



CHAPTER 11

NAZI THEOLOGY

It's been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?

—ADOLF HITLER

One sometimes hears that Hitler was a Christian. He was certainly not, but neither was he openly anti-Christian, as most of his top lieutenants were. What helped him aggrandize power, he approved of, and what prevented it, he did not. He was utterly pragmatic. In public he often made comments that made him sound pro-church or pro-Christian, but there can be no question that he said these things cynically, for political gain. In private, he possessed an unblemished record of statements against Christianity and Christians.

Especially early in his career, Hitler wished to appear like a typical German, so he praised the churches as bastions of morality and traditional values. But he also felt that, in time, the churches would adapt to the National Socialist way of thinking. They would eventually be made into vessels for Nazi ideology, so it little served his purposes to destroy them. It would be easier to change what already existed and benefit from whatever cultural cachet they possessed.

In his famous diary, Joseph Goebbels, who was probably closer to Hitler than anyone, recorded some of the Führer's private thoughts about the clergy:

The Fuehrer spoke very derogatorily about the arrogance of the higher and lower clergy. The insanity of the Christian doctrine of redemption really doesn't fit at all into our time. Nevertheless there are learned, educated men, occupying high positions in public life, who cling to it with the faith of a child. It is simply incomprehensible how anybody can consider the Christian doctrine of redemption as a guide for the difficult life of today. The Fuehrer cited a number of exceptionally drastic and in part even grotesque examples. . . . Whereas the most learned and wisest scientists struggle for a whole lifetime to study but one of the mysterious laws of nature, a little country priest from Bavaria is in a position to decide this matter on the basis for his religious knowledge. One can regard such a disgusting performance only with disdain. A church that does not keep step with modern scientific knowledge is doomed. It may take quite a while, but it is bound finally to happen. Anybody who is firmly rooted in daily life and who can only faintly imagine the mystic secrets of nature, will naturally be extremely modest about the universe. The clerics, however, who have not caught a breath of such modesty, evidence a sovereign opinionated attitude toward questions of the universe.

Hitler's attitude toward Christianity was that it was a great heap of mystical out-of-date nonsense. But what annoyed Hitler was not that it was nonsense, but that it was nonsense that did not help him get ahead. According to Hitler, Christianity preached "meekness and flabbiness," and this was simply not useful to the National Socialist ideology, which preached "ruthlessness and strength." In time, he felt that the churches would change their ideology. He would see to it.

Martin Bormann and Heinrich Himmler were the most passionately anti-Christian members of Hitler's inner circle, and they didn't believe the churches should adapt or could. They wanted the clergy crushed and the churches abolished, and they encouraged Hitler along these lines whenever possible. They hoped to accelerate the timetable for open warfare with the

church, but Hitler was in no hurry. Whenever he attacked the churches, his popularity waned. Unlike his top men, Hitler had an instinctive political sense of timing, and now was not the time to take on the churches directly. Now was the time to pretend to be pro-Christian.

Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, was a firsthand witness to Hitler's cold-blooded approach: "Around 1937, when Hitler heard that at the instigation of the party and the SS vast numbers of his followers had left the church because it was obstinately opposing his plans, he nevertheless ordered his close associates, above all Göring and Goebbels, to remain members of the church. He too would remain a member of the Catholic Church, he said, although he had no real attachment to it."

Bormann despised Christians and Christianity, but couldn't yet say so publicly. In 1941, when the war was raging, he made his thoughts known, saying, "National Socialism and Christianity are irreconcilable." Speer commented,

In Bormann's mind, the *Kirchenkampf*, the campaign against the churches, was useful for reactivating party ideology which had been lying dormant. He was the driving force behind this campaign. . . . Hitler was hesitant, but only because he would rather postpone this problem to a more favorable time. . . . "Once I have settled my other problems," he occasionally declared, "I'll have my reckoning with the church. I'll have it reeling on the ropes." But Bormann did not want this reckoning postponed. Brutally direct himself, he could ill tolerate Hitler's prudent pragmatism. . . . [So he] would draw one of the members of the entourage into telling him about seditious speeches a pastor or bishop had delivered, until Hitler finally became attentive and demanded details. . . . At some point [Bormann] would take a document from his pocket and begin reading passages from a defiant sermon or a pastoral letter. Frequently Hitler became so worked up that he began to snap his fingers—a sure sign of his anger—pushed away his food and vowed to punish the offending clergyman eventually.

