical order. Since these papers reached more homes than the average Sunday sermons, their constant portrayal of the caricature of a sinister, omnipotent, degenerate Jewish minority that was out to corrupt and destroy the virtuous Christian majority undoubtedly softened the minds of millions for the infinitely more vicious propaganda that the Nazis would put out in the ensuing years.<sup>28</sup> After sifting through the literary remains of the Evangelical church during this period the Anglican clergyman concludes sadly that the leaders of the church "did little or nothing to warn against the impropriety or danger of Christians indulging in anti-Jewish feeling." He found "no evidence whatsoever" that the church issued any authoritative statement calling for the earnest consideration of the problem from the purely biblical standpoint and in the light of the Christian gospel of love and mercy, nor did he discover any official warning issued by the church about the growing tendency to treat the Jewish problem as predominantly one of race.<sup>29</sup>

The most egregious examples of anti-Semitism were to be found in the sermons and writings of the "German Christians," the hard-line minority of "true believers" who desired to make the church part and parcel of the state and dedicate it totally to Nazism. They wanted the church to adopt the principle of authoritarian leadership (*Führerprinzip*), thus doing away with representative bodies

and elections and eliminating both divisions within the church as well as the artificial separation between one's religious and secular life. "German Christian" pastor Martin Wagner maintained that in the creation God ordained family, race, and *Volk*, and just as Christians affirm the sanctity of marriage, likewise they must uphold racial and *Volk* purity. God did not will sameness and uniformity among the peoples of the world but manifold diversity, and he decreed that "we as Germans must keep our race and *Volk* heritage pure and not become bastard-folk of Jewish-Aryan blood. German Evangelicals should join with Martin Luther in saying: "For my Germans was I born and them will I serve." Hence no marriage should be permitted between Jews and Germans, and even if they became Christians they would not be allowed to partake in the life of the German church. "Thus are we obligated to our *Volk* and our race."<sup>30</sup>

Even more prominent churchmen were not shy about making rather strongly anti-Semitic statements. Theologian Paul Althaus told the church convention (*Kirchentag*) in 1927 that "evangelization is today opposed on all sides by a mentality under Jewish influence in business, the press, art, and literature." The church is threatened by a "demoralized and demoralizing, urban intellectual class which is represented primarily by the Jewish race."<sup>31</sup> General Superintendent Otto Dibelius, one of the outstanding personages in the church leadership, declared in an Easter greeting to the clergy of his diocese in 1928:

We will all have not only understanding but also full sympathy for the final motives which have given rise to the nationalist movement. Despite the ugly sound which has often attached itself to the word, I have always regarded myself as an anti-semite. The fact cannot be concealed that the Jews have played a leading part in all the symptoms of disintegration in modern civilization.<sup>32</sup>

The latent passions in Christian anti-Semitism came out completely in the open once Hitler was in power. Even the great biblical scholar Gerhard Kittel published a number of works, particularly *Die Judenfrage* and *Kirche und Judenchristen*, both in 1933, that contended the problem was a religious, not racial one. The Jews had rejected Christ and become a cursed people, so their record in the Bible was not a history of redemption (*Heilsgeschichte*) but one of rejection (*Unheilsgeschichte*). Destined to be wanderers and strangers in the nations of the world, they should not try to circumvent divine judgment either by seeking to establish a national state once again (Zionism) or by becoming full

citizens of the modern secular state and losing their identity (assimilation). The answer was to convert them to Christianity and then organize them into Jewish churches that would be completely separate but equal to German ones. In subsequent years Kittel authored some even more pointedly anti-Semitic writings, and after the war he was interned for a year by the French for his allegedly pro-Nazi stance.<sup>33</sup> The tragedy of this renowned scholar, the editor of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, was repeated over and over again by lesser lights, and it poignantly testifies to the corrupting influence that anti-Semitism had upon so many German Protestants.

The appointment of Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933 and the institution of the Third Reich within the following weeks provided the occasion for an effusion of obsequious praise that went beyond all bounds of rationality and revealed how badly churchmen had misjudged the National Socialist movement. To indicate some examples, a group of top church officials issued the Loccum Manifesto in May that referred to the "turning point in history" where "through God's providence our beloved German fatherland has experienced a mighty exaltation."<sup>34</sup> The church enthusiastically responded to the call of the Nazi minister of education and culture in Prussia to join with the regime in the "bitter struggle for our existence against Bolshevism."<sup>35</sup> Siegfried Leffler, a "German Christian," announced that Hitler was "the one whom God has sent to place Germany before the Lord of history." Moreover:

