

Aryan Jesus and the *Kirchenkampf*:
An Examination of Protestantism under the Third Reich

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Often unstated in the history of National Socialism is the role played by Protestantism. More often than not, Christian doctrine and institutions are seen as incongruous with Nazism. Accordingly, the *Bekennende Kirche*, or Confessing Church, receives a great deal of scholarly and popular attention as an example of Christian resistance to the National Socialist regime. Overlooked, however, were the *Deutsche Christen*, or German Christians. This division within Protestantism does more than highlight Christian opposition to Nazism; on balance, the same cultural shifts that allowed the rise of Adolf Hitler transformed many of the most fundamental aspects of Christianity. Even the Confessing Church was plagued with the influence of National Socialist thought. In this light, the German Christians largely overshadowed the Confessing Church in prominence and influence, and Protestantism under the Third Reich was more participatory than resistant to Nazi rule.

Like the National Socialists, the *Deutsche Christen*, or German Christians, have their roots in the postwar Weimar Republic. The movement began with the intention of incorporating post-war nationalism with traditional Christian theology.¹ The waves of nationalism brought about by the dissolution of the German Empire spread beyond political thought and into religious ideas. Protestant theologians feared that Christianity retained many elements that were not “German” enough, such as the Jewishness of Jesus, the canonicity of the Hebrew Bible, and the subservient nature of Christian ethics.² These fears led to dialogues among the clergy and laity about the future and possible modification of Christian doctrine.

By the late 1920s, the movement headed by Nazi Party members Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser in Thuringia had absorbed many of the Protestant groups that formed in order

¹ Susannah Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life” in *Church History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 588

² Ibid.

to push a paradigm shift towards religious nationalism. A likeminded faction arose in Berlin under Wilhelm Kube, the Gauleiter of Brandenburg. These efforts came to a head in 1931 with the mutual cooperation of both factions and the official branding of the German Christians at the insistence of Adolf Hitler.³ The intent of this new faction was to organize Nazi Protestants in order to win Prussian church elections.⁴

In the wake of Hitler's rise to the Chancellorship and the passing of the Enabling Act in 1933, the German Christian movement accomplished their electoral goals. The elections held in July of 1933 witnessed the greatest voter turnout in church history, ending with the German Christians taking all but three of the regional Protestant Bishoprics. Hitler himself played a role in the popular support of the German Christians by urging their election through radio broadcasts. He affirmed their existence as an appropriate religious complement to the rapidly shifting Nazi culture.⁵

Germany's origin as a host of fractured states and principalities created centuries-old religious institutions lacking central authority. Institutionally, the German Christians revolutionized the organization of governance within the German Protestant church. In accordance with the Nazi doctrine of *Führerprinzip*, or 'leader principle,' the new German Christian leadership established a policy of centralization under the rule of a single Reich bishop.⁶ In doing so, a unified Protestant doctrine infused with National Socialism could be promulgated at every pulpit in the Reich.

³ Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement and the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5

⁴ Ibid. 94

⁵ Ibid. 5-6

⁶ Ibid. 8

The German Christians also targeted Germany's educational institutions in their attempts to unify Protestant doctrine. Protestant theological faculties became inundated with German Christian supporters. By 1937, all deanships, half of all lectureships, and one third of all professorships were posts held by German Christians.⁷ German Christians opposed Christian unity; this anti-ecumenism through institutional dominance paralleled the Nazi Party's rise to power through institutional means. The dissemination of an ideology that insists on conformity and homogeneity necessarily demands ideological unity in established institutions.

The ideology of the German Christians itself was a process of borrowing the ideas of National Socialism and applying them to the theology and scriptures of Protestantism. The new doctrinal attitudes of the Protestant church leadership formed through racial ideology grounded in anti-Semitism. Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller declared that:

We must emphasize with all decisiveness that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism but developed in opposition to Judaism. When we speak of Christianity and Judaism today, the two in their most fundamental essences stand in glaring contrast to one another. There is no bond between them, rather the sharpest opposition.⁸

Theological revision was often employed to distance Christianity from its roots in Judaism. Indeed, some of the more radical theological positions taken by the German Christians, which gained little traction in the German population, included the complete removal of the Old Testament from the Christian canon and establishing Jesus as an Aryan rather than a Hebrew.⁹

A common word used by the German Christians with no proper English translation is *Völkisch*. Bergen describes *Völkisch* as “an historically bound word; it reflects a way of thinking that emphasizes the ethnic, racial group—the *Volk*—and is obsessed with its preservation and

