

Zeitschrift: Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums
Herausgeber: Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog
Band: 27 (1971)

Artikel: The christian churches and the jews in the Third Reich
Autor: Matheson, P.C.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-961374>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ZUR FRAGE: DIE CHRISTLICHEN KIRCHEN UND DIE JUDEN IM DRITTEN REICH

Wenn wir heute den Beitrag *«The Christian Churches and the Jews in the Third Reich»* von Rev. Dr. P. C. Matheson, Professor für Kirchengeschichte am New College in Edinburgh, veröffentlichen, dann geschieht es gewiss nicht, um eine «unbewältigte Vergangenheit» daran zu hindern, endlich bewältigt zu werden. Nur sind wir der festen Überzeugung, daß gerade dieses Kapitel der Kirchengeschichte unserer Zeit noch mancher Aufhellung bedarf.

Es gibt über dieses Thema bereits eine reichhaltige Literatur, teilweise objektiver, teilweise mehr oder weniger apologetischer Tendenz. Es erschien uns deshalb interessant, auch einmal einem nicht-deutschen Kirchenhistoriker das Wort zu geben, in dessen Urteil keinerlei persönliche oder affektive Momente hineinspielen und der auch aus einem Kirchenbereich kommt, der nicht direkt in die Ereignisse impliziert war.

Der nachfolgende Artikel ist der Niederschlag eines Vortrags, den Prof. Matheson im Juli 1970 auf der Tagung des Komitees für die Kirche und das jüdische Volk des Ökumenischen Weltkirchenrats in New York gehalten hat.

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND THE JEWS IN THE THIRD REICH

By P. C. MATHESON, Edinburgh

The sensitivity of this subject needs no stressing. Any treatment of the events of the Third Reich is necessarily controversial, and that of the role of the Christian churches in the Third Reich doubly so. How much more delicate still for a non-German to raise the

question of the attitude of the Churches in Germany to the agony of the Jewish people under the Third Reich.

Yet it is a false delicacy which inhibits discussion of this matter. As a recent work has convincingly shown¹, the guilt for the Final Solution is a European-wide burden. The 'Bewältigung der Vergangenheit' is not a matter for the Germans alone. Where there is a solidarity in guilt there is an equal right to speak, an equal need to avoid the two poles of apologia and selfflagellation.

The problem of interpretation, however, remains. Despite the flood of literature on the Third Reich² we seem almost as far away as ever from finding an interpretative framework which will do justice to the twelve-year millenium. Confronted by its complexity, banality, and brutality language fails us and our categories run out into the sand. Our Achilles heel in this respect may well be not so much the failings of our reasoning processes as the febrility of our imagination. What Hannah Arendt has said of the concentration camps can be applied to the Third Reich as a whole: No description of a nightmare, however vivid, can pierce the veil of credibility which separates the now and the then. We are too intact, too secure, too relaxed, too rational to begin to understand³.

We operate, of course, with hindsight. As we rerun the reel of events we know from the outset how the Leidensweg of the Jews in the Third Reich will end – in the factories of death. Clearly one must not judge those who operated in this dark time by the light of our fuller knowledge. On the other hand, the historian had no obligation to accord the Christian churches a particularly charitable judgement because of their partial knowledge. It certainly provides no universal alibi. Indeed those who claim, as churchmen tend to do, a peculiar gift for discerning the signs of the times must expect

¹ Johan M. Snoek, *The Grey Book*. Assen, 1969. Cf. Paul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Chicago, 1961; Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution*. London, 1953.

² Recent interesting interpretations include Joachim C. Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich*. London, 1970; Eberhard Jackel, *Hitlers Weltanschauung: Entwurf einer Herrschaft*. Tübingen, 1969.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (London 1958) p. 444.

to come under especially cold scrutiny when they so lamentably fail.

It should not be necessary to reiterate here the outrages to body, mind and spirit suffered by the Jews in the Third Reich. Our task is to ask whether it is quite self-evident that such things could happen in the heart of Christian Europe, in a country in which 95% of the population confessed to some form of Christian allegiance⁴. What, in a word, was the role of the Church under National Socialism? Were the Churches, like the Jews, Hitler's victims⁵, or were they his accomplices? Why did the synagogues burn while the churches were left standing? Were the Christians simply out-witted, hypnotised, impotent? Or are there fatal flaws in the Christian faith itself which predestined a Christian land to be the locus of the most evil thing humanity has yet managed to perpetrate?