In the pitch black night of church history Hitler became that wonderful transparency for our time, the window through which the light fell on the history of Christianity. Through him we were enabled to see the Saviour in the history of the Germans. Hitler stood there like a rock in a vast desert, like an island in an endless sea. Whoever would have life in the future must align himself with him. Through him flows the historical stream of life to Germany. He is the organ through which the word "*Deutsch*" was filled with life and eternal meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Leffler's colleague, Pastor Julius Leutheuser, even went further and declared:

Christ has come to us through Adolf Hitler. He was the decisive figure when the people were just about to go under. Hitler struck out for us, and through his power, his honesty, his faith and his idealism, the Redeemer found us. . . . We know today the Saviour has come. . . . We have only one task, be German, not be Christian.<sup>37</sup>

These absurd statements (and dozens more equally ridiculous



could have been cited) indicate just how convinced churchmen were that Hitler was a believer in God and that his movement would bring about the national spiritual regeneration for which they had longed so deeply during the fourteen year hiatus of the Weimar Republic. They desperately wanted to believe that National Socialism possessed a basic integrity and that its immature leaders would in time outgrow their faults. They shared the same prejudices — conservatism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism — while Hitler publicly left the impression that Christianity had an important role in the national renewal he was planning.

In *Mein Kampf* were a number of favorable references to religion. Speaking of World War I Hitler commented that the people had "fulfilled their duty in the most overwhelming manner. Whether they were Protestant or Catholic clergy, they both had an immensely large share in preserving for so long a time our force of resistance not only at the front but even more so at home." For the two camps there was "only one single and sacred German Reich, and everyone turned to his own heaven for its existence and future."<sup>38</sup> He maintained that political parties have nothing to do with religious problems, as long as they do not harm the nation and undermine the ethics and morality of the people, and religion should not be "combined with the absurdity of political parties." A political leader must always regard the religious doctrines and institutions of his people as "inviolable."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he argued that the movement should not take stands on questions lying outside the framework of its political work or on "unimportant" matters.

Its task is not that of a religious reformation, but that of a political reorganization of our people. In the two religious denominations it sees two equally valuable pillars for the existence of our people, and for this reason it fights those parties which wish to degrade this foundation of an ethical, religious, and moral prop of our national body to the instrument of their party interests.<sup>40</sup>

When Hitler came to power he appeared to be a man of faith. He did not sever his relation with the Roman Catholic church into which he was baptized, he utilized the Garrison Church in Potsdam for the gala ceremony which formally inaugurated the Third Reich, and occasionally he would attend a funeral or some other public service at a church. In a radio address on February 1, 1933 the Fuehrer gave assurance that his government saw as its primary task to restore the spiritual unity of the people on which national strength rested. "It will seek firmly to protect Christianity as the

basis of our entire morality; and the family as the nucleus of the life of our people and our community."<sup>41</sup> In a speech before the Reichstag on March 23 Hitler declared that his government "sees in Christianity the unshakeable moral foundation of the people." The regime "considers the two Christian communions as the most important factors in the maintenance of our *Volkstum*." He promised to honor the agreements that had been made between the churches and the respective German states, and he expected that the churches would reciprocate by supporting the government. "The struggle against a materialistic world view and the construction of a true *Volk* community serves equally the interests of the German nation and those of our Christian faith."<sup>42</sup> Speaking to the Roman Catholic bishop of Osnabrück a month later the Fuehrer declared: "I am personally convinced of the great power and deep significance of Christianity, and I will not allow any other religion to be promoted."<sup>43</sup>

By far the most widely mentioned example of Hitler's benevolent attitude toward religion was point twenty-four of the National Socialist Party's "unalterable" program.

We demand freedom for all religious denominations in the State, so far as they are not a danger to it and do not militate against the morality and moral sense of the German race. The Party, as such, stands for positive Christianity, but does not bind itself in the matter of creed to any particular confession. It combats the Jewish-materialist spirit *within* and *without* us, and is convinced that our nation can achieve permanent health from within only on the principle: THE COMMON INTEREST BEFORE SELF-INTEREST.<sup>44</sup>

What "positive Christianity" really meant was not clear from this statement, and many church people, especially the "German Christians," simply assumed that Hitler and the party based their actions on Christian principles. But, as James Zabel cogently comments, its vagueness made the phrase "a useful term for the Nazis because it allowed the faithful to indulge in wishful thinking without having any concrete meaning."<sup>45</sup>