⁷ Heschel, “Nazifying,” 589

⁸ Quoted in Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 21

⁹ Heschel, “Nazifying,” 588

advancement.”¹⁰ Since Christianity forms part of the identity of the *Völkisch*, opposition to Judaism becomes part of the struggle for existence. Judaism becomes not just an ideological opposition to Christianity, but an existential threat to the preservation of the racial integrity of the *Volk*:

The racial platform of the German Christian was justified through theological means: God had created societal orders—marriage, family, Volk, profession, hierarchy, property, and so forth—God had given each Volk a task and place on earth. Believers in racial hierarchy could see it as an extension of the biblical account of God’s creation of hierarchical orders within nature, and social orders such as marriage, and Christians were told that racial hierarchies were an extension of the divine order.¹¹

In this perspective, Germans were the superior *Volk* sent by God to finish Christ’s mission on Earth: the eradication of the Jewish threat. The state under the *Führer* existed by God’s command to guide the *Volk* into their divinely ordained place among the races of the world. Only ethnic cleansing could actualize their position.

The most significant institutionalization of this overt anti-Semitism occurred in 1939. *Kristallnacht* revealed the growing threat of anti-clericalism as a result of Christian ties to the Old Testament. The German Christians sought to prove that Christianity was just as anti-Semitic as the new regime and its National Socialist ideology. In Thuringia, theologians, professors, bishops, and pastors within the German Christian movement established the “Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” with Siegfried Leffler as its leader. The Institute’s academic director was a young theologian named Walter Grundmann who, like Leffler, joined the Nazi Party and an apologist for the German Christians.¹²

¹⁰ *Twisted Cross*, 23

¹¹ Susannah Heschel, “The Impact of Nazism on German Rabbinics Scholarship: a Response to Robert P. Ericksen” in *Jewish Social Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 78

¹² Heschel, “Nazifying,” 589

In 1990, Western scholars, Heschel chief among them, gained access to church records in Thuringia at the consent of the regime in East Germany. Previous scholarship on the relationship between Christianity and National Socialism depicted Christianity as struggling to maintain theological integrity under an oppressive Nazi regime. Indeed, Grundmann's Institute was construed to be a legitimate body of scholars impartially examining Jewish theology and doctrine.¹³ Only in the last thirty years has historical scholarship on Christianity and National Socialism undergone a transformation in examining the prevalence of complicity rather than opposition in Protestant organizations.

Among the historical truth brought to light in the examination of the archives in 1990 was the Godesberg Declaration, issued in April of 1939.¹⁴ The Declaration proposed by a wide body of German Christian members in reaction to the Archbishop of Canterbury's condemnation of the Nazi aggression in Czechoslovakia, and that it "repudiated ecumenism and 'World Protestantism' and presented Christianity as the irreconcilable religious foe of Judaism."¹⁵ The Declaration stressed the historical continuance of Martin Luther's true intentions as an anti-Semite with the ideology and institutions of National Socialism.¹⁶ The importance of this Declaration lies in the fact that it demonstrated the shared intentions of the German Christian and the Nazi state in enacting global change.

The alliance between the church and the state can be viewed as part of the revolutionary program put forth by the German Christians. Along with rejecting most established orthodoxy and doctrine in favor of ideas wrapped in *Völkisch* and anti-Semitic thought, the German

¹³ Ibid. 590

¹⁴ Ibid. 590-1

¹⁵ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 19

¹⁶ Heschel, "Nazifying," 591

Christians revised established notions in regards to the boundaries between church and state. German Christians believed that churches with complete separation from the state would inhibit National Socialism, precluding the “emphasis on the ‘organic’ unity of communal life.”¹⁷ They viewed the blending of church and state as an integral portion to the German Christian platform because the church’s subservience to the state embodied the *Fuhrerprinzip*, the only political means to actualize the intents of the *Völkisch* ideology.

For the Nazi Party and the German Christians to transform the lives and actions of the population with their ideology, reforms in the relationship between doctrine and daily life would be required. The concept of soldiering for the Reich fit well in creating a new identity for the church in wartime Germany. Being and identity of humanity was grounded in the hierarchies established by God. Among these was the hierarchy between men and women, the masculine and the feminine. This portion of the German Christian platform can be seen as their attempt to further ties to the National Socialist program. The Nazi Party’s successful use of masculine soldierliness in its rhetoric and imagery led the German Christians to adopt the same approach to enhance their position.¹⁸

The German Christians faced an internal inconsistency with their preference for masculinity, however. Biblically and historically, many viewed the church as a feminine institution due to its concerns about “nurturing, caring, [and] preserving purity.”¹⁹ In order to reconcile the notions of aggression and “manliness,” the hallmarks of National Socialism, the German Christians devised a way to legitimize their institutions and doctrines through warfare.