If these are the ultimate questions, we can begin by examining the factors which had an immediate bearing on the attitudes of the German Churches towards the Jews during the National Socialist era: the tradition of Christian anti-semitism, the political views of the Churches, the total inexperience of churchmen in dealing with the new phenomenon of totalitarianism.

We cannot rehearse here yet again the melancholy history of Christian anti-Semitism⁶. We might, however, remind ourselves that it is scarcely an exclusively German product. The Anglo-Saxon world tends to shrug it off as a hang-over from medieval attitudes, or to attribute it to the malign influence of Martin Luther. This is, however, naive to a degree. Anti-Semitic attitudes provide the historian

⁴ J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, (London, 1969) p. 232

⁵ The correspondents of *The Times*, to give but one example for the pre-war years, tended to parallel the experience of the Churches and the Jews under Hitler. Similarly the apologetic writings of both Catholic and Protestant Churches after the War.

⁶ A useful introduction in W. P. Eckert, "Die Stellung der antiken und der mittelalterlichen Kirche zu den Juden", in *Das Christentum und die Juden*, (Cologne, 1966) pp. 68–100; also the articles by Kupisch, Kraus, and Reichmann in *Der Ungekündigte Bund*, ed. Dietrich Goldschmidt and Hans-Joachim Kraus (Stuttgart, 1962) pp. 79–119. For a bibliography *ibid.* pp. 285–304.

with one of the very few threads of continuity in the long history of the Christian Church. They have been part and parcel of good orthodox Christianity. To paraphrase Rapp Brown they are as Christian as the Eucharist. If this is offensive it is because the reality is offensive.

Hitler, consummate hypocrite as he was, was not without all justification in assuring the Catholic bishops in April 1933 that his “handling of the Jewish question” was simply a return to the 1500 year old traditions of the Church prior to the “Liberal Era”⁷. It is no accident that the Churches and Hitler shared a cordial dislike of that era, and it is certainly true that the emancipation of European Jewry was won in the teeth of orthodox Christianity’s opposition. The modern virtue of toleration owes as little to the Christian tradition as that of democracy.

As far as the political attitudes of the German Churches are concerned it has become platitudinous to speak of the comfortable divorce between the realms of Church and State promoted by Lutheranism, or of the traumatic influence of the Kulturkampf on the Catholic Church, which became obsessed with proving itself more German than National Protestantism. The self-evident way in which authoritarian and Christian values were confused by German churchmen in this period is comparable only with the complacent identification of democratic and Christian values in our own time⁸.

Both Churches had regarded the Weimar experiment with some dismay. In effect they had retreated into ghettos of their own creating and sulked. Indeed as far as the Churches are concerned talk of “internal emigration” is probably more apposite to the Weimar era than to the Third Reich. Hitler’s accession to power was, on the whole, a relief to them. “There will be few among us”, said

⁷ Hans Müller (ed), *Katholische Kirche und Nationalsozialismus*, (Munich, 1965) p. 129.

⁸ Cf. Karl Kupisch, *Die deutschen Landeskirchen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 1966) pp. 128 ff. An invaluable quarry for these attitudes is provided by the First World War sermons of both denominations. Cf. Heinrich Missalla, “Gott mit uns”: *die deutsche katholische Kriegs predigt 1915 bis 1918*. Munich 1968; Wilhelm Pressel, *Die Kriegs predigt 1914–1918 in der Evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands*. Göttingen 1967.

General-Superintendent Dibelius, “who do not wholeheartedly welcome this turn of events”⁹, and this was the general feeling. They nursed the delusion that they would be able to tame, to humanise Hitler. Politically they were babes in arms, barren of ideas, ripe for a fascist plucking.

In fact, the influence exercised by the Churches on Hitler’s policies was minimal. In practical, political terms – and Hitlerism meant essentially the politicisation of the whole of life – the Churches might as well not have existed. As an independent political factor they could be virtually discounted¹⁰.