Positive Christianity could be any one of a number of things. An article prepared for foreign consumption maintained that it had to do with Lutheran spirit and piety, the confessions of the Evangelical church, and the "whole Bible."<sup>46</sup> Zabel enumerates five other definitions that were also prevalent in the early months of the National Socialist period: (1) the gospel as the objective life power given from God, not man; (2) a heroic German piety that is dedi-

cated to strength, freedom, and struggle; (3) the church working hand-in-hand with the *Volk* and state to infuse the newly-awakened German *Volk* with the spirit of Christ and thereby advancing the national revolution; (4) protecting traditional Christian ethical values like personal morality, sabbath observance, maintenance of Christian schools, charity, and social welfare; and (5) a defense against neo-paganism as well as the extremes of dialectical theology on the left and strict confessionalism on the right. The notion of positive Christianity contained such a high level of uncertainty, flexibility, and opportunism that almost any action of the Nazi state could be interpreted as "Christian."<sup>47</sup>

What the Nazis really meant by the term was revealed unwittingly by a broadside that was published in February 1932 as the platform of the "Evangelical National Socialists" in Silesia who were putting up a slate of candidates for the elections in the Prussian Union church. The announcement said that they would build "our *Landeskirche*" on the foundations of a *positive Christianity* in the spirit of Martin Luther. More specifically, this would include:

1. Rejection of the liberal spirit of the Jewish-Marxist Enlightenment;
2. Overthrow of the humanitarianism that was born out of the Jewish-Marxist spirit, along with its resulting effects such as pacifism, internationalism, Christian world-citizenship, etc.;
3. Emphasis on a militant faith in the service of the God-given German *Volkstum*;
4. Purification and preservation of the race as an obligation given by God for all eternity;
5. Struggle against Marxism, the enemy of religion and the people, and its Christian-Socialist fellow-travelers of every description;
6. Inculcation of a new spirit into our church leaders;
7. Amalgamation of the small *Landeskirchen* into a strong Evangelical *Reichskirche*.<sup>48</sup>

Although some points would be received favorably by the conservatives that predominated in the church, this went farther than most of them might have wanted to go. But, they were so intoxicated by the rarified air of national revival that they were unaware of the true dimensions of Nazi cynicism about religion. They hoped to work together with the Fuehrer to give a spiritual dynamic to the national revolution. Hitler, however, had other plans for the church—first it would be *gleichgeschaltet* and then eventually it would just die out.<sup>49</sup>

The record of the church during Hitler's rise to power is just as dismal as that of other segments of German society. Although it was reasonably well-informed about the nature of the Nazi party

and program, the church leadership did not speak out against the National Socialists either on religious or political grounds. This was graphically illustrated by the refusal in 1931 of the responsible church executive bodies to issue a general condemnation of violence after a Nazi attack on Jews and Jewish shops along Berlin's Kurfürstendamm because it might look like a direct criticism of the Nazi Party, and to condemn acts of desecration against Jewish cemeteries by Hitler's hoodlums since there supposedly was no reason to believe that any Protestants were involved.<sup>50</sup>

The churches were taken in by Hitler's opportunistic approach of identifying with their social and political views and professing support for their privileged position in the state. Protestant Christians readily responded to the anti-communism and nationalism of the Nazi appeal, and deceived themselves into believing Hitler was on their side. What is so disconcerting about this whole tragic story was that the ones who delivered the German Evangelicals over to National Socialism were scattered across the theological spectrum. The blame for the failure of the church to resist at a time when it could and should have—the period before January 1933—cannot simply be placed on the shoulders of the liberals, as is so often the case when the matter of the church's support for Nazism is discussed today.

Christian historians can only view with sorrow what transpired in Germany, but they do have the obligation to warn their fellow believers of the dangers inherent in linking the church with the political and cultural ideals of any state or political movement. What inevitably results is a watering down of the gospel message and the muting of any prophetic voice. Christians in the United States particularly need to take to heart the historical experience of their brethren in pre-1933 Germany, because the American civil religion has such a deceptive quality about it that Christians in this land often are taken into cultural captivity completely unawares.<sup>51</sup> Just as the horrors of World War II constituted a judgment upon the German church, so Christians in other lands that do not maintain a prophetic stance toward their respective secular states are served notice that they, too, will be judged.

Historian John Conway's assessment of the plight of the church in Germany forms both a fitting conclusion to this essay and an admonition to Christians everywhere:

The German Churches were trapped in a situation which exposed their every weakness and encouraged every temptation. Humanly speaking, their

leaders, by collaborating with the Nazis, were no more and no less guilty than the rest of their fellow countrymen. But, as custodians of the Christian Gospel, their conduct must be judged by different standards. Their readiness to allow the truths of the Christian faith to be distorted for the purposes of political expediency, and their failure to denounce the crimes so openly committed in their society, place a heavy burden of guilt upon them.<sup>52</sup>

## NOTES

1. The writer expresses his appreciation to the National Endowment for the Humanities for financial support and Professor Charles F. Delzell of Vanderbilt University for his assistance in carrying out the research for this essay.

