

The Great Scandal: Christianity's Role in the Rise of the Nazis – Part I

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“You know what happens when atheists take over – remember Nazi Germany?” Many Christians point to Nazism, alongside Stalinism, to illustrate the perils of atheism in power.¹ At the other extreme, some authors paint the Vatican as Hitler’s eager ally. Meanwhile, the Nazis are generally portrayed as using terror to bend a modern civilization to their agenda; yet we recognize that Hitler was initially popular. Amid these contradictions, where is the truth?

A growing body of scholarly research, some based on careful analysis of Nazi records, is clarifying this complex history.² It reveals a convoluted pattern of religious and moral failure in which atheism and the nonreligious played little role, except as victims of the Nazis and their allies. In contrast, Christianity had the capacity to stop Nazism before it came to power, and to reduce or moderate its practices afterwards, but repeatedly failed to do so because the principal churches were complicit with – indeed, in the pay of – the Nazis.

Most German Christians supported the Reich; many continued to do so in the face of mounting evidence that the dictatorship was depraved and murderously cruel. Elsewhere in Europe the story was often the same. Only with Christianity’s forbearance and frequent cooperation could fascistic movements gain majority support in Christian nations. European fascism was the fruit of a Christian culture. Millions of Christians actively supported these notorious regimes. Thousands participated in their atrocities.

What, in God’s name, were they thinking?

Before we can consider the Nazis, we need to examine the historical and cultural religious context that would give rise to them.

Christian Foundations

Early Christian sects promoted loyalty to authoritarian rulers so long they were not intolerably anti-Christian or, worse, atheistic. Christian anti-Semitism sprang from one of the church’s first efforts to forge an accommodation with power. Reinterpreting the Gospels to shift blame for the Crucifixion from the Romans to the Jews (the “Christ killer” story) courted favour with Rome, an early example of Christian complicity for political purposes. Added energy came from Christians’ anger over most Jews’ refusal to convert.³

Christian anti-Semitism was only intermittently violent, but when violence occurred it was devastating. The first outright extermination of Jews occurred in 414 CE. It would have innumerable successors, the worst nearly genocidal in scope. At standard rates of population growth, Diaspora Jewry should now number in the hundreds of millions. That there are only an estimated 13 million Jews in the world⁴ is largely the result of Christian violence and forced conversion.⁵

Anti-Semitic practices pioneered by Catholics included the forced wearing of yellow identification, ghettoization, confiscation of Jews' property, and bans on intermarriage with Christians. European Protestantism bore the fierce impress of Martin Luther, whose 1543 tract *On the Jews and Their Lies* was a principal inspiration for *Mein Kampf*.⁶ In addition to his anti-Semitism, Luther was also a fervent authoritarian. *Against the Robbing and Murdering Peasants*, his vituperative commentary on a contemporary rebellion, contributed to the deaths of perhaps 100,000 Christians and helped to lay the groundwork for an increasingly severe Germa-Christian autocracy.⁷

With the Enlightenment, deistic and secular thinkers seeded Western culture with Greco-Roman notions of democracy and free expression. The feudal aristocracies and the churches counterattacked, couching their reactionary defence of privilege in self-consciously biblical language. This controversy would shape centuries of European history. As late as 1870, the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed a reactionary program at the first Vatican Council. Convened by the ultraconservative Pope Pius IX (reigned 1846–1878), Vatican I stridently condemned modernism, democracy, capitalism, usury, and Marxism.⁸ Anti-Semitism was also part of the mix; well into the twentieth century, mainstream Catholic publications set an intolerant tone that later Nazi propaganda would imitate. Anti-Semitism remained conspicuous in mainstream Catholic literature even after Pope Pius XI (reigned 1922–1939) officially condemned it.

Protestantism, too, was largely hostile toward modernism and democracy during this period (with a few exceptions in northern Europe). Because Jews were seen as materialists who promoted and benefited from Enlightenment modernism, most Protestant denominations remained anti-Semitic.

With the nineteenth century came a European movement that viewed Judaism as a racial curse. Attracting both Protestant and Catholic dissidents within Germanic populations, Aryan Christianity differed from traditional Christianity in denying both that Christ was a Jew and that Christianity had grown out of Judaism.⁹ Adherents viewed Christ as a divine Aryan warrior who brought the sword to cleanse the earth of Jews.¹⁰ Aryans were held to be the only true humans, specially created by God through Adam and Eve; all other peoples were soulless sub-humans, descended from apes or created by Satan with no hope of salvation.¹¹ Most non-Aryans were considered suitable for subservient roles including slavery, but not the Jews. Spiritless yet clever and devious, Jews were seen as a satanic disease to be quarantined or eliminated.

During the same years neo-pagan and occult movements gained adherents and incubated their own form of Aryanism. Unlike Aryan Christians, neo-pagan Aryans acknowledged that Christ was a Jew—and for that reason rejected Christianity. They believed themselves descended from demigods whose divinity had degraded through centuries of interbreeding with lesser races. The Norse gods and even the Atlantis myth sometimes decorated Aryan mythology.

Attempting to deny that Nazi anti-Semitism had a Christian component, Christian apologists exaggerate the influence of Aryan neo-paganism. Actually, neo-paganism never had a large following.



Together with interior minister Wilhelm Frick (second from the right) and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (far right), Catholic bishops Franz Rudolf Bornewasser (Bishop of Trier) and Ludwig Sebastian (Bishop of Speyer) raise their hands in the Nazi salute at an official ceremony in Saarbrücken City Hall marking the re-incorporation of the Saarland into the German Reich.