But all of this was far in the future. In 1933, Hitler never hinted that he was capable of taking a stand against the churches. Most pastors were quite convinced that Hitler was on their side, partly because he had a record of pro-Christian statements that reached back to the first days of his political

life. In a 1922 speech, he called Jesus "our greatest Aryan hero." Reconciling the idea of the Jewish Jesus as an Aryan hero is no less preposterous than trying to reconcile Hitler's ideal of the ruthless, immoral Nietzschean *Übermensch* with the humble, self-sacrificing Christ.

Hitler must be called a Nietzschean, although he likely would have bristled at the term since it implied that he believed in something beyond himself. This clashed with the idea of an invincible Führer figure, above whom none could stand. Still, Hitler visited the Nietzsche museum in Weimar many times, and there are photos of him posed, staring rapturously at a huge bust of the philosopher. He devoutly believed in what Nietzsche said about the "will to power." Hitler worshiped power, while truth was a phantasm to be ignored; and his sworn enemy was not falsehood but weakness. For Hitler, ruthlessness was a great virtue, and mercy, a great sin. This was Christianity's chief difficulty, that it advocated meekness.

Nietzsche called Christianity "the one great curse, the one enormous and innermost perversion . . . the one immortal blemish of mankind." He despised the Christian idea of virtue, considering it despicable and weak: "Society has never regarded virtue as anything else than as a means to strength, power and order." And of course, Nietzsche exalted the idea of strength personified in the Superman, or *Übermensch*, a cruel and ruthless champion of unbridled power—"the magnificent blond brute, avidly rampant for spoil and victory."

Hitler seemed to have believed that Nietzsche had prophesied his coming and rise to power. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche prophesied the coming of a race of rulers, "a particularly strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will." Hitler believed the Aryan race was this "race of rulers." Nietzsche referred to these men as "lords of the earth." William Shirer said that Nietzsche's rantings along these lines met with Hitler's approval: "[They] must have struck a responsive chord in Hitler's littered mind. At any rate he appropriated them for his own—not only the thoughts but . . . often his very words. 'Lords of the Earth' is a familiar expression in *Mein Kampf*. That in the end Hitler considered himself the superman of Nietzsche's prophecy can not be doubted."

Hitler could hail Nietzsche as great as long as people understood that Nietzsche existed principally to prepare the way for Hitler, to be his John the Baptist, as it were.

Among the first to portray Hitler in a messianic light was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whom Shirer called “one of the strangest Englishmen who ever lived,” and whom many considered to be one of the spiritual fathers of the Third Reich. Chamberlain believed Germany was meant to rule the world as a master race, and he prophesied that Hitler was the man to lead them:

At the end of a fantastic life he could hail the Austrian corporal—and this long before Hitler came to power or had any prospect of it—as a being sent by God to lead the German people out of the wilderness. Hitler, not unnaturally, regarded Chamberlain as a prophet, as indeed he turned out to be. . . . He went to his grave . . . on January 11, 1927—with high hope that all he had preached and prophesied would yet come true under the divine guidance of this new German Messiah.

Before he died, Chamberlain met Hitler. He is another baffling character in a baffling story, a kind of satanic Simeon warbling an inverted *Nunc Dimittis*.

A New Nazi Religion

Since Hitler had no religion other than himself, his opposition to Christianity and the church was less ideological than practical. That was not the case for many leaders of the Third Reich. Alfred Rosenberg, Martin Bormann, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhardt Heydrich, and others were bitterly anti-Christian and were ideologically opposed to Christianity, and wanted to replace it with a religion of their own devising. Under their leadership, said Shirer, “the Nazi regime intended eventually to destroy Christianity in Germany, if it could, and substitute the old paganism of the early tribal Germanic gods and the new paganism of the Nazi extremists.”

Hitler wouldn’t let them do this at first, hence his constant battle to rein them in. But he was not opposed to their doing it when the time was right. He couldn’t take it very seriously, but he thought that the neopagan stew that Himmler was cooking up would probably be far more useful than Christianity because it would advocate such “virtues” as would be useful to the Third Reich.

Himmler was the head of the SS and was aggressively anti-Christian. Very early on, he barred clergy from serving in the SS. In 1935 he ordered

every SS member to resign leadership in religious organizations. The next year he forbade SS musicians to participate in religious services, even out of uniform. Soon afterward he forbade SS members to attend church services. For Himmler, the SS was itself a religion, and its members, postulants in its priesthood. Many SS rituals were occultic in nature. Himmler was deeply involved in the occult and in astrology, and much of what the SS perpetrated in the death camps bore Himmler's saurian stamp.

