
CHRISTIAN COMPLICITY?

Changing Views on German Churches
and the Holocaust

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JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE
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THE JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE honors excellence in Holocaust research and fosters dissemination of cutting-edge Holocaust scholarship. Generous philanthropists, Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff of Baltimore, Maryland, provided support to organizations worldwide, focusing on Jewish learning and scholarship, music, the arts, and humanitarian causes. Their children, Eleanor Katz and Harvey M. Meyerhoff, Chairman Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, endowed this lecture.

My title for this Meyerhoff Lecture addresses the question of Christian complicity in the Holocaust, with attention also to “changing views” over time on the role of German churches. It has been just over sixty years since the Holocaust came to an end. By coincidence, my first scholarly article on the topic appeared in 1977, at approximately the halfway point of this sixty-year period. I will use the two halves of this timeframe to suggest that a transition occurred at about that middle point, a transition in which evidence concerning the pervasive participation of Germans and of German churches in the Nazi state and widespread support of its policies has increasingly undercut ubiquitous German claims of innocence. During the first years after the war, many or most Germans, Christians and otherwise, claimed never to have supported Adolf Hitler and not to have been responsible for atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. This was met by some Allied cynicism at the time. American GIs, for example, remarked that opponents of Hitler blossomed in 1945 like the flowers of spring. For thirty years, however, historians largely accepted the innocence of the German masses, ranging from members of the Christian churches to soldiers in the German *Wehrmacht*, and tended instead to focus on narrow circles of culpability in the SS and in the Nazi Party. Recent research has called such assumptions into question.

I will begin with my own article of thirty years ago. Then I will look at the broader context of historical understanding of the Holocaust, arguing that two segments of about thirty years each can be identified. Finally, I will focus on the narrower topic of German churches and the Holocaust, suggesting that an important new trajectory set

in a generation ago. I am not claiming that something profound happened exactly three decades in the past, and I am especially not arguing that my first article in 1977 occupies a central place. However, I am making a claim for my generation. I will argue that a broad, generational transition began in the 1970s, a transition that changed the way we understand the Holocaust, adding an awareness of greater complexity and broader German complicity to the story. I believe this is true for Holocaust history as a whole. It certainly is true for the story of German churches and the Holocaust.

My first article, published before I had completed my graduate training, appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary History* in 1977 under the title “Theologian in the Third Reich: The Case of Gerhard Kittel.”¹ I presented a quite critical view of this renowned theologian. Although he had occupied a very important place in German Protestant theology—as the son of a famous theologian, Rudolf Kittel; as a professor of New Testament in the highly esteemed Protestant Theological Faculty at the University of Tübingen; and especially as the founding editor of a very important reference work, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*—I described Kittel’s membership in the Nazi Party, his enthusiastic praise for the rise of Adolf Hitler, and his efforts to establish a Christian foundation for the brutal mistreatment of Jews undertaken by the Nazi regime.

One year later, in 1978, Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz of the University of Tübingen published an article on Kittel.² Siegele-Wenschkewitz also was willing to take a critical look at Kittel, especially in terms of a 1933 speech he gave on “Die Judenfrage.”³ In that speech, Kittel approached the “Jewish Question” by accepting virtually all of the Nazi antisemitic stereotypes, taking as truth the view that Jews represented a particularly important danger for Germany. He fully accepted the idea of a “Jewish problem,” even though Jews constituted less than 1% of the German population. Presupposing the Nuremberg racial laws, which the Nazi regime did not introduce until two years later, he advocated taking citizenship away from Jews so that special measures could be developed to remove those individuals from whatever jobs they might hold in important areas of German life—law, medicine, education, the bureaucracy. Kittel went on to admit that outsiders might scream of brutality if Germany introduced such policies. In particular, Christians might be just the sort of people who would sympathize with seemingly unfair hardships faced by Jews, many of whom would seem upstanding and individually blameless. However, “God does not require that we be sentimental, but that we see the facts and give them their due,” Kittel

said.⁴ He then underlined his point: “But we may also not become soft ... If the battle is correct in its object, the Christian also has his place at the front.”⁵