German Aryanism, whether Christian or pagan, became known as “Volkism.” Volkism prophesied the emergence of a great God-chosen Aryan who would lead the people (Volk) to their grand destiny through the conquest of *Lebensraum* (living space). A common motto was “God and Volk.” Disregarding obvious theological contradictions, growing numbers of German nationalists managed to work Aryanism into their Protestant or Catholic confessions, much as contemporary adherents of *Voudoun* or *Santería* blend the occult with their Christian beliefs. Darwinian theory sometimes entered Volkism as a belief in the divinely intended survival of the fittest peoples. Democracy had no place, but Nietzschean philosophy had some influence – a point Christian apologists make much of. Yet Nietzsche’s influence was modest, as Volkists found his scepticism toward religion unacceptable.¹²

Though traceable to the ancient world, atheism first emerged as a major social movement in the mid-1800s.¹³ It would be associated with both pro- and antidemocratic worldviews. Strongly influenced by science, atheists tended to view all humans as descended in common from apes. There was no inherent anti-Semitic tradition. Some atheists accepted then-popular pseudoscientific racist views that the races exhibited varying levels of intellect due to differing genetic heritages. Some went further, embracing various forms of eugenics as a means of improving the human condition. But neither of these positions was uniquely or characteristically atheistic. “Scientific” racism is actually better understood as a tool by which Christians could perpetuate their own cultural prejudices—it was no accident that the races deemed inferior by Western Christian societies and “science” were the same!

When we seek precursors of Nazi anti-Semitism and authoritarianism, it is among European Christians, not among the atheists, that we must search.

Following World War I, the religious situation in Europe was complex. Scientific findings about the age of the Earth, Darwin’s theory of evolution, and biblical criticism had fuelled the

first major expansion of non-theism at Christianity's expense among ordinary Europeans. The churches' support for the catastrophic Great War further fuelled public disaffection, as did (in Germany) the flight of the Kaiser, in whom both Protestant and Catholic clergy had vested heavily.¹⁴ But religion was not everywhere in retreat: post-war Germany experienced a Christian spiritual renaissance outside the traditional churches.¹⁵ Religious freedom was unprecedented, but the established churches enjoyed widespread state support and controlled their own education systems. They were far more influential than today.

Roughly two-thirds of Germans were Protestant, almost all of the rest Catholic. The pagan minority claimed at most 5 percent. Explicit non-theism was limited to an intellectual elite and to committed socialists. Just 1.5 percent of Germans identified themselves as unbelievers in a 1939 census, which means either that very few Nazis and National Socialist German Worker's Party supporters were atheists, or that atheists feared to identify themselves to the pro-theistic regime.

Most religious Germans detested the impiety, secularism, and hedonistic decadence that they associated with such modernist ideas as democracy and free speech. If they feared democracy, they were terrified by Communism, to the point of being willing to accept extreme counter-methods.

Thus it was a largely Christian, deeply racist, often antidemocratic, and in many respects dangerously primitive Western culture into which Nazism would arise. It was a theistic powder keg ready to explode.

Nazi Leaders, Theism, and Family Values

According to standard biographies, the principal Nazi leaders were all born, baptized, and raised Christian. Most grew up in strict, pious households where tolerance and democratic values were disparaged. Nazi leaders of Catholic background included Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, and Joseph Goebbels.

Hitler did well in monastery school. He sang in the choir, found High Mass and other ceremonies intoxicating, and idolized priests. Impressed by their power, he at one time considered entering the priesthood.

Rudolf Hoess, who as commandant at Auschwitz-Birkenau pioneered the use of the Zyklon-B gas that killed half of all Holocaust victims, had strict Catholic parents. Hermann Goering had mixed Catholic-Protestant parentage, while Rudolf Hess, Martin Bormann, Albert Speer, and Adolf Eichmann had Protestant backgrounds. Not one of the top Nazi leaders was raised in a liberal or atheistic family – no doubt, the parents of any of them would have found such views scandalous. Traditionalists would never think to deprive their offspring of the faith-based moral foundations that they would need to grow into ethical adults.

So much for the Nazi leaders' religious backgrounds. Assessing their religious views as adults is more difficult. On ancillary issues such as religion, Party doctrine was a deliberate tangle of contradictions.¹⁶ For Hitler consistency mattered less than having a statement at hand for any situation that might arise. History records many things that Hitler wrote or said about religion, but they too are sometimes contradictory. Many were crafted for a particular audience or moment and have limited value for illuminating Hitler's true opinion; in any case,

neither Hitler nor any other key Nazi leader was a trained theologian with carefully thought-out views.

Accuracy of transcription is another concern. Hitler's public speeches were recorded reliably, but were often propagandistic. His private statements seem more likely to reflect his actual views, but their reliability varies widely.¹⁷ The passages Christian apologists cite most often to prove Hitler's atheism are of questionable accuracy. Apologists often brandish them without noting historians' reservations. Hitler's personal library has been partly preserved, and a good deal is known about his reading habits, another possible window onto Hitler's beliefs.¹⁸ Also important, and often ignored by apologists, are statements made by religious figures of the time, who generally—at least for public consumption—viewed Hitler as a Christian and a Catholic in good standing. Meanwhile, the silent testimony of photographs is irrefutable, much as apologists struggle to evade this damning visual evidence.

Despite these difficulties, enough is known to build a reasonable picture of what Hitler and other top Nazis believed.

Hitler was a Christian, but his Christ was no Jew. In his youth he dabbled with occult thinking but never became a devotee. As a young man he grew increasingly bohemian and stopped attending church. Initially no more anti-Semitic than the norm, in the years before the Great War he fell under the anti-Semitic influence of the Volkish Christian Social Party and other Aryan movements. After Germany's stunning defeat and the ruinous terms of peace, Hitler became a full-blown Aryanist and anti-Semite. He grew obsessed with racial issues, which he unfailingly embedded in a religious context.

