

The Faintest Conception of a Church

Hitler's Attack on Christianity and German Resistance

By David Golding

One year following the death of his father Adolf Hitler was confirmed a Roman Catholic at the request of his mother.¹ He attended communion and confession as late as 1918 and made numerous references to an apparent belief in Christ in *Mein Kampf* and other speeches during his rise to power. For instance, in his seminal articulation of anti-Jew doctrine, Hitler still included the ubiquitous symbol of Catholic faith—the crucified Jesus on the cross:

We are now met by the question: Do we wish to restore Germany to freedom and power? If “yes”, then the first thing to do is rescue it from the Jew who is ruining our country.... We want to stir up a storm. Men must not sleep: they ought to know that a thunderstorm is coming up. We want to prevent our Germany from suffering, as Another did, the death upon the Cross.²

But Hitler's supposed Catholic belief, albeit tainted by anti-Semitism, never seemed credible. Speaking of the previous five years during a speech in 1937, he gave credit to “Providence” for making Germans “immeasurably strong.”³ At other times, Hitler spoke of “Nature” and her role in the rise of Nazism. Had these and other religious statements been spoken seriously or without political pretense, Hitler would have been a Catholic, deist, and transcendentalist all within a span of less than five years—hardly possible considering the unwavering conviction of which he was capable as evidenced in his relentless attack on Jews. In his final words, Hitler still assailed the Jews,

fully blamed them for the atrocities of World War II, and proclaimed the reincarnation of the National Socialist movement after his death. Moments before his suicide, Hitler's "extreme unction" was scarcely Catholic. His thoughts all centered on himself, the Nazi soldiers, and the Hitler Youth.⁴ Given these qualities of Hitler's religious conviction, little wonder historians generally regard him as no Christian, but rather an atheist and warmonger.

Hitler's religion as the Führer was Nazism and his bias against Christianity was evident in his inner councils. Protestants "have neither a religion that they can take seriously nor a great position to defend like Rome," he said to insiders in 1933.⁵ At the same time, Germans were served unprecedented propaganda which portrayed Nazis as the protectors of "positive Christianity" and religious freedom. In fact, the party itself pledged in 1928 to "demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state" and to uphold "the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession."⁶ Later, speaking for the Nazi party in a speech before the German parliament, Hitler reiterated the Nazi alliance with Christianity:

The National Government sees in [Protestantism and Catholicism] most vital factors in the survival of our nationality. Their rights will not be touched. The National Government will accord and secure to the Christian Confessions the influence that is due them in schools and education.⁷

Certainly, no event more atrocious than the Holocaust could have come out of the Nazi regime. But given the pledges of the party in favor of Christianity and the Führer's own bipolar behavior toward the religion, the fact of their subsequent attacks on German Christians during the Third Reich and the Christian resistance is worth attention. As Allied forces gained momentum in the war, so did German dissenters on the inside of the regime. Nazis fought to suppress rebellion within the regime, but ultimately could not quell the mutiny that came from within Christian churches of those who refused to place the Führer above God.

The War against Christianity

During the years of the Third Reich, Nazis effectively suppressed most religious organizations. State police dissolved many churches and faith

fellowships to prevent public opposition to Nazism and the government attempted deliberately to gain total power over Protestantism. Hitler believed that the Roman Catholic church was too numerous and entrenched in German society to be immediately controlled through ground-level coercion. He consequently arranged for a concordat with the papacy in 1933. This deal assured the papacy that the German government would not intervene in Catholic churches or affairs; the church agreed to allow the Reich authority in secular society.⁸

Protestants, on the other hand, could not be so easily handled; their more open system of organization meant more leaders and more congregations for the regime to systematically suppress and no negotiation, like the concordat with the papacy, with Protestant leadership or councils was possible. Hitler expressed a deeper resentment of Protestants, calling their religious worship a “form of Bolshevism” and a “Jewish peril” that needed to be destroyed. His first year as chancellor, Hitler and his party made “three declarations of war against the Protestant church”: the “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Bureaucracy”; the appointment of a Nazi bishop to direct the German Protestant Church; and the promotion of Alfred Rosenberg as chief Nazi Party ideologist. These three measures brought about an intense struggle within German Protestantism, known commonly as the “Church Struggle.”⁹