¹⁷ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 55

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 65

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 192

In this state, the church could provide both a source of aggression towards the foes of the *Volk* and nurturing and tenderness to the sons sent to their deaths.²⁰ German Christian anti-ecumenism and exclusionary ethnic policies provided a means for expressing the fundamental “manliness” of the ideology by channeling aggression towards the enemies of the *Volk* while maintaining the nurturing, “feminine” elements of the traditional church institutions for those of God’s chosen *Volk*.

The importance of this form of ideological synchronization with the National Socialists demonstrates the legitimizing influence the church had on Nazi policy programs. The association of religious ideas and socio-political ideology provided the grounds for legitimizing state actions, such as genocide and warfare. When the material ends of a political institution are justified through religious terms, the capacity to restrict potential actions on moral or ethical grounds is lost.

This is demonstrated in one of the great ironies in the history of Nazi Germany - the German Christian response to the Nazi eugenics program. While many Catholic circles condemned sterilization and euthanasia, the German Christians remained largely silent. Indeed, German Christians that even spoke of eugenics were exceptional among a silent majority.²¹ Some German Christian publications, however, offered support for the eugenics policies by stating that they were consistent with Christianity: “[Eugenics policies were] aimed to ‘protect our people from the curse of ongoing evil and from the harmful consequences and dangers of inferior and criminal humanity.’ Therefore ... that law reflected true Christian love.”²² Most officials, however, simply avoided discussing the issue with the same fervency as they discussed

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 40

²² Ibid. 41

the question of Judaism. Without a consensus for a reasonable justification to legitimize the eugenics policies within German Christian theology, the leadership elected to avoid discussing the issue altogether.

The German Christians did not rise into their dominant position in church leadership without opposition, however. When the Nazi Party took power in 1933, it began enacting legislation barring Jews from positions in civil service. After the July 1933 church elections that witnessed the electoral victory of the German Christians, the church planned on enacting similar laws that would lead to the expulsion of Jewish converts and any member of the church with Jewish ancestors. Martin Niemöller, a pastor from Berlin, reacted by establishing the *Pfarrernotbund*, or Pastor's Emergency League, in order to protest these new rules.²³ This movement would later be known as the *Bekennende Kirche*, or Confessing Church.

Shelley Baranowski provides a succinct analysis of the Protestants that abandoned their support of the Nazi Party and the German Christians:

The Confessing Church, a coalition of prominent Protestant clerics and lay leaders, exemplified both the agreement and ambivalence with which conservative elites encouraged the rise and triumph of Nazism. The social composition of its membership resembled that of leading political elites who first approved of the regime and then later grew reserved toward its increasing racial, economic, and military radicalism.²⁴

This schism became known as the *Kirchenkampf*, or “church struggle”. The German Christians viewed the Church as a battleground for the *Volk* to prove their superiority, to fight out a “church struggle.”²⁵ The previous analysis already indicates that the German Christians largely succeeded

²³ Ibid. 34

²⁴ Shelley Baranowski, “Consent and Dissent: The Confessing Church and Conservative Opposition to National Socialism” in the *Journal of Modern History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 57

²⁵ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 12

in their *Kirchenkampf*. The chief opposition was the Confessing Church, an organization dedicating to preserving the traditional church and its laws.²⁶

Paralleling previous scholarship on the German Christians, Heschel dispelled much of the myth surrounding the Confessing Church:

The Third Reich's *Kirchenkampf* is sometimes mistakenly understood as referring to the Protestant churches' resistance to National Socialism. In fact, the term refers to an internal dispute between members of the *Bekennende Kirche* and members of the *Deutsche Christen* over control of the Protestant church. While not all members of the Confessing Church opposed Hitler's policies, the movement called for an autonomy of the church from National Socialist legal measures, particularly the racial laws, motivated both by theological and political considerations.²⁷

The Confessing Church did not necessarily oppose National Socialism. Rather, they opposed the German Christians and their efforts to unify the church and state as one body.