Apologists often suggest that Hitler did not hold a traditional belief in God because he believed that he was God. True, Hitler thought himself God's chosen leader for the Aryan race. But he never claimed to be divine, and never presented himself in that manner to his followers. Members of the Wehrmacht swore this loyalty oath: "I swear by God this holy oath to the Führer of the German Reich and the German people, Adolf Hitler." For Schutzstaffel (S.S.) members it was: "I pledge to you, Adolf Hitler, my obedience unto death, so help me God."

Hitler repeatedly thanked God or Providence for his survival on the western front during the Great War, his safe escape from multiple assassination attempts, his seemingly miraculous rise from homelessness to influence and power, and his amazing international successes. He never tired of proclaiming that all of this was beyond the power of any mere mortal. Later in the war, Hitler portrayed German defeats as part of an epic test: God would reward his true chosen people with the final victory they deserved so long as they never gave up the struggle.

Reich iconography, too, reveals that Nazism never cut its ties to Christianity. The markings of Luftwaffe aircraft comprised just two swastikas—and six crosses. Likewise the Kriegsmarine (German Navy) flag combined the symbols. Hitler participated in public prayers and religious services at which the swastika and the cross were displayed together.



Top: A German soldier in winter uniform on motorcycle. Bottom: The inscription on the German soldier's belt buckle translates "God With Us."

Hitler openly admired Martin Luther, whom he considered a brilliant reformer.¹⁹ Yet he said in several private conversations that he considered himself a Catholic. He said publicly on several occasions that Christ was his saviour. As late as 1944, planning the last-ditch offensive the world would know as the Battle of the Bulge, he code-named it "Operation Christrose."

Among his Nazi cronies Hitler criticized the established churches harshly and often. Some of these alleged statements must be treated with scepticism,²⁰ but clearly he viewed the traditional Christian faiths as weak and contaminated by Judaism. Still, there is no warrant for the claim that he became anti-Christian or antireligious after coming to power. No reliably attributed quote reveals Hitler to be an atheist or in any way sympathetic to atheism. On the contrary, he often condemned atheism, as he did Christians who collaborated with such atheistic forces as Bolshevism. He consistently denied that the state could replace faith and instructed Speer to include churches in his beloved plans for a rebuilt Berlin. The Nazi-era constitution explicitly evoked God. Calculating that his victories over Europe and Bolshevism would make him so popular that people would be willing to abandon their traditional faiths, Hitler entertained plans to replace Protestantism and Catholicism with a reformed Christian church that would include all Aryans while removing foreign (Rome-

based) influence. German Protestants had already rejected a more modest effort along these lines, as will be seen below. How Germans as a whole would have received this reform after a Nazi victory is open to question. In any case, Hitler saw himself as Christianity's ultimate reformer, not its dedicated enemy.

Hitler was a complex figure, but based on the available evidence we can conclude our inquiry into his personal religious convictions by describing him as an Aryan Volkist Christian who had deep Catholic roots, strongly influenced by Protestantism, touched by strands of neo-paganism and Darwinism, and minimally influenced by the occult. Though Hitler pontificated about God and religion at great length, he considered politics more important than religion as the means to achieve his agenda.

None of the leaders immediately beneath Hitler was a pious traditional Christian. But there is no compelling evidence that any top Nazi was non-theistic. Any so accused denied the charge with vehemence.

Reich-Führer Himmler regularly attended Catholic services until he lurched into an increasingly bizarre Aryanism. He authorized searches for the Holy Grail and other supposedly powerful Christian and Cathar relics. A believer in reincarnation, he sent expeditions to Tibet and the American tropics in search of the original Aryans and even Atlantians. He and Heydrich modelled the S.S. after the disciplined and secretive Jesuits; it would not accept atheists as members.²¹ Goering, least ideological among top Nazis, sometimes endorsed both Protestant and Catholic traditions. On other occasions he criticized them. Goebbels turned against Catholicism in favour of a reformed Aryan faith; both his and Goering's children were baptized. Bormann was stridently opposed to contemporary organized Christianity; he was a leader of the Church Struggle, the inconsistently applied Nazi campaign to oppose the influence of established churches.²²

The Nazis championed traditional family values: their ideology was conservative, bourgeois, patriarchal, and strongly antifeminist. Discipline and conformity were emphasized, marriage promoted, abortion and homosexuality despised.²³

Traditionalism also dominated Nazi philosophy, such as it was. Though science and technology were lauded, the overall thrust opposed the Enlightenment, modernism, intellectualism, and rationality. It is hard to imagine how a movement with that agenda could have been friendly toward atheism, and the Nazis were not. Volkism was inherently hostile toward atheism: freethinkers clashed frequently with Nazis in the late 1920s and early 1930s. On taking power, Hitler banned free thought organizations and launched an "anti-godless" movement. In a 1933 speech he declared: "We have . . . undertaken the fight against the atheistic movement, and that not merely with a few theoretical declarations: we have stamped it out." This forthright hostility was far more straightforward than the Nazis' complex, often contradictory stance toward traditional Christian faith.

Destroying Democracy: a Political-Religious Collaboration

As detailed by historian Ian Kershaw, Hitler made no secret of his intent to destroy democracy. Yet he came to power largely legally; in no sense was he a tyrant imposed upon the German people.