Hans Gisevius, a member of the German military, would become one of the leaders in the conspiracy against Hitler. Like most in the conspiracy, Gisevius was a serious Christian. He was a friend of Niemöller and attended his church. One day around 1935 he was in a meeting with Himmler and Heydrich, who knew of his faith and argued with him about it. Gisevius wrote,

Heydrich, who took a lively part in the discussion, paced energetically back and forth in the room. He never quite finished making his point, and as we were taking our leave he ran after me to get in a final word. Tapping me on the shoulder he said with a grin: "Just you wait. You'll see the day, ten years from now, when Adolf Hitler will occupy precisely the same position in Germany that Jesus Christ has now."

The SS was fiercely intent on this subject. Albert Speer recalled hearing Hitler privately mock Himmler's efforts: "What nonsense! [Hitler said.] Here we have at last reached an age that has left all mysticism behind it, and now he wants to start that all over again. We might just as well have stayed with the church. At least it had tradition. To think that I may some day be turned into an SS saint! Can you imagine it? I would turn over in my grave."

Rosenberg was one of the Nazi leaders most active in creating this "new religion." How they would get there was a point of some disagreement. Some, like Himmler, wanted to start fresh; while others thought it easier to turn the existing Christian churches into "Nazi" churches over time. Rosenberg was an "outspoken pagan" who, during the war, developed a thirty-point program for the "National Reich Church." That it was entrusted to an outspoken pagan shows how much respect Hitler had for the Christian church and its doctrines. Rosenberg's plan is some of the clearest proof that exists of the Nazis' ultimate plans for the churches. A few points of his program illustrate

what Hitler was open to approving and, under cover of war, would move toward:

13. The National Church demands immediate cessation of the publishing and dissemination of the Bible in Germany. . . .
14. The National Church declares that to it, and therefore to the German nation, it has been decided that the Fuehrer's *Mein Kampf* is the greatest of all documents. It . . . not only contains the greatest but it embodies the purest and truest ethics for the present and future life of our nation.
18. The National Church will clear away from its altars all crucifixes, Bibles and pictures of saints.
19. On the altars there must be nothing but *Mein Kampf* (to the German nation and therefore to God the most sacred book) and to the left of the altar a sword.
30. On the day of its foundation, the Christian Cross must be removed from all churches, cathedrals and chapels . . . and it must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika.

The German Christians

The most serious Christians in Germany recognized the incompatibility of Christianity and Nazi philosophy. Karl Barth said Christianity was separated "as by an abyss from the inherent godlessness of National Socialism."

But someplace in the deep and wide abyss betwixt these two existed a strange group who did not think there was an abyss, and who wished to create a seamless connection between National Socialism and Christianity. They saw no theological problem with this project, and during much of the 1930s, they constituted a powerful force in Germany. They formed the core of the opposition to Bonhoeffer, Niemöller, and other leaders in the Confessing Church side of the church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) just beginning. To co-opt all who fancied themselves Germans and Christians, they called themselves the *Deutsche Christens*, "German Christians." The contortions required to pull together their idea of Germanness with their idea of Christianity can be painful to contemplate.

In her book *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*,

Doris Bergen wrote that "the 'German Christians' preached Christianity as the polar opposite of Judaism, Jesus as the arch anti-semite, and the cross as the symbol of war against Jews." Fusing the German *Volk* (people) with the German *Kirche* (church) meant stretching and twisting the definitions of both. Step one was to define *Germanness* as inherently in opposition to *Jewishness*. To make Christianity one with Germanness meant purging it of everything Jewish. It was an absurd project.

For starters, they decided the Old Testament must go. It was obviously too Jewish. At one German Christians' gathering in Bavaria, the speaker ridiculed the Old Testament as a saga of racial defilement. His remark that "Moses in his old age had married a Negro woman" drew boisterous laughter and enthusiastic applause. As late as 1939, they founded "the Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life." Like the famous Jefferson Bible that omitted anything not to Jefferson's liking, this institute took a cut-and-paste attitude toward the Bible, excising anything that seemed Jewish or un-German. One of the leaders, Georg Schneider, called the whole Old Testament "a cunning Jewish conspiracy." He went on: "Into the oven, with the part of the Bible that glorifies the Jews, so eternal flames will consume that which threatens our people."

As for the New Testament, the German Christians quoted scriptures out of context and twisted the meaning to suit their anti-Semitic agenda. They used John 8:44 to great effect: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Of course Jesus and all of his disciples were Jewish, and the Jews whom Jesus addresses here are religious leaders. It was only with them that he took such a harsh tone. The passage in which Jesus throws the money changers out of the temple was also popular with the German Christians. But to hone its barbed point, the phrase "den of thieves" was replaced with the German *Kaufhaus* (department store), most of which were then owned by Jews. The German Christians always painted Jesus as a non-Jew and often as a cruel anti-Semite. As Hitler had called him "our greatest Aryan hero," this was not much of a leap. Before the German Christians were through with him, the Nazarene rabbi would be a goose-stepping, strudel-loving son of the Reich.