We now come to the third factor influencing the role of the Churches: the unprecedented nature of the confrontation with totalitarianism. It is helpful to remember that in sociological terms the Churches were simply one conservative institution among others. They shared the fate of the other traditional bodies which survived the Machtergreifung: the Universities, the Civil Service, the Armed Forces. All of these – like the Churches – counted themselves fortunate if they could maintain a certain professional integrity within their own little spheres. On the major policy issues, however, they were simply swept aside by the National Socialist revolution¹¹. The inadequate response of the Churches to totalitarianism must be seen in this larger context.

These preliminary considerations may help us to understand why the Churches were so ill-equipped in 1933 to cope with the peculiarly acute crisis of the Third Reich; to these we must add, especially in the Protestant Churches, doctrinal confusion and a deep-seated social insecurity¹². Let us turn now to the different stages of National

⁹ Heinrich Hermelink (ed), *Kirche im Kampf* (Tübingen, 1950) p. 31

¹⁰ The “euthanasia” controversy is the partial exception which proves the rule. Otherwise the Churches were at best only able to slow down or divert into Party jurisdiction State policies to which they objected.

¹¹ Cf. Andreas Flitner (ed), *Deutsches Geistesleben und Nationalsozialismus*. Tübingen, 1965; *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsäcker*. tr. John Andrews; London 1951.

¹² Karl-Wilhelm Dahm, *Pfarrer und Politik: Soziale Position und politische Mentalität des deutschen evangelischen Pfarrerstandes zwischen 1918 und 1933*. Cologne, 1965.

Socialism's "Jewish Policy", and see how the Churches reacted to each stage.

From 1933–1934 a happy spontaneity of thuggery and intimidation was the rule. In 1935 the second stage began. The Nuremberg Laws provided a pseudo-legal basis for a progressive dehumanisation of the Jews. From the time of the so-called 'Crystal Night' in 1938 the only alternatives considered were expulsion and extermination¹³

In the first period both Protestant and Catholic Churches were too busy coming to terms with the new regime to want to blot their copy-books by paying undue attention to alleged actions against the Jews. Protestant leaders wrote to their co-religionists overseas angrily denouncing such rumour-mongering¹⁴. Archbishop Bertram, President of the Fulda Conference of Catholic bishops, counselled his episcopal brethren against acceding to a Jewish request for a protest against the April 1933 boycott of Jewish businesses. No vital Catholic interest was involved, he pointed out. Protests would achieve nothing and only prejudice their relations with the government. And anyway, when had Jews ever intervened on behalf of Catholics¹⁵?

It is a widespread misapprehension that racialist anti-semitism was restricted to the "völkisch" and NS movements and had no footing in the Churches, that anti-semitism there had an exclusively confessional or cultural motivation. The rabid racialists in the Christian camp were certainly the exception rather than rule. The Protestants, however, could boast a very substantial contingent in the folkish-orientated Glaubensbewegung Deutscher Christen, the so-called 'German Christians', the "SA of Jesus Christ", who were

¹³ There is a certain arbitrariness about any periodisation. For Kurt Meier 1941 marks the beginning of a fourth and final stage. "‘Kristallnacht und Kirche’: die Haltung der evangelischen Kirche zur Judenpolitik des Faschismus", *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx Universität*. XIII (1964), *Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, pp. 91 ff.

¹⁴ E. g. the "Evangelical appeal to America" of Dibelius and the Methodist bishop Dr. Ruelsen protesting against "the hair-raising reports on the cruel and bloody treatment of Communists in Germany" on the basis of which "world Jewry has started an agitation against Germany in several countries". J. S. Conway, *op. cit.*, pp. 342–344.

¹⁵ Hans Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 98

in their heyday in 1933, mobilising the masses of the theologically illiterate laity behind them and sweeping into power in the Church. By the end of 1933, their bubble had burst though they continued to be a significant force within the Evangelical Church¹⁶.

The majority of church leaders, however, and particularly the Catholics condemned racialist attitudes unequivocally. They did not of course directly attack National Socialism but, in the Catholic case, vented their wrath on Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*¹⁷. Cardinal Faulhaber, for example, in his famous Advent sermons in 1933, denounced the current relapse into paganism, and defended the Old Testament. Nor can there be any doubt of his hatred of injustice and his human sympathy for the Jews. Yet he regarded the Jewish people as forsaken of God and as exercising a malevolent influence on the political and cultural life of Germany. His attitude is typical for many among the "silent majority" of Christians of both denominations¹⁸.