The Nazi takeover climaxed a lengthy, ironic rejection of democracy at the hands of a majority of German voters. By the early 1930s, ordinary Germans had lost patience with democracy; growing numbers hoped an authoritarian strongman would restore order and prosperity and return Germany to great-power status. Roughly two-thirds of German Christians repeatedly voted for candidates who promised to overthrow democracy. Authoritarianism was all but inevitable; at issue was merely who the new strongman would be.

What made democracy so fragile? Historian Klaus Scholder explains that Germany lacked a deep democratic tradition, and would have had difficulty in forming one because German society was so thoroughly divided into opposing Protestant and Catholic blocs. This division created a climate of competition, fear and prejudice between the confessions, which burdened all German domestic and foreign policies with an ideological element of incalculable weight and extent. This climate erected an almost insurmountable barrier to the formation of broad democratic centre. And it favoured the rise of Hitler, since ultimately both churches courted his favour – each fearing that the other would complete the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation through Hitler.²⁴

Carefully plotting his strategy, Hitler purged some of the Volkish Nazi radicals most belligerent toward the traditional Christian churches. In this way he lessened the risk of ecclesiastical opposition. At the same time, he knew that the presence of both Catholics and Protestants among the Nazi leadership would ease churchmen's fears that the Party might engage in sectarianism.

Though it had many Catholic leaders (including Hitler), the Nazi Party relied heavily on Protestant support. Protestants had given the Party its principal backing during the years leading up to 1933 at a level disproportionate to their national majority.²⁵ Evangelical youth was especially pro-Nazi. It has been estimated that as many as 90 percent of Protestant university theologians supported the Party. Indeed, the participation of so many respected Protestants gave a early, comforting air of legitimacy to the often-thuggish Party. So did the frequent sight of *Sturmabteilung* (S.A.) units marching in uniform to church.

As German life between the wars grew more desperate, some Protestant pastors explicitly defended Nazi murders of “traitors to the Volk” from the pulpit. Antifascist Protestants found themselves marginalized. The once-unlikely topic of Volkist-Protestant compatibility became the leading theological subject of the day.²⁶ This is less surprising when we consider that Volkism and German Protestantism were both strongly nationalistic; Lutheranism in particular had German roots.

This mirage of harmony enticed Hitler into a naïve attempt to unite the German Protestant churches into a single Volkish body under Nazi control. Launched shortly after the Nazis came to power, this project failed immediately. The evangelical sects proved as unwilling as ever to get along with one another, though much of their clergy eventually Nazified.

Catholicism and the Nazi Takeover

Ironically – but, as we shall see, for obvious reasons – Chancellor Hitler had greater initial success reaching accommodation with Roman Catholic leaders than with the Protestants. The irony lay in the fact that the Catholic Zentrum (Centre) Party had been principally responsible for denying majorities to the Nazis in early elections. Although Teutonic in outlook, German

Catholics had close emotional ties to Rome. As a group they were somewhat less nationalistic than most Protestants. Catholics were correspondingly more likely than Protestants to view Hitler (incorrectly) as godless, or as a neo-heathen anti-Christian. Catholic clergy consistently denounced Nazism, though they often undercut themselves by preaching traditional anti-Semitism at the same time.

Even so, and despite Catholicism's minority status, it would be German Catholics and the Roman Catholic Church that whose actions would at last put total power within the Nazis' reach.

Though it was not without anti-modernists, the Catholic Zentrum party had antagonized the Vatican during the 1920s by forming governing coalitions with the secularized, moderate Left-oriented Social Democrats. This changed in 1928, when the priest Ludwig Kaas became the first cleric to head the party. To the dismay of some Catholics, Kaas and other Catholic politicians participated both actively and passively in destroying democratic rule, and in particular the Zentrum.

The devoutly Catholic chancellor Franz von Papen, not a fascist but stoutly right-wing, engineered the key electoral victory that brought Hitler to power. Disastrously Papen dissolved the Reichstag in 1932, then formed a Zentrum-Nazi coalition in violation of all previous principles. It was Papen who in 1933 made Hitler chancellor, Papen stepping down to the vice chancellorship.

The common claim that Papen acted in the hope that the Nazis could be controlled and ultimately discredited may be true, partly true, or false; but without Papen's reckless aid, Hitler would not have become Germany's leader.

The church congratulated Hitler on his assumption of power. German bishops released a statement that wiped out past criticism of Nazism by proclaiming the new regime acceptable, then followed doctrine by ordering the laity to be loyal to this regime just as they had commanded loyalty to previous regimes. Since Catholics had been instrumental in bringing Hitler to power and served in his cabinet, the bishops had little choice but to collaborate.

German Catholics were stunned by the magnitude and suddenness of this realignment. The rigidly conformist church had flipped from ordering its flock to oppose the Nazis to commanding cooperation. A minority among German Catholics was appalled and disheartened. But most "received the statement with relief—indeed with rejoicing—because it finally also cleared the way into the Third Reich for Catholic Christians" alongside millions of Protestants, who joined in exulting that the dream of a Nazi-Catholic-Protestant nationalist alliance had been achieved.²⁷ The Catholic vote for the Nazis increased in the last multi-party elections after Hitler assumed control, doubling in some areas, inspiring a mass Catholic exodus from the Zentrum to the fascists. After the Reichstag fire, the Zentrum voted en masse to support the infamous Enabling Act, which would give the Hitler-Papen cabinet executive and legislative authority independent of the German Parliament. Zentrum's bloc vote cemented the two-thirds majority needed to pass the Act.

Why did the church direct its party to provide the critical swing vote? It had its agenda, as we shall see below.