In the beginning, the Confessing Church took steps to separate themselves from the Protestant church. They held their own distinct national synods in 1934, 1935, and in 1936, and they established a distinct provisional church leadership in Prussia.²⁸ Still, political division was not the dividing line between the two factions. Martin Niemöller's brother, Wilhelm, a pastor in Bielefeld, had been a member of the Nazi Party since the early 1920's and originally sympathized with the German Christian movement. In July of 1933, Wilhelm stated that "As to my position regarding the 'German Christians,' I am a member of the movement and will remain so."²⁹ By the end of the summer, however, Wilhelm joined his brother, Martin, and became integral to the leadership of the Confessing Church. This is juxtaposed to Friedrich Buschtöns, Wilhelm's colleague in Bielefeld, who abandoned his opposition to the German Christians and

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Heschel, "Nazifying," 587

²⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 13

²⁹ Ibid.

rose to prominence within that faction.³⁰ While it is fair to say that the German Christians were a National Socialist faction, it is more difficult to say that the Confessing Church established itself on political lines because of the fluidity between the memberships of the two factions.

While racial policy is what drove Niemöller to establish the Pastor's Emergency League, it is not clear that the Confessing Church, growing out of the *Pfarrernotbund*, entirely opposed National Socialist ideas on race. Despite their differences with the German Christians, the Confessing Church did not inherently champion Judaism and the rights of Jews.³¹ Many anti-Nazi Lutherans opposed the *Volkisch* movement with the same fervency that they opposed the Jewish religion; both were considered to be “[defining] themselves by blood in ways that led to chauvinistic ethnic racism.”³² Even Niemöller, the founder of the Confessing Church, personally believed it acceptable to establish racial policy in reaction to the prejudices of a congregation.³³ Indeed, Niemöller believed that the solution to the problem of Jewish officeholders was for the Jews to voluntarily reject any positions offered in order to “spare their fellow Christians difficult decisions.”³⁴

The Confessing Church still retained diversity in its theological justifications for opposition to the German Christians. Some prominent pastors, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans Ehrenberg, viewed anti-Semitism as a direct assault on the fundamentals of Christianity. Ehrenberg asserted that precluding Jews and Jewish descendants from church membership denied an essential component of the Christian spirit. Bonhoeffer agreed on similar lines, yet

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 35

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 90

³⁴ Quoted in Ibid.

remained frustrated with most members of the Confessing Church for being unable to perceive the deeper theological threat of precluding Jews.³⁵

Bonhoeffer made this statement in regards to the new legislation barring Jews, converted Jews, and descendents of converted Jews from civil and religious positions:

Pastors are not state officials. Hence official regulations cannot be applied to them under any circumstances. Concerning admission to the ministry, as to other Church positions, only ecclesiastical viewpoints are decisive, i.e., right doctrine, Christian conduct, and spiritual endowments alone qualify for the ministry. It is therefore an ecclesiastical impossibility to exclude, as a matter of principle, Jewish-Christian members from any offices of the Church. . . . With exclusion of the Jewish-Christians from the communion of worship, he who realizes the nature of the Church must feel himself to be excluded also.³⁶

Bonhoeffer was influenced by the fact that one of his close friends from Berlin University, Franz Hildebrandt, was a baptized Jew.³⁷ Bonhoeffer's twin sister, Sabine, also married a baptized Jew, Gerhard Leibholz.³⁸

Bonhoeffer's affinity for baptized Jews, however, did not prevent him from being shaped by the cultural and historical backdrop of postwar Germany. Bonhoeffer published "The Church and the Jewish Question" in 1933, the same year the German Christians took over the Protestant Church and promulgated legislation opposing Jewish occupation in civil and religious positions.³⁹ Bonhoeffer wrote that "the Church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the 'chosen people,' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its

³⁵ Ibid. 35

³⁶ Quoted in Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933—1935" in *Jewish Social Studies* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press), 239

³⁷ Ibid. 238

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 240

actions through a long history of suffering.”⁴⁰ Zerner argues that “Bonhoeffer viewed the Jewish people as a kind of paradigm of salvation as well as suffering – a warning to Christians.”⁴¹ If this is the case, it is clear that even Protestants who resisted Nazism in defense of Judaism remained prejudiced by strains of anti-Semitic theology.

Despite his notoriety and depiction as a martyr of the Christian faith, Bonhoeffer still operated within the confines of a conservative Christian interpretation of human existence. Bergen demonstrates that even Niemöller was a “self-professed anti-Semite,” and that he believed excluding baptized Jews from Church positions “would effectively negate the teaching of baptism.”⁴² Much of the critical reaction from conservative elites to the German Christians and to Hitler’s Nazi Party was not a criticism of their domestic policies, but fear that these new and radical ideas challenged the authority of traditional ideologies and institutions.⁴³ Much of the Confessing Church perceived National Socialism not an assault on human rights, but an assault on Christian orthodox regarding the possibility of divine redemption for the Jews.