The law enacted on 7 April 1933 forced clergy related to Jewish ancestors or living kin into retirement and only directly affected eighteen men. Though the loss of these clergymen was small, the assumption by the government to interfere with church affairs intensified the relations of the Nazi regime with Protestant groups. When German Protestants formed a more streamlined organization in July 1933, the Nazis intervened by appointing Ludwig Müller, a former army chaplain, as the bishop of the new church with the specific assignment to unify other German Protestants. Eventually these German Protestants would confess to be disciples of both Christ and Hitler, and non-Aryans became excluded from baptism.¹⁰ Rosenberg, upon his appointment as party ideologist, spoke anti-Christian rhetoric to scores of Germans. To him, Christians’ use of the Bible put them in the same league as the Jews; Germans had the same responsibility to cleanse the nation of the Old and New Testaments as they had to eradicate Jewry. Hitler Youth instructors eventually taught that for Christianity to remain, all references to Jews must be removed

from its worship and scripture. “Christ was the greatest anti-Semite of all times,” German youth were told.¹¹

Christian resistance

Many assimilated into this rhetoric, but thousands resisted. Between 1933 and 1945, German special courts, regular justice systems, and court martial executions of Germans totaled over 77,000. Indeed, this number describes the widespread effort of Nazis to punish German dissenters and their quick and assiduous response to anything anti-Nazi. But it also demonstrates the large anti-Nazi activity among German countrymen, most of whom were Christians of one tradition or another.¹² Seventy-nine of the 375 priests of the diocese of Berlin were either “interrogated, warned, fined, arrested, thrown in prison, transported to a concentration camp, or executed by guillotine for their opposition to the state.”¹³ The Gestapo’s dealings with dissident Christians were usually precipitated by what priests considered pastoral obligations. Once a pastor placed greater importance on anything above the Führer (in the case of Christians, frequently this was teaching doctrines relating to Christ’s kingdom on the earth, etc.), this was grounds for treason. Many priests, when warned by the state police of the possibility of committing treason, never again questioned the authority of the state. Others, however, argued for pastoral freedom in the face of governmental pressure and often accepted severe punishments.¹⁴

On 21 September 1933, the Pastors’ Emergency League rallied dissenters to support the emerging German Christian church. The statement that each member signed included a pledge to “protest unreservedly every infringement” of the Aryan Paragraph in the law of 7 April 1933. In less than two weeks, over 2,500 members had signed the pledge; by 1934, some 7,000 members came out in open resistance to Hitler’s anti-Christian laws.¹⁵

The Confessing Church comprised the greatest resistance to Hitler’s attacks on Christianity. In a secret memorandum to Hitler, members of the Confessing Church’s administration drafted warnings of the regime’s recent attacks.

When Blood, Race, Nation, and Honor ... are raised to the rank of qualities that guarantee eternity, the Christian is bound by the first

commandment [“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”] to reject the assumption. When the “Aryan” human being is glorified, God’s Word bears witness to the sinfulness of all men. When, within the compass of the National Socialist view of life, anti-Semitism is forced upon the Christian... [it contradicts] the Christian injunction to love one’s neighbor.

The memo also censured Hitler for elevating himself “to the role of deity” and for mediating between God and the people.¹⁶

For years Christian leaders vacillated between Nazi pressure to conform to the regime and the Nazis assertion of spiritual supremacy to secular authority. From individual acts of heroism in rescuing Jews from concentration camps to institutional resistance efforts, German Christians added to the difficulties Hitler faced in advancing Nazism. During his reign, Hitler regarded Christians as subservient vassals while presenting himself as the ideal Christian. They “haven’t the faintest conception of a church,” he said. “You can do anything you like to them. They will submit.”¹⁷ In the end, American and British Christians would advance into Hitler’s empire and decidedly defeat the regime. Whether ironic or just, Hitler’s defeat by mainly Christian nations is at least appropriate. Nazism, the immortal force which was the Führer’s religion, fell with his suicide as Allied forces besieged Berlin. Christianity, the “faintest conception of a church,” on the other hand, did not submit to the Nazi dictatorship as Hitler prophesied and outlasted the Führer’s failed reincarnation.

¹ Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 384–85.

⁴ Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 164–65.

⁵ Hermann Rauschnig, *Voice of Destruction* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940), 54.

⁶ Theodore N. Thomas, *Women Against Hitler: Christian Resistance in the Third Reich* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Thomas, 1–2.

⁹ Ibid., 2–3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3, 8.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Peter Hoffmann, "The German Resistance to Hitler and the Jews: The Case of Carl Goerdeler," *The Genocidal Mind: The 32nd Annual Scholar's Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 2005), 277.

¹³ Kevin Spicer, "Resisting or Defending the Faith? Clerical Responses to the National Socialist State," *The Genocidal Mind*, 185.

¹⁴ Ibid., 186.

¹⁵ Thomas, 13–14.

¹⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 July 1936, 1–4.

¹⁷ Rauschning, 54.