Deal Making with the Devil

Even after the Enabling Act, Hitler's position remained tenuous. The Nazis needed to deepen majority popular support and cement relations with a sceptical German military. Hitler needed to ally all Aryans under the swastika while he undermined and demoralized regime opponents. What would solidify Hitler's position? A foreign policy coup: the Concordat of 1933 between Nazi Germany and the Vatican.

The national and international legitimacy Hitler would gain through this treaty was incalculable. Failure to secure it after intense and openly promoted effort could have been a crushing humiliation. Hitler put exceptional effort into the project. He courted the Holy See, emphasizing his own Christianity, simultaneously striving to intimidate the Vatican with demonstrations of his swelling power.

Catholic apologists describe the Concordat of 1933 as a necessary move by a church desperate to protect itself against a violent regime which forced the accord upon it—passing over the contradiction at the heart of this argument. Actually, having failed in repeated attempts to negotiate the ardently desired concordat with a sceptical Weimar democracy, Kaas, Papen, the future Pius XII (who reigned 1939–1958), the sitting Pius XI, and other leading Catholics saw their chance to get what they had been seeking from an agreeable member of the church—that is, Hitler—at an historical moment when he and fascism in general were regarded as a natural ally by many Catholic leaders.²⁸ Negotiations were initiated by both sides, modelled on the mutually advantageous 1929 concordat between Mussolini and the Vatican.

Now Zentrum's pivotal role in assuring passage of the Enabling Act can be seen in context. It was part of the tacit Nazi-Vatican deal for a future concordat.²⁹ The Enabling Act vote hollowed Zentrum, leaving little more than a shell. Thus, a clergy far more interested in church power than democratic politics could take control on both sides of the negotiating table. In a flagrant conflict of interest, the devout Papen helped to represent the German state. Concordat negotiations were largely held in Rome, so that Kaas could leave his vanishing party yet more rudderless. Papen, Kaas, and the future Pius XII worked overtime to finalize a treaty that would, among other things, put an end to the Zentrum. In negotiating away the party he led, Kaas eliminated the last political entity that might have opposed the new Führer.³⁰ Nor did the Vatican protect Germany's Catholic party. Contrary to the contention of some, evidence indicates that the Vatican was pleased to negotiate away all traces of the Zentrum, for which it had no more use save as a bargaining chip. In this the Holy See treated Zentrum no differently than it had the Italian Catholic party, which it negotiated away in the Concordat with Mussolini.

Hitler sought to eliminate Catholic opposition in favour of obligatory loyalty to his regime. For its part, the church was obsessed with its educational privileges,³¹ and especially with securing fresh sources of income. It would willingly sacrifice political power to protect them. As both sides worked in haste to produce a treaty that would normally have required years to complete, Hitler took masterful advantage of Vatican over eagerness. Filled with "certainty that Rome neither could nor would turn back, [Hitler] was now able to steer the negotiations almost as he wanted. The records prove he exploited the situation to the full."³² Indeed, Hitler was so confident that he had the Church in his lap that he went ahead and promulgated his notorious sterilization decree before the Concordat's final signing. Hitler's project for involuntary sterilization of minorities and the mentally ill was an direct affront to Catholic

teaching. But as Hitler surmised, not even this provocation could deflect the Holy See in its rush toward the Concordat. Because ordinary Catholics largely supported the Nazis, the party even felt free to use violence against the remaining politically active Catholics, frequently disrupting their rallies.

Signed on July 20, 1933, the Concordat was a *fait accompli*, the negotiations having been conducted largely in secret. Most German bishops gave their loyal, though impotent, approval to the pact that would strip away their power. A few bishops objected, criticizing the Nazi regime's lack of morality (but never its lack of democracy).

The Concordat was a classic political kickback scheme. The church supported the new dictatorship by endorsing the end of democracy and free speech. In addition it bound its bishops to Hitler's Reich by means of a loyalty oath. In exchange the church received enormous tax income and protection for church privileges. Religious instruction and prayer in school were reinstated. Criticism of the church was forbidden. Of course, nothing in the Concordat protected the rights of non-Catholics.

If Catholic officials were disappointed with the Concordat's terms, they did not show it, sending messages of congratulation to the dictator. In Rome, a celebratory mass followed the treaty's signing by Papen and the future Pius XII amid great pomp and circumstance. In Germany, the church and the Berlin government held a joint service of thanksgiving that featured a mix of Catholic, Reich, and swastika banners and flags. The musical program mixed hymns with a rousing performance of the repugnant Nazi anthem "Horst Wessel"—which was set, by the way, to the traditional hymn "How Great Thou Art." All of this was projected by loudspeaker to the enthusiastic crowd outside; as most German Catholics welcomed the Concordat, the thanksgiving service drew far more than Berlin's cathedral could hold.

Scholder comments that "anyone who saw things from the Roman perspective could come to the conclusion that . . . the treaty was . . . an indescribable success for Catholicism. Even a year before, the Holy See had only been able to dream of the concessions which the concordat contained. . . . On the Catholic side the concordat was accordingly described as 'something very great,' indeed as nothing short of a 'masterpiece.'"³³ Catholic response was so exuberant that Hitler felt it necessary to defend himself to Protestant clerics and Nazi radicals who viewed this sudden amity with Rome as a betrayal.

The practical results of the collaboration were clear enough. Most Catholics "soon adjusted to the dictatorship"³⁴; indeed they flocked to the Party. Post-Concordat voting patterns suggest that Catholics, on average, even outdid Protestants in supporting the regime, further undermining any efforts by the clergy to challenge Nazi policies. In any case much of the Catholic clergy was Nazifying. Even the idiosyncratic S.S. welcomed Catholics, who would ultimately compose a quarter of its membership.