Bonhoeffer also believed that the institute of the church could not necessarily intervene in the actions of the state:

The true church of Christ, however, which lives solely from the Gospel and realizes the character of the state's actions, will never intervene in the state in such a way as to criticize its history-making actions from the standpoint of some humanitarian ideal. It recognizes the absolute necessity of the use of force in this world and also the 'moral' injustice of certain concrete acts of the state which are necessarily bound up with the use of force.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 35

⁴³ Baranowski, “Consent and Dissent,” 57

⁴⁴ Quoted in Zerner, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” 242

Bonhoeffer believed that the one true church should be free to offer humanitarian criticisms of the state, but direct intervention on such matters would be a violation of the church's role within society. Bonhoeffer acknowledged Luther's notion that the state and church govern distinct and separate realms, and that one should not directly intervene in the other. To Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, this justified their opposition to the German Christians because they violated this principle by infusing the church and state together. How could the Confessing Church maintain integrity of conviction if it denied the state the right to intervene in the church, while at the same allowed the church to intervene in the state?

Bonhoeffer eventually came to personally despise the Nazi and German Christian policies towards Jews, baptized or otherwise, by the end of 1933.⁴⁵ During the *Kristallnacht*, he reportedly said "If the synagogues burn today, the churches will be on fire tomorrow."⁴⁶ Given Bonhoeffer's theology on the Semitic origin of Christianity, he viewed Nazi aggression as a prelude to a future assault against the church. Given the oppositional nature of Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, the Nazi Party persecuted the organization and drove them underground. By 1938, the organization was in tatters.⁴⁷ In this year Bonhoeffer began to actively conspire against the regime by smuggling Jews into Switzerland and passing on sensitive documents to German military officials opposed to Hitler.⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer suffered from an internal struggle over the meaning of his faith in the presence of those that would use the same faith to justify genocide. His actions in the latter end of the Nazi era indicate a sentiment of universality and secular humanitarianism, yet his earlier

⁴⁵ Ibid. 245

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ibid. 246

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

writings and actions speak of an individual content with compartmentalizing the human species over religious ideas. While Bonhoeffer's resistance and eventual martyrdom demonstrated his transformation into something more than a Christian, most of his colleagues in the Confessing Church fell short. They both maintained the same prejudiced attitudes towards Jews. The German Christians and the Confessing Church overlapped in many ways; chiefly, they both had the tendency to arbitrarily proclaim a certain group of people as the "people" that deserve salvation. The German Christian's decision to reserve salvation for Aryans is no more arbitrary than the Confessing Church's decision to promote the orthodoxy of baptism and the possibility of salvation for those willing to accept it. By creating an ingroup and outgroup on the basis of belief, the species became divided in the eyes of the members of either faction.

Historical scholarship on the German Christians and the Confessing Church was long mired in misconception. Heschel states that when she visited Thuringia in 1990 to examine the archives of the Institute, "many prominent historians urged me to drop my study because, they claimed, the Institute had been marginal and inconsequential."⁴⁹ Heschel uncovered the falsity of such claims, showing that all levels of state, educational, and church institutions held historical documents revealing the true nature of the Institute.⁵⁰ This intentionally poor historiography led directly to the rehabilitation of prominent Nazi theologians into German society. Walter Grundmann, the former academic director of the Institute, became the rector of a seminary in East Germany in 1954 and became the most important and influential East German theologian. Into the 1990's, his gospel commentaries became standard reading for prospective ministers and

⁴⁹ Heschel, "Impact of Nazism," 77

⁵⁰ Ibid.

theologians in the seminaries.⁵¹ Individuals that furthered Nazi crimes were absolved and rehabilitated with little question.

Scholarly opposition to investigating the historical truth behind the relationship between Christianity and National Socialism is, in many ways, guilty of the same errors in judgment that furthered the anti-Semitism of the German Christians and the compartmentalization of the Confessing Church. It can be seen in the history of the German Christian movement that intentional distortion and manipulation of historical knowledge furthered the agenda of unifying the church with the state. The analysis of the Confessing Church, however, demonstrates that the German Christian attempts to warp theology differed little, in principle, to any attempt to justify a position or action in theological terms. In this light, the Confessing Church suffered from the same false presuppositions as the German Christians. Though some individuals, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, attempted to move beyond limiting and divisive religious beliefs, the vast majority in either movement were unable to do so, resulting in the furtherance of the religiously inspired divisions that justified total war and genocide in Nazi Germany.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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