Siegele-Wenschkewitz described all of this almost as harshly as I had done. Then, however, she added an important qualifier: “From a sympathizer of the presumably moderate *Führer*, he became an opponent of the National Socialist politics of destruction.”⁶ I was astonished. I had found and described extensive evidence that Kittel’s brutality toward Jews only grew worse after 1933. He spent the next decade working in Walter Frank’s “Institute for the History of the New Germany,” a Nazi think tank, and he became the single most prolific contributor to the “Research Section on the Jewish Question” within that Institute. Throughout this period he wrote very little that could be described as Christian theology; rather, he lent his energy, his scholarship, and his reputation to works that tried to explain the danger of Jews, the racial “mongrelization” of Jews, and the historical origins of the “Jewish problem” that had now been so effectively recognized by Hitler and the Nazi Party.

I could find no evidence that Kittel ever “became an opponent of the National Socialist politics of destruction,” as Siegele-Wenschkewitz claimed, at least not before the collapse of Nazi Germany in 1945. As late as 1944, Kittel still praised Christianity *and* the Nazi regime. He called them twin bulwarks in the effort to save Western civilization from the menace of Jews.⁷ By 1944, of course, there were far fewer Jews available to “menace” anyone. Virtually all Germans knew by then that Jews had disappeared from the streets of Germany. After the war, Kittel admitted that he had become aware of the murder of Jews at least by 1943,⁸ yet he had continued his attack unabated.

I now believe that Siegele-Wenschkewitz’ casual exoneration of Gerhard Kittel, her claim that he became an opponent of Hitler, represented the standard default position at that time, both among Germans and among non-German observers. It seemed hard to believe that decent people could have admired and supported Adolf Hitler. It seemed hard to imagine that “good Germans,” people whose accomplishments at the height of academe or people whose commitment to their Christian identity seemed above approach, that these individuals would not have reacted as we react in the postwar world, condemning the Nazi state as a criminal regime that implemented the basest, most immoral policies. On that basis postwar historians tended to give church leaders in particular a free pass, assuming that “real Christians” either practiced the moral opposition shown by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, or, failing

the courage to risk life and limb, observed the predations and crimes of the Nazi state in silent, secret, but thoroughgoing opposition. Such an optimistic view might have led Siegele-Wenschkewitz to claim that, of course, Kittel would have opposed Hitler once he recognized the true nature of Hitler's policies and intentions. However, that was not true for Gerhard Kittel. Neither has such a view stood up against the scholarship of the past thirty years about other "good Germans."

THE CONTEXT

For about three decades after 1945, very few Germans were willing to acknowledge the extent to which Nazi politics and Nazi enthusiasms had permeated otherwise respectable circles, nor were they willing to consider the implications of this darker reality for understanding questions of complicity in the Holocaust. Rather, many or most Germans were eager to bury the past and to hide skeletons in their own closets. During the early postwar period of denazification, virtually every German claimed never to have been a real Nazi, whether or not membership in the Party, or in the Stormtroopers, or even in the SS, might have suggested otherwise.⁹ "We were only following orders" was the common refrain, or, "We had to shoot or they would have shot us." This word "they" makes for an interesting convenience. Whom did it represent? It became common to label the perpetrators "Nazis," rather than "Germans," as if the Nazis were not somehow also German. The crimes of the Nazi state were blamed on a very small circle of leaders—Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels—most of whom were conveniently dead. This entire attitude was later satirized in a piece of street theater in Berlin under the title "It wasn't us. Hitler did it." Only by the 1980s did Germans begin more seriously to work at what they started to call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to terms with the past.