The Concordat's disastrous consequences cannot be exaggerated. It bound all devout German Catholics to the state – the clergy through an oath and income, the laity through the authority of the church. If at any time the regime chose not to honour the agreement, Catholics had no open legal right to oppose it or its policies. Opponents of Nazism, Catholic and non-Catholic, were further discouraged and marginalized because the church had shown such want of moral fiber and consistency.

Apologists have insisted that the church had no choice but to accept the Concordat for the modest protections it provided. But those provisions were never needed. Major Protestant denominations suffered no more than Catholicism, though the Protestant churches lacked protective agreements and had snubbed Hitler's early attempt to unite them. Apologists make much of Vatican "resistance" to Nazism, but the net effect of Vatican policy toward Hitler was collaborative.

Indeed, the 1933 Concordat stands as one of the most unethical, corrupt, duplicitous, and dangerous agreements ever forged between two authoritarian powers. Perhaps the Catholic strategy was to outlast the Nazi's frankly popular tyranny rather than try to bring it down. But the Catholic Church made no attempt to revoke the Concordat and its loyalty clause during the Nazi regime. Indeed, the 1933 Concordat is the only diplomatic accord negotiated with the Nazi regime that remains in force anywhere in the world.

Germany's Protestant sects were too decentralized to be co-opted by a single document. To this extent Protestants who disputed Nazi policies could be said to enjoy a more favourable position than Catholics. But opposition was rare among Protestants too. Hitler cynically courted the major denominations even as they cynically courted him. Most smaller traditional Christian sects did little better. For example, Germany's Mormons and Seventh-Day Adventists bent over backwards to accommodate National Socialism.³⁵

Christian Comfort with the Rising Regime

Catholics and Protestants at first embraced the new German order. Germany was regaining international prestige, the economy improving thanks to growing overseas support.³⁶ Industrialists like Henry Ford invested heavily in the new Reich. German Christians also looked to the Nazis for a revival of "Christian" values to help counter the rise of non-theism. Most welcomed the Nazis' elimination of chronic public strife by terrorizing, imprisoning, and killing the fast-shrinking German Left. The leftists had long been despised by traditionalists, who composed four fifths of the population. The state purged a far higher proportion of atheists than traditional Christians. In newspapers and newsreels the Nazis proudly publicized their new concentration camps. Reports sanitized the camps' true nature, but no one could mistake that they were part of a new police state – to which most German followers of Jesus raised no objection. The very high rate of "legal" executions reported in the press also met with mass indifference or positive approval.

Far from being hapless victims, the great bulk of German Christians joined, eagerly supported, collaborated with, or accommodated to a greater or lesser degree, the new tyranny.

Hitler: the Popular Oppressor

Apologists for Christian conduct during the Nazi era imagine that the regime suppressed dissent ruthlessly, no matter whom – or how many – it needed to slaughter to achieve its ends. Hitler's regime is portrayed as Stalinesque in its response to dissent. This simplistic view reveals a failure to understand the complicated actuality of a popular terror state. The keyword is popular: Hitler was Europe's most popular leader, and his goal was universal Aryan support. The Party obsessively tracked public opinion, something never seen in the USSR.³⁷ Before the war, foreign tourism was encouraged; Hitler knew most Germans would speak well of the Reich to visitors, in sharp contrast to the USSR, whose leaders prudently feared interaction between foreigners and a citizenry of dubious loyalty. During most of the

Reich, any unprovoked attempt to liberate Germany would have met fierce majority resistance.

Though there were assassination attempts, the top Nazis had little to fear from ordinary Germans.³⁸ Hitler's personal security was shockingly lax; Goering regularly drove his open convertible around Berlin.

If the apologists were right, we should expect the Gestapo to have been a massive organization, relentlessly searching out and crushing widespread dissent. Analysis of surviving Gestapo records reveals that in fact it was surprisingly small.³⁹ Germany's Christian population being largely satisfied, there was little resistance to suppress. Most cases the Gestapo handled were initiated by ordinary citizens looking to settle petty disputes and had no ideological content.

The Führer had been successful in buying off his Aryans with false egalitarian prosperity, stolen Jewish wealth, and his refusal to put Deutschland on a full war footing until well into the war. During the early war years civilians were under much tighter control in submarine-blockaded England than in Germany. Since nearly all Aryans were Protestant and Catholic, Hitler had to keep both sects reasonably happy, and he did. After all, the main focus of Nationalist Socialism was to make the divinely favoured Aryan Volk, both Protestant and Catholic, thrive in order to transform the German population into a unified machine of domination over the lesser peoples. Contrary to Catholic apologists, the nominally Catholic Hitler had not the slightest desire to slaughter masses of the very Aryan people to whom he belonged, and whom he wanted to elevate to supreme power. Leaving aside the fact that doing so would have been ideological and racial suicide, the record makes clear that Hitler's intention was to reform and standardize Aryans' political, social, and ultimately their religious beliefs, not to purge them or to kill off groups of Aryans. Doing that would have grossly violated Nazi doctrine, undermined the myth of Aryan solidarity, grievously weakened the state, and risked religious civil war. Disloyalty of the Catholic third of the population would have been disastrous to a modest-sized nation trying to expand its resources in preparation for epic wars of conquest; it was this fact, not the Concordat, that would be the main constraint on Nazi actions. For that reason, apologist claims that thousands or millions of Catholics and Protestants would have joined the Jews had they protested Nazis policies are false. The proof is found in the historical record.