The German Christians took the same line with church music. At their famous gathering in the Berlin *Sportpalast*, one of their leaders declared, "We want to sing songs that are free from all Israelite elements!" This would be difficult. Even the most German hymn of all, Luther's "Mighty Fortress Is Our God," contained a reference to Jesus as "Lord Sabaoth." But they were deadly earnest about purging their hymnbooks of such "Jewish" words as *Jehovah*, *Hallelujah*, and *Hosanna*. One author proposed changing *Jerusalem* to *heavenly abode*—and *cedars of Lebanon* to *firs of the German forest*.

As they bent themselves into pretzels, some German Christians realized it was a losing battle. So in 1937, a group of them stated that the written word of Scripture was the problem. "Whereas the Jews were the first to write out their faith," they said, "Jesus never did so." True "German" Christianity must therefore move beyond written words. "A demon always resides in the written word," they added.

Their efforts became more and more ridiculous. German Christians sometimes spoke of baptism as a baptism not into the body of Christ but into "the community of the *Volk*" and into the *Weltanschauung* of the Führer. Communion presented other difficulties. One pastor spoke of the bread symbolizing "the body of the earth that, firm and strong, remains true to the German soil," and the wine was "the blood of the earth." The paganism of it all escaped them.

But it wasn't merely the jots and tittles of their theology that were at issue. Their entire concept of Christianity was heretical. Ludwig Müller, the man whom Hitler would put forward as his choice to lead a "united German church"—in the new position of Reich bishop—declared that the "love" of the German Christians had a "hard, warrior-like face. It hates everything soft and weak because it knows that all life can only then remain healthy and fit for life when everything antagonistic to life, the rotten and the indecent, is cleared out of the way and destroyed." This was not Christianity, but Nietzschean social Darwinism. Müller also publicly stated that the idea of grace was "un-German." A crew-cutted former naval chaplain and self-styled "lusty fellow" and "man's man" who sneered at theologians—Karl Barth was one of his favorite whipping boys—Müller was one of the staunchest advocates of the Nazification of the church in Germany. He would be the principal nemesis of the Confessing Church in the church struggle ahead.

But Müller was hardly alone in thinking that the love and grace of tradi-

tional Christianity had no place in the positive Christianity of the German Christians. Another German Christian declared that the teaching of "sin and grace . . . was a Jewish attitude inserted into the New Testament" and was simply too negative for Germans at that time:

A people, who, like our own, has a war behind them that they did not want, that they lost, and for which they were declared guilty, cannot bear it, when their sinfulness is constantly pointed out to them in an exaggerated way. . . . Our people has suffered so much under the lie of war guilt that it is the task and duty of the church and of theology to use Christianity to give courage to our people, and not to pull them down into political humiliation. [[proofreader note:: agreement problems in original, don't change]]

How the German Christians justified twisting and bending the traditionally accepted meaning of the Scriptures and the doctrines of the church is complicated. One German Christian leader, Reinhold Krause, said that Martin Luther had left Germans with "a priceless legacy: the completion of the German Reformation in the Third Reich!" If Luther could break away from the Catholic church, it followed that nothing was written in stone. That was the weed in the garden of Protestantism. Even Luther had questioned the canonicity of some books of the Bible, especially the book of James, for what he took as its preaching of "salvation by works." And Bonhoeffer's professor, the liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack, had questioned the canonicity of much of the Old Testament. There's little question that the liberal theological school of Schleiermacher and Harnack helped push things along in this direction. But the other piece of this puzzle has to do with the confusion that inevitably arises when the Christian faith becomes too closely related to a cultural or national identity. For many Germans, their national identity had become so melted together with whatever Lutheran Christian faith they had that it was impossible to see either clearly. After four hundred years of taking for granted that all Germans were Lutheran Christians, no one really knew what Christianity was anymore.

In the end, the German Christians would realize that they were living in Barth's abyss after all. True Christians viewed them as confused, nationalistic heretics, and they could never satisfy the staunch anti-Semites on the Nazi

side of the abyss. One Nazi leader sent the Gestapo a letter complaining that the *melody* to the hymn "Jerusalem, Thou City High and Fair" was played at memorial services for the German war dead. There were no offensive words, since only the melody was played, but even to evoke the memory of the words was unacceptable. That well-known hymn, which had been played at German memorial services for many years, was chosen by Paula Bonhoeffer for Walter's funeral in 1918.