This first period, however, also saw the evolution of the Confessing Church, formed in conscious opposition to the German Christians and gradually coming to realise that its real problem was the religious policy of the NS Party and State. This grouping, which never numbered more than a third of the Protestant pastors and considerably less of the laity, is remarkable for its relatively firm theological stance, for its strength on the local, congregational level, and as the sole example of open, organised defiance of NS Gleichschaltung¹⁹.

¹⁶ On the 'German Christians' the best theological treatment is still Hans Buchheim, *Glaubenskrise im Dritten Reich*. Stuttgart, 1953; for the organisational aspect cf. Kurt Meier, *Die Deutschen Christen*. Göttingen, 1964.

¹⁷ Rosenberg's almost unreadable and largely unread book helped to convince the semi-literate that their prejudices had a scientific basis. By 1934 it had already reached 32 editions.

¹⁸ On Faulhaber cf. Ludwig Volk, *Der bayerische Episcopat und der Nationalsozialismus 1930–1934* (Mainz, 1966²) esp. pp. 171 ff; ibid., "Kardinal Faulhabers Stellung zur Weimarer Republik und zum NS Staat", *Stimmen der Zeit* CLXXVII (1966) pp. 173–195.

¹⁹ For a review of the vast literature on this subject cf. Jürgen Schmidt, *Die Erforschung des Kirchenkampfes* (Theologische Existenz Heute Nr. 149) Munich, 1969.

The Confessing Church is of special interest to us for another reason. It owes its origin in no small measure to the German Christian attempt to apply the “Aryan clause”, excluding Jews from public office, to the Protestant ministry. The protests of theologians such as Bultmann against the intrusion of ideas so alien to the New Testament to the realm of the Church still make moving reading today²⁰.

Yet even here we must draw a sombre balance. The opposition to the Aryan clause in the Church did not challenge the right of the State to apply it elsewhere. The key considerations were loyalty to Scripture, the defence of the ordained man’s status, and protection of the Church’s independence. Many, like Martin Niemoeller himself at this stage, felt constrained for theological reasons to deny the validity of antisemitic measures within Christ’s church while affirming their necessity in the political realm. “Let the Church be the Church” was the watch-cry. The political significance, therefore, was all too indirect, and ill fitted the Church for prophetic protest²¹.

This emerges all too clearly when we note the deafening silence with which the Nuremberg Laws were received by the Churches. These laws, branding those of Jewish descent as second-class citizens and protecting German honour by prohibiting inter-marriage between Jews and Aryans, seem to us today so manifestly unjust that we simply cannot comprehend how men of integrity could fail to protest against them. In our hearts we explain the Churches’ inaction in terms of funk. We moralise.

Yet the realities are more complex than our comfortable generalisations. Many were in fact taken in by Goebbel’s propaganda machine, by now working in top gear and doing its humble best to foster an objective understanding of the Jewish question. The churches themselves were reeling under a succession of hammer-blows as the Gleichschaltung process got under way in education,

²⁰ Der Ungekündigte Bund pp. 194–214

²¹ The non-political nature of Niemöller’s opposition was little understood abroad. Cf. Keith Robbins, “Martin Niemöller, the German Church Struggle, and English opinion”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* XXI, ii (1970); cf. also the highly polemical pamphlet by Friedrich Baumgärtel, *Wider die Kirchenkampf-Legenden*, Neuendettelsau, 1958.

youth work, the social services, the mass media, the arts. In the previous period churchmen had been too complacent to worry about the eternal whining of the Jews. Now they were much too worried about their own institutional skins to have the nervous energy to expend on other people's concerns. The Jewish question may have been Hitler's No. 1 obsession²²; it came way down the churches' list of priorities. Resistance to Party and State tended to be limited to those areas in which doctrinal and churchly interests were directly menaced²³. A larger duty to speak up on behalf of human dignity was apparently not within their remit²⁴.