2. A discussion of all the relevant literature would require a lengthy tome. The state of the church struggle research through 1972 is detailed in John S. Conway, "Der deutsche Kirchenkampf," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 17 (October 1969): 423-449, and Owen Chadwick, "The Present State of the Kirchenkampf Enquiry," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24 (January 1973): 33-50. The best survey in English of the entire topic is John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). The most extensive publication series in Germany is the *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes* which had been inaugurated by the late Kurt Dietrich Schmidt twenty years ago and now contains some thirty titles, published by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht in Göttingen.

3. The committed Protestant support of Hitler is spelled out in great detail in Kurt Meier, *Die Deutschen Christen: Das Bild einer Bewegung im Kirchenkampf des Dritten Reiches* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), and James A. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976). Meier's imposing new three volume study, *Der evangelische Kirchenkampf* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), deals with the larger aspects of the church-state controversies in the period. The Roman Catholic stance is treated in a controversial book by political scientist Guenther Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The little-known attitude of the Baptists is described in a chapter by David T. Priestley, "The Baptist Response in Germany to the Third Reich," in Robert D. Linder, ed., *God and Caesar* (Terre Haute, Ind.: Conference on Faith and History, 1971), 101-123.

4. The term Evangelical (*evangelisch*) is the German equivalent of Protestant. It is generally applied to the Lutheran church but it may be used in a hyphenated form with either of the two Protestant confessions, i.e., *evangelisch-lutherisch* or *evangelisch-reformiert*. Since World War II the Baptists have picked up the term as well and refer to their union with a few other free churches as the *evangelische Freikirche*. The word is not synonymous with *evangelical* in the Anglo-American world which means theologically conservative, evangelistically-oriented Christians regardless of their confessional or denominational identification or affiliation.

5. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), II, 575. (German edition, 1911)

6. Quoted in Klaus Scholder, "Neuere deutsche Geschichte und protestantischer Theologie," *Evangelische Theologie*, 23 (October 1963): 525.

7. Karl-Wilhelm Dahm, *Pfarrer und Politik* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1965), p. 147. J.R.C. Wright points out that most of the DNVP Reichstag deputies were Protestants and several church leaders were in the DNVP delegation. An example of the church's hostility to left-wingers in the clerical ranks was the dismissal of a pastor in Baden in 1927 who had joined the German Communist Party. Wright, "Above Parties": *The Political Attitudes*

of the German Protestant Church Leadership 1918-1933 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 51, 65.

8. "The church is politically neutral but it votes German National [People's Party]." Cited in Wright, *Above Parties*, p. 49.

9. The next few paragraphs summarize the argument set forth in Klaus Scholder, "Neuere deutsche Geschichte," pp. 525-530, and Daniel R. Borg, "Volksskirche, 'Christian State,' and the Weimar Republic," *Church History*, 35 (June 1966): 186-206. Throughout the essay the word *Volk* (people) and its derivatives *völkisch* and *Volkstum* (folkish and nationdom) will be left untranslated whenever they are used in the larger German sense, which connotes more than these specific literal renderings. As George L. Mosse puts it: "Volk" is a much more comprehensive term than 'people,' for to German thinkers ever since the birth of German romanticism in the late eighteenth century 'Volk' signified the union of a group of people with a transcendental 'essence'. . . . Fused to man's innermost nature, [it] represented the source of his creativity, his depth of feeling his individuality and his unity with other members of the Volk." *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 4.

10. Borg, "Volksskirche," p. 202. On the role of the Evangelical Church in the Weimar Republic see also Jochen Jacke, *Kirche zwischen Monarchie und Republik: Der preussische Protestantismus nach der Zusammenbruch von 1918* (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 1976).

11. George Wünsch, *Der Zusammenbruch des Luthertums als Sozialgestaltung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921), p. 21.

12. Paul B. Means, *Things That Are Caesar's: The Genesis of the German Church Conflict* (New York: Round Table Press, 1935), pp. 149-151.