Rosenstrasse: the Power of Resistance

Far from exercising absolute power at home, Hitler often discontinued, modified, or concealed initiatives that threatened his regime's precious popular approval. Stout public objection could and repeatedly did alter Nazi behaviour. Flummoxed when the Protestant churches refused to unite, Hitler deferred his grand effort to reform German Christianity to a dreamlike utopian future. Later attempts by Nazi authorities to hamper church activities were often frustrated by sizeable demonstrations.⁴⁰ When Party elements stripped Bavarian schools of their crucifixes without Hitler's approval, vigorous protests by, among others, the mothers of schoolchildren quickly brought about their replacement.⁴¹ When Hitler denounced Protestant opposition bishops Hans Meiser and Theophil Wurm and ordered their ouster, public anger boiled over. One protest drew 7,000 demonstrators. Hitler reversed course and reinstated Meiser and Wurm with fulsome praise. Strong opposition to the mass killing of the mentally disabled circa 1941 drove it further underground, saving many lives, even though this program too enjoyed the Führer's approval.

This is not to say that protesters courted no danger. Opposition figures were frequently harassed, sometimes killed. But the top Nazis knew how limited their power was. When regime officials contemplated forcing the removal of Muenster's Catholic bishop, Clemens Galen, Goebbels warned that the "the population of Muenster could be regarded as lost during the war if anything were done against the bishop . . . [indeed] the whole of [the state] of Westphalia."⁴² Though Galen suffered harassment, he remained active throughout the war and held his office.

In occupied countries from Norway to Italy, residents successfully opposed Nazi racial policies and saved hundreds of thousands of Jews. In Denmark, political and ecclesiastical leaders forcefully protested Nazi policies; the whole nation worked under the noses of the Gestapo to save almost all of Denmark's Jews. Neither leaders or citizens suffered severe retaliation. French bishops who opposed Nazi actions against Jews likewise survived the war. Most extraordinary and telling is the Rosenstrasse incident.⁴³ Some 30,000 Jews lived openly in Germany as the spouses of Christians. Nine in ten such marriages remained intact despite ceaseless harassment. Oriented toward family values as they were, the Nazis could not decide how to handle these Jews without violating the sanctity of marriage. Early in 1943, Goebbels, then in charge of Berlin, decided it was time to cleanse the capital by rounding up these last Jews. Hitler agreed. Some 2,000 Jewish men from mixed marriages were seized and taken to a large downtown building on the Rosenstrasse, from which they would be deported to the camps.

For a week their Gentile wives stood in the winter cold, chanting "We want our husbands back!" Ordinary Germans sometimes joined them. All told, the protests involved about 6,000 people. They continued in the face of S.S. and Gestapo threats, even threats to use machine guns. They continued though British bombers pounded the city by night. But the Nazis dared not fire upon these defenceless, unorganized Aryan women. Berliners saw the protests directly. Foreign diplomats spread word of it to the world press. The British Broadcasting Company broadcast the story back into Germany.

What was the outcome of Nazi Germany's only mass demonstration to save Jews? The 2,000 Jewish husbands were released with Hitler's approval. Two dozen who had already been sent to Auschwitz were returned. Jewish-Christian couples continued to live openly and survived the war. They would comprise the great majority of German Jewish survivors.

Goebbels later commented to an associate that the regime relented "in order to eliminate the protest from the world, so that others didn't begin to do the same." Sadly, this strategy was successful: during the rest of the war, no similar action would ever be taken in defences of Jews in general.

Nor does this exhaust the catalogue of successful opposition. When Goebbels called for mass employment of housewives in war industries, also early in 1943, refusal was widespread. Again, reprisals were rare, partly because of the regime's established emphasis on traditional roles for women. On a broader scale, Germans who refused to participate in atrocities – even if they were soldiers, party members, or S.S. men – almost never suffered retaliation. This was so well known that, after the war, Nazis accused of war crimes were forbidden to claim fear of retaliation as a defence.

These incidents suggest that the Nazi regime was at root cowardly, happy to pick on the weak and disorganized but intimidated by public demonstrations. When it came to the Volk, Nazi leaders preferred propaganda, education, persuasion, and social pressure to terror. They knew that terror worked best when its objective was supported by many and opposed by few. Only toward the end of the war was widespread domestic terror resorted to in Germany, and it was often ineffective.

Clearly ordinary citizens could oppose and alter state policy, all the more so if powerful nongovernmental institutions supported them.⁴⁴ As Sarah Gordon comments, the “failure of German churches to speak out against racial persecution is a disgrace . . . because the Nazis feared the propaganda or political power of the churches, it is almost certain that church leaders could have spoken out more vehemently against racial persecution.”⁴⁵

The apologist claim that Germany’s traditional Christians were impotent in the face of Nazi terror is an exaggeration on a scale that Goebbels might have appreciated. As the wives of Berlin discovered, Christians had the power to protect the lives and well-being of others and the potential to confound Hitler and his minions. Had they wished to, they need only have applied it.

Notes

¹ Nazism and fascism are considered secular, atheistic, or both, in, among other sources, David Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopaedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² Seminal studies by mainstream, non-polemical researchers include Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936: Hubris*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) and *Hitler: 1936–1945: Nemesis*, (London: Allen Lane, 2000); Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich Vols. 1 and 2*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979 [English version, 1988]); Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: The Rosenstrasse Protest and Intermarriage in Nazi Germany*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Beth Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and Sarah Gordon, *Hitler, Germans, and the “Jewish Question”*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Also see John Patrick Michael Murphy, “Hitler Was *Not* an Atheist,” *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring 1999).