This self-denying ordinance was not merely a cowardly trimming of the ecclesiastical sails. Hans Rothfels' remark about the historians under the Third Reich applies here too: The primary failing was intellectual, not moral²⁵. Traditional Lutherans like Bishop Meiser of Bavaria or Bishop Wurm of Württemberg just didn't see that it was any of the Church's business. "No Protestant Church has ever denied that the State is entitled to put through legislation to protect the purity of the German people", wrote Wurm in January 1942²⁶. Church and State, Christ and Caesar, Gospel and Law were conceived of as existing in undialectical parallelism. The inapplicability

²² It is becoming increasingly clear that the characterisation of Hitler as believing only in struggle being motivated only by the pursuit of power, is inadequate. His theology of history was, in fact, a crude racialist variant of Marcionism. The Jew is, for Hitler, the creation of another God. The life and death struggle against the Jew has, therefore, cosmic dimensions. Cf. Jäckel, *op. cit.*

²³ As Guenther Lewy has convincingly shown for the Catholic Church in *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*. London, 1968.

²⁴ Ernst Wolf points out that even within the Confessing Church, a realisation of this larger responsibility came only gradually, and one might add – even then only to a minority. Graml, Mommsen, Reichhardt & Wolf, *The German Resistance to Hitler*. tr. Peter and Betty Ross (London 1970) pp. 193–234.

²⁵ Hans Rothfels, "Die Geschichtswissenschaft in den Dreissiger Jahren" in *Deutsches Geistesleben und Nationalsozialismus*, pp. 90 f.

²⁶ Quoted by Otto Elias from letter by Wurm to the Deutsche Evangelische Kanzlei in the Bielefeld archives in "Der evangelische Kirchenkampf und die Judenfrage", *Informationsblatt für die Gemeinden in den niederdeutschen lutherischen Landeskirchen*, X, xiv (July 1961) p. 217.

of this sort of model to a totalitarian situation was not grasped. The Church leaders still dreamed the dream of an authoritarian, positively Christian State. As a result of their political naivety any possibility of challenging the ominous march of events was lost²⁷.

Again the Confessing Church presents a partial exception. In its memorandum to Hitler in 1936 it declared its pastoral concern at the impossible conflicts of conscience in which its members were involved as a result of NS policy violating basic human rights. "If in the context of the NS Weltanschauung an antisemitism is forced on the Christian, which obliges him to hate the Jews, then the Christian command to love one's neighbour points in the opposite direction . . . Our people threatens to transgress the limits set it by God²⁸."

Yet this was by now a decimated Church with steadily dwindling public influence. It was rapidly becoming a persecuted sect under systematic administrative and police pressure. Hence by the end of the 1930's, when the third period of total repression sets in, the Churches were either too weakened or too compromised to resist, even had they wanted to. One should remember that Hitler's Foreign Policy was followed, with but few exceptions, with rapturous approval. When war came the Churches, though stunned like most Germans, were not found wanting with the usual patriotic declamations²⁹.

²⁷ Despite the unmistakeable stance of Barth himself one tends to agree with Meier that the "theology of crisis" school cannot be exonerated from all criticism either. Its characteristic stress on the utter transcendence of the Gospel could be interpreted as deprecating too active engagement in the world of culture and politics.

²⁸ Not a particularly strong statement in itself, but we must, of course, remember the context. Wilhelm Niemöller's study, "Die Bekennende Kirche sagt Hitler die Wahrheit" (Bielefeld, 1954) tends on the other hand, to triumphalism. English text in appendix to A. S. Duncan-Jones, *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany*, London, 1938.

²⁹ E. g. the incredible proclamation of the prestigious Lutheran bishop of Hanover, Marahrens, that "the Church has supplemented the weapons of steel with the invincible powers deriving from the Word of God" (zu den Waffen aus Stahl die unüberwindlichen Kräfte aus dem Worte Gottes gereicht), W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* (Bielefeld 1948), p. 487.

The NS euphemism «Kristallnacht» has been adopted generally to describe the nation-wide pogrom of 9/10 November 1938. More was smashed than shop-windows. 26,000 Jews were dragged off to concentration camp, 7500 Jewish businesses were destroyed, the synagogues throughout Germany went up in flames. Again, only a few individuals protested³⁰. The silence of the Churches this time may be humanly understandable in view of the antisemitic hysteria abroad at the time, but it gave the legions of little men a blank check in the years to come. They could lend a loyal hand in the distasteful work of eradicating Judaism with a good conscience. Ordinary men need clear speaking, not subtle hints or careful qualifications. They did not get it from their Church leaders³¹.