A similar process of transition can be recognized in constituencies outside Germany, groups for which the late 1970s also represented a turning point. For example, very few Jewish survivors gave talks to schoolchildren in the first decades after the war. For many of them, the horrors may have been too fresh, the nightmares too real. They also were likely to discover, however, that few people wanted to listen to such painful information. There was no Holocaust Museum then and the very few memorials to Jewish victims were likely to be found only at camps where the murders had taken place. The word "Holocaust" was not commonly used until the 1970s, and the first television miniseries under that name appeared late in that decade. Holocaust

scholar Christopher Browning has noted that, when he did his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1970s, he was advised against a Holocaust topic with the suggestion there would be no future in it.¹⁰

The huge problem here—which this disparate group of Germans, Jews, and American scholars seemed to recognize in those early postwar decades—is that the story of the Holocaust teaches us things we really do not want to know. That was certainly true for Germans, who had so many secrets to hide. It was also true in some ways for Jews. When Raul Hilberg published his massive study in 1961, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, among other things it touched on unpleasant stories about the role of Jewish Police in the ghettos and the nature of the *Judenräte*.¹¹ Christians also did not want to face the Holocaust. Outside as well as inside Germany, they quite desperately wanted to think that real Christians would have recognized the immorality of the Nazi state, would have condemned the regime in their hearts, even if they did not possess the courage or the ability to stand up in opposition. Finally, if we consider that largest category—human beings—the story of the Holocaust is also frightening, a tale of crimes and atrocities humans seemed quite willing to commit.

Further complicating the story, we must remember that Germans by the twentieth century represented a very high place in human accomplishment. German universities were the best in the world, German scientists won the most Nobel prizes, German composers ranged from Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to Wagner, and German theologians had essentially invented modern theology. This was a highly educated, highly cultivated, Christian nation. Yet Germans were also the ones who perpetrated the Holocaust. It is a sobering thought.

Scholarship on Nazi Germany in the past thirty years has increasingly acknowledged the discomfiting complexity of this story. Our awareness of the perpetrators cuts a wider and wider swath through the German populace and the results look worse than we had hoped, or imagined, wherever we might choose to cast our glance. Take Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men*. People had hoped there would be some satisfactory explanation for the killers: they were young, they had come of age in the Hitler Youth, they had been brainwashed, they were the most committed Nazis. Yet Browning found killers who were none of these things. He disturbs the mythology that had allowed us some distance, describing murderers who were older, family men, men who had not grown up in the Hitler Youth, middle-aged men who were not particularly Nazi in their orientation or their enthusiasms. In 1941, two years

into World War II, they were living safely in or near Hamburg and only under pressure of a draft did they become that group of killers in Reserve Police Battalion 101 who disposed of some 85,000 Jews. Furthermore, these ordinary men were told by their commanding officer that they could opt out of murdering Jews at pointblank range, with all of the attendant blood and gore and splatter, if they did not feel up to the task. Some 10–15% of the 500 men took up this offer, suffering no punishment or reprisal for their refusal to do the killing; but that means that 85–90% of these men willingly accepted the gruesome task and worked at it daily for weeks and months.¹²

Browning's book is troubling, because it widens the web of human complicity in the killing. It reveals the perpetrators to be quite human. The same is true of Robert Gellately's books on the Gestapo, in which he describes the Nazi police state as rather understaffed according to our expectations.¹³ Gestapo agents were not stationed on every corner in Hitler's Germany. Rather, they relied heavily upon the German populace to listen and watch and turn in any neighbors or co-workers who seemed disloyal. Neighbors turned in people who told jokes about Hitler, Himmler, Goering, and Goebbels or who appeared inadequate in their harshness toward Jews. Then there is the recent historiography on the *Wehrmacht*. The old myth said that the *Wehrmacht* was a highly professional army, good at the art of war but unsullied by the war crimes and atrocities of the Nazi regime. Omer Bartov and others have destroyed that myth by exposing the evidence of *Wehrmacht* complicity in the killing of Jews and other innocent victims of Nazi terror.¹⁴

CHURCH HISTORIOGRAPHY

Now I will come to my specific focus for this lecture, "changing views on German Churches and the Holocaust." Here too the 60-year trajectory shows three decades of minimizing and mythologizing, followed by three decades in which one myth after another has been exposed. Here too the Holocaust represents a story that, for several decades, proved too difficult honestly to face. I believe that the problem was especially acute for Christians, both inside and outside postwar Germany, particularly since the primary victims of the Holocaust were Jews. It was hard for Christians to deny nearly two thousand years of Christian hostility toward Jews. It was hard to deny that Germany had been an important Christian nation, the home of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, the home of the most important Christian theologians in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. By the time of Adolf Hitler, some 98% of

Germans still maintained their membership in the Catholic or Protestant church and still paid their church taxes. Postwar Christians could not easily reconcile these realities with their self-image as paragons of virtue. They imagined their God to be a God of love, their Christian ethic a model of human morality.