³ See James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and David Kertzer, *The Pope Against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

⁴ <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Judaism/jewpop.html>

⁵ Viewed in the context of more than 1,500 years of Christian violence against Jews, the enormity of the Holocaust may as much reflect the large populations and relatively advanced technologies of the time as it does the virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism. Other Christian groups might have done the same thing earlier, had the technical means and a large enough pool of potential victims been available.

⁶ Nowadays Islamic anti-Semites reprint Luther's work.

⁷ Prior to World War I, many religious Germans viewed dying for the Fatherland as being on a par with Christian martyrdom; reluctance to die in battle was considered blasphemous.

⁸ After Vatican I, the Roman Catholic clergy was required to take an oath against modernity.

⁹ Aryan Christianity continues to exist; contemporary U.S. examples include Christian Identity, Aryan Nation, and other extremist racist sects.

¹⁰ In Aryan Christian doctrine, Christ was non-Semitic because he did not have a Jewish father. His assault on the Temple was taken as evidence of his anti-Semitism. Christianity's false association with Judaism was blamed on St. Paul.

¹¹ Thus the extremist Christian term mud people. Jews' lack of a soul was held to explain their supposed lack of interest in spirituality and the afterlife and their focus on material gain.

¹² For example, the Catholic Volkist Dietrich Eckart, later a friend and mentor to Hitler, wrote in 1917 that "to be an Aryan and to sense transcendence is one and the same thing," yet described Nietzsche as the "crazy despiser of our religious foundations."

¹³ Gregory Paul, "The Secular Revolution of the West: It's Passed America By – So Far," *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 2002).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Scholder vol. 1, p.12.

¹⁶ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity 1919–1945*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003) is the first attempt to detail the religious beliefs of the Nazis.

¹⁷ Christian defenders frequently cite *Table Talk*, which presents some of Hitler's most vehement anti-Christian statements. But mainstream historians find *Table Talk* unreliable. It consists of private conversations recorded in the 1940s by two secretaries, one of whom later said that "no confidence" should be placed in the final volume because the compiler – Bormann, even by Nazi standards a deceptive opportunist and much more anti-Christian than Hitler – destroyed the original transcripts. Still, even as presented in *Table Talk*, Hitler usually attacks Judeo-Christianity, not Christ. Hitler lauds Christ as a divine Aryan.

¹⁸ Timothy Ryback, "Hitler's Forgotten Library," *Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 29, No. 4 (May 2003), expresses naïve surprise at how interested Hitler was in reading about religion. Oddly, Ryback's conclusion, that Hitler saw himself as God, is contrary to the quote Ryback cites in support of his hypothesis.

¹⁹ The regime put an original edition of *On the Jews and Their Lies* on display and celebrated Luther's 450th birthday in 1933 on massive scale.

²⁰ See Steigman-Gall.

²¹ Neo-paganism was far more prevalent in the S.S. than in German society as a whole; even according to Party statistics, paganism never claimed more than 5 percent of the general population.

²² See Steigman-Gall.

²³ Contrary to common belief, the Nazis never operated state sex-for-procreation facilities. On the other hand, Nazi “culture” was not exceptionally prudish; home movies of the era show young women lying topless on the beach, and kitsch nudity was common in Nazi art.

²⁴ Scholder vol. 1, p. 130.

²⁵ See Scholder vols. 1 and 2, Kershaw pp. 488-90 and 324, and Gellately p. 14, whose *Backing Hitler* is a precedent-setting historical examination based in part on examination of surviving Gestapo records. Religion was not a primary focus of the study, but what Gellately includes on this topic is damning. See also Gordon, who gives a balanced account of church collaboration and resistance.

²⁶ See Scholder vol. 1, pp. 37-51 and 74-87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁸ Ronald Rychlak, “Goldhagen v. Pius XII,” *First Things*, June/July 2002, pp. 37–54, offers a typically convoluted example of pro-Vatican spin when he asserts that the concordat “was a Nazi proposition. The Nazis accepted terms that the Church had previously proposed to Weimar, but which Weimar had rejected.”

²⁹ See Scholder vol. 1, p. 241.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-43.

³¹ A concordat already negotiated with Bavaria gave the church control of the schools.

³² Scholder vol. 1, p. 386.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

³⁴ Gellately, p. 14.

³⁵ See Christine Elizabeth King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982).

³⁶ Hitler and his fellow thugs had no idea how to run a modern economy. The Nazi economic “miracle” was a Potemkin-village scheme kept going, prior to the takeovers of other nations, by selling off Germany’s gold reserves and taking out international loans that could never be paid back.

³⁷ See Gellately.

³⁸ Hitler missed by minutes being killed by a bomb a few months after invading Poland. Pope Pius XII sent the Führer his “special personal congratulations.”

³⁹ See Gellately, p. 39.

⁴⁰ See Griech-Polelle, pp. 36-37.

⁴¹ Nazi politics were as peculiar as its theology. Hitler avoided committing himself on tangential issues to protect his popularity and keep his options open. This, coupled with Hitler's harsh survival-of-the-fittest view of power, fuelled chronic, often vicious intraparty battles that contributed to the chaos of the regime. In "working towards the Führer," party functionaries often went beyond what Hitler wanted done, at least in the short term; the Bavarian crucifix debacle is a good example of this tendency.

⁴² Cited in Gellately, Kershaw, p. 429, and Gordon.

⁴³ See Stoltzfus, pp. 209-57.

⁴⁴ Hitler fared little better in international affairs; even when he was master of continental Europe, his power had limits. His supposed ally Franco politely told the vexed Führer to take a hike when he pressed for Spain to enter the war against the allies. Hitler found himself forced to negotiate with the Vichy French government he had helped to install over the same matter, and it too refused to budge.

⁴⁵ Gordon, p. 261.