Indeed some of them put their name to an amended version of the notorious Godesberg Declaration of 31 May 1939, which called upon the Church to support the «constructive racial-political work of the Führer» and approved a «serious and responsible racial policy» for keeping Germany's cultural heritage pure³². This period saw a mushrooming of Institutes for research into the depraving effect of Jewish influences on the Christian faith a parts of a programme to dejudaise the Church. The logical conclusion was reached with the decree of the Evangelical Church Chancellery at the end of 1941 instructing church authorities “in view of the breakthrough of racial consciousness in our people” to take the necessary measu-

³⁰ The sole exception was the Kirchentag of the Prussian Confessing Church at Steglitz in December 1938 which expressed solidarity with the Christian Jews in their suffering and referred to the persecution of pastors who had preached against such violations of the Ten Commandments. Heinrich Hermelink, *Kirche im Kampf*, pp. 461–463; cf. Elias, op. cit., p. 217.

³¹ As Julius von Jan, himself one of the few to speak out and suffer the consequences, has put it, “We were all afraid to touch the regime at its most sensitive point”. *Ibid.* For an account of von Jan's sermon and the reaction to it cf. Conway, op. cit., pp. 375–376.

³² Hermelink, op. cit., pp. 477–478. A minority, including Bishop Marahrens, was prepared to sign a still more radical version which asserted the validity of the NS Weltanschauung, as “die völkisch-politische Lehre, die den deutschen Menschen bestimmt und gestaltet”, for the Christian German as well. *Ibid.* p. 476 The eighth Confessing Synod at Steglitz in May 1939 strongly attacked the Declaration.

res to segregate baptised non-Aryans from the church life of the Germans³³.

We know the rest only too well. The War, soon to be a Christian crusade against Bolshevism, absorbed all energies, first in the exhilaration of victory, then by the stern struggle for survival. For the churches the moment of truth came as late as for the rest of the population – too late³⁴.

The truth is that by now the option of collaboration or silent complicity was the only one left open to the churches. They were caught up in the web of their previous compromises and mistaken judgements. As the rumours from the East hardened into firm knowledge in 1942–1943 they found their hands tied. An appeal at this stage would have been met with blank incomprehension by an uninstructed people.

The technique of totalitarianism is to isolate the individual, to strip him of all independent judgement, throw him in his loneliness on the sole security of obeying orders. Eichmann's death machine worked not only because the Christian in Germany felt no particular solidarity with the Jews but because he was unaware of any solidarity with his fellow-Christians over against the policies of the Final Solution. This is the measure of the failure of the churches³⁵. It meant that only heroic individuals could act.

It is true that the churches did raise their voices on behalf of one

³³ The text of this decree in Wilhelm Niemöller, *Ist die Judenfrage bewältigt?* (Junge Kirche, Beiheft 2/1968) p. 18. The Provisional Leadership of the Confessing Church commented that logically this meant the exclusion of the Apostles and Christ himself from the German Church. *Der Ungekündigte Bund*, p. 237.

³⁴ Cf. Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*. New York 1962.

³⁵ Conway contends that by the end of 1941 the leaders of the Christian Churches at last “realised that Christianity and Judaism could no longer be regarded as opposing movements but were one in their needs and their adversity”. *op. cit.*, p. 263. This is meant as a charitable judgement, but if it is true, their prolonged silence becomes all the more fateful for those towards whom they should have exercised leadership. For, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal”. H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London, 1963) p. 253.

class of Jew, the Christian Jew, or the Jew married to a Christian. Yet even here they did not manifest any great determination. No bishop insisted on wearing the Star of David to show his solidarity with his fellow-Christians. When in 1943 6000 "non-Aryans" were arrested in Berlin their "Aryan" wives followed them for hours screaming until they secured their release. Nothing similar is recorded from the realm of the Churches. Indeed the distinction between the various classes of 'privileged' or nonprivileged Jews was merely a tactic by the SS State to break down moral resistance to the deportations, and the Churches fell into this trap.

Deserving of special mention are Bishop Wurm's nine protests against the treatment of the Jews. These protests came when the tide of German victories was on the ebb, and most German Jews had already perished. He still sought to work within the system, and hence their language is framed to appeal to the NS authorities. Yet he does denounce in plain words the systematic murder of Jews and Poles as contrary to the clear commandment of God³⁶. With similar courage the twelfth Confessing Synod of the Old Prussian Union issued a pulpit declaration in October 1943: "Woe to us and our people ... when it is considered that the killing of men is justified because ... they belong to another race³⁷." To this we must add the individual witness of men like Provost Lichtenberg, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a handful of others.