13. The most valuable work on the "two kingdom" doctrine is Karl H. Hertz, *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976). He has brought together readings on the topic from a wide range of sources, many of which have never been available to the English reader, and he touches base with the significant literature in the field. For a useful bibliography on the topic see pp. 375-377. Hertz's volume is based on a comprehensive three-volume collection of texts and commentaries on the two kingdom doctrine edited by Ulrich Duchrow and various co-workers which are contained in the *Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte* series published by Gerd Mohn in Gütersloh: *Die Vorstellung von zwei Reichen und Regimenten bis Luther* (1972), *Umdeutungen der Zweireichslehre Luthers im 19. Jahrhundert* (1975), and *Die Ambivalenz der Zweireichslehre in den Lutherischen Kirchen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1976). The following discussion depends heavily in Hertz's work.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

20. The ideas in this section are drawn from a thoughtful article by Hans Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church and the Rise of National Socialism," *Church History*, 41 (September 1972): 326-336; and the important monograph by Wolfgang Tilgner, *Volkstheologie und Schöpfungsglaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

21. Kurt Dietrich Schmidt, *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äusserungen zur Kirchenfrage des Jahres 1933* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), p. 184.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

23. Some significant recent works on this topic are Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten* (München: Max Hueber, 1972), a study of the reformer's statements on the Jewish question as they were interpreted by writers of various and even no religious persuasion in the last two centuries; Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975 [Hebrew edition, 1969]), and Jehuda Reinharz, *Fatherland or Promised Land: The Dilemma of the German Jews, 1893-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), both of which deal with the problems facing Jews in late nineteenth-early twentieth century Germany; and Richard Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb! The German Evangelical Church and the Jews 1879-1950* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), a probing analysis of the Lutheran church in the Jewish question and an indictment of its failures.
24. Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb*, p. 29; and Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany*, pp. 223-289.
25. The first complete English translation of the tract *On the Jews and Their Lies* was published only in *Luther's Works, American Edition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), XLVII, 137-306. Translator Martin H. Bertram's introduction (pp. 123-136) is a succinct survey of the issues surrounding Luther's anti-Semitic utterances. The other tract has not yet been translated.
26. Essay, "Luther and the Jews," in Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb*, pp. 215-323.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-12. For a more detailed treatment of Stoecker's activities and other varieties of political anti-Semitism during this period see Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
28. Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb*, p. 39.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
30. Martin Wagner, *Die "Deutschen Christen" im Kampf um die innere Erneuerung des deutschen Volkes* (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Zeitungsdienst, 1933), pp. 21-22.
31. Quoted in Wright, *Above Parties*, p. 54.
32. Text of the letter published in Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, p. 411.
33. J. R. Porter, "The Case of Gerhard Kittel," *Theology*, 50 (November 1947): 401-406; Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb*, pp. 111-114; Max Weinreich, *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes Against the Jewish People* (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1946), pp. 41-43, 48.
34. Schmidt, *Bekenntnisse des Jahres 1933*, p. 153.
35. *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 9, 1933, quoted in Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, p. 17.
36. Quoted in Hans Buchheim, *Glaubenskrise im dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1953), p. 51.
37. Quoted in Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, p. 48.
38. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), pp. 146-147.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 479-480.
41. Max Domarus, ed., *Hitler, Reden und Proklamationen 1932-1945* (München: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1965), I, 192.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233.
43. Hans Müller, *Katholische Kirche und Nationalsozialismus. Dokumente 1930-1935* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1963), p. 118. In

- the same conversation he repudiated ideologist Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* as not being a "party book."
44. Gottfried Feder, *Hitler's Official Programme and Its Fundamental Ideas* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 43.
45. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors*, p. 113.
46. Pfarrer [Martin] Thom, "New German Christians," *Missionary Review of the World*, 56 (November 1933): 548.
47. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors*, pp. 114-129.
48. *Die christliche Welt*, 46 (April 2, 1932): 331-332. Hitler felt the designation "Evangelical National Socialists" was politically too inflammatory and he insisted that they change their label to "German Christians." This term soon was appropriated by those who identified Christianity with the aims of the National Socialist revolution, whether or not they were actually party members.
49. "The best thing is to let Christianity die a natural death. . . . One day its structure will collapse. Science has already impregnated humanity. Consequently, the more Christianity clings to its dogmas, the quicker it will decline." *Hitler's Secret Conversations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953), pp. 49-50.
50. Wright, *Above Parties*, pp. 87, 100-101. Jonathan Wright has also contributed a penetrating article on the church's relationship with the party in the crucial months immediately before and after Hitler's accession to power to a recent symposium in Britain. "The German Protestant Church and the Nazi Party: The Period of the Seizure of Power," in *Studies in Church History, Volume 14: Renaissance and Renewal in Christian History*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 393-418.
51. This problem is dealt with in considerable detail in Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, *Twilight of the Saints: Biblical Christianity and Civil Religion in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978).
52. Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, p. 46. An important new work by Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das dritte Reich. Band I. Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusionen 1918-1934* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen Verlag, 1977), appeared as this article was in press and thus it was not possible to take advantage of the insights provided by it.