It is ironic, though hardly surprising, that only the Confessing Church, whose record had been consistently the best, was prepared to confess to its failures after the War in the Stuttgart Confession. The Catholic Church and the Protestant establishment were more concerned with *apologia*. They pointed to the Christian martyrs and to some of their own generalised pious rhetoric during the Third Reich as evidence that they, too, had opposed the Final Solution.

These impenitent lies must be nailed as such. As Karl Amery has pointed out, if the Catholic heroes on whom such great worth is laid

³⁶ For a very fair assessment of Wurm's protests cf. Elias, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

today were prophets, they were just as much prophets against their own church milieu as against National Socialism³⁸. The same is true of the contemporary adulteration of Bonhoeffer by the Protestant Churches³⁹.

Let us honour the heroic individuals. Those, for example, of whom Max Krakauer so movingly relates in the account of his underground existence in Berlin, Pomerania and Württemberg, as he and his wife shuttled from one pastor's home to another, who "risked their own life and that of their dependents for the sake of two persecuted fugitives from the Gestapo"⁴⁰. But as Heinrich Grüber says, who himself did perhaps more than any Christian to help, "What were the few who protested against the millions who collaborated or kept silence"⁴¹

Thus the Churches in Germany may not have been Hitler's accomplices, as far as the persecution of the Jews was concerned. On the whole, the sympathies of responsible opinion within the Churches swung towards the Jews as discrimination turned to genocide⁴². Yet, in fact, this sympathy was not translated into action. In effect, the Churches remained the sleeping partners of National Socialism.

This is a subject with naught for any of our comforts. It raises

³⁸ Carl Amery, *Die Kapitulation oder Deutscher Katholizismus heute*. Hamburg, 1963.

³⁹ Theologically it may be correct to regard men such as Lichtenberg and Bonhoeffer as being the true representatives of the Christian Church in this era and as having a significance out of all proportion to their numbers. Historically, however, one must regard them as peripheral figures, quite unrepresentative of the Churches. Eberhard Bethge, for example draws attention to Bonhoeffer's gradual exodus from traditional "Church" concerns to political commitment. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Theologe, Christ, Zeitgenosse*. Munich, 1967. Kurt Gerstein is, perhaps, the example of the Christian 'outsider'; cf. the biography (to be used with caution) of Saul Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, tr. Charles Fullmann. London, 1969.

⁴⁰ Max Krakauer, *Lichter im Dunkel*. Stuttgart, 1947.

⁴¹ Quoted in Elias, op. cit., p. 217. On Grüber's work cf. Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, p. 114f.

⁴² The Security Service (SD) of the SS became quite alarmed at alleged pro-Jewish sentiment in the Churches. The violent anti-ecclesiastical basis of the reports, however, urges caution in accepting their evaluation.

the gravest questions about the Christian faith and the Christian Churches which we would simply evade by demanding or expecting from others, at a safe distance of time, a readiness for martyrdom which we probably cannot identify in ourselves.

To recapitulate:

1. The primary weakness of the Church was not moral but intellectual. Its Gospel, unlike that of the National Socialists, had no cutting edge.
2. Politically, the Churches were naive to a degree. And when insight finally came their exaggerated respect for authority inhibited them from even contemplating the thought of resistance.
3. The heavy weight of traditional structures and institutions prevented the Churches from fostering any real solidarity of commitment and action.

HEBRÄISCHE MAQAMENDICHTUNG IN SPANIEN (III)

Von HERBERT DITTMANN, Köln

2.2.14 Kalonymos ben Kalonymos

geb. 1286 in Arles, gest. nach 1328 in Arles (?), führte wie manche seiner jüdischen Zeitgenossen ein Wanderleben und stand in regem Verkehr mit vielen Großen seiner Zeit¹²². Als Bearbeiter

¹²² So begab er sich 1319 mit Empfehlungen und wissenschaftlichen Aufträgen des Königs von Neapel, Robert von Anjou, über Avignon (Papst) nach Rom, wo er zum Freundeskreis des berühmten 'Immanuel ben Šlomoh gehörte.