For the Catholic Church, in 1946 Munich's Bishop Johannes Neuhäusler produced a book that told a sanitized version of Catholics in Germany. He described his fellow Catholics as opponents of Nazi ideology and victims of Nazi oppression.¹⁵ Neuhäusler's version remained unchallenged until the 1960s, when a Catholic scholar, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, exposed the complicity of Catholics in the rise of Hitler in 1933 and the enthusiasm with which Catholics responded to Nazi ideology.¹⁶ Böckenförde's article so offended the mythology in place that he was denounced as "patently unserious" and his methods were described as "extraordinarily primitive."¹⁷ Rolf Hochhuth two years later aroused even more animosity with his play, *The Deputy*, which castigated Pope Pius XII for his failure to criticize the Nazi regime and his refusal to condemn the German murder of Jews when he could and should have done so.¹⁸ For more than four decades, Pius XII has remained a focus for scholars and others, some vehemently defending him as a man who did all that he could and secretly saved Jews, others attacking him, as did Hochhuth, for his failures, whether based on residual antisemitism, his preference for Nazism over communism in the fight between them, or his alleged choice to save the physical church rather than the soul of the church. The number of books participating in the controversy over Pius XII would fill a considerable portion of any large room.¹⁹

However, I will now turn to the Protestant churches, which have been the subject of my own research. Immediately in 1945, Protestant church leaders raised protests against the Allied plan of denazification. They claimed that the Americans and British could not understand Germany nor recognize who the real Nazis were. They raised the now familiar argument that the number of true Nazis was very, very small. We can see in retrospect that the very prominent Bishop Wurm, for example, criticized denazification at least partly because his own son had been caught falsifying his *Fragebogen* (his Allied questionnaire) by not mentioning that he had already joined the Nazi Party by the mid-1920s. That highlights one major reason for Protestants to have opposed denazification: a large number of Christians would be caught in its snares. Church leaders literally complained that only communists would be left to run Germany if the good Christians who had "innocently joined the Nazi Party" were

removed from positions of influence via denazification.²⁰ Protestant pastors sabotaged denazification by writing letters of recommendation for all who asked, even for some accused and convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity. These letters became so notorious in postwar Germany that they were tagged with a satirical name based on a common soap product. So-called *Persilscheine* were “soap certificates” designed to wash someone clean of any Nazi taint. Protestant church officials in Bavaria had to warn pastors not to write too many such letters and to try not to fill them each with the same phrases, lest they lose all credibility.²¹ Of course, it is worth mentioning that Catholic priests also contributed *Persilscheine*, and the Vatican frequently gave false identification and travel papers to German war criminals trying to shed their identity and escape to places such as South America.²²

Alongside the falsification of the past to be found in the denazification process, a falsification occurred when the first histories of Protestant churches in the Nazi period came to be written. Wilhelm Niemöller dominated the telling of that story. He was the brother of Martin Niemöller, a major participant in the Protestant *Kirchenkampf* (or Church Struggle) alongside Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and other members of the Confessing Church. Wilhelm Niemöller had participated himself in the various phases of the Church Struggle from 1933 through 1945. Through Martin he also had access to a large number of documents produced during this struggle. In the postwar era he continued collecting such documents and created an archive on the Church Struggle at his parish in Bielefeld, an archive that remains to this day a very important source for church historians studying the period. Finally, Wilhelm Niemöller wrote a number of studies dealing with the Confessing Church and the *Kirchenkampf*. Accordingly, as a historian and as an archivist, he can be seen as having set the tone and set the agenda. From today’s perspective, that agenda seems suspect.²³

In 1956, Wilhelm Niemöller’s book *Die Evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich: Handbuch des Kirchenkampfes* was published. Though the title suggests that it is a history of the entire Protestant church, he focuses only on the activities of the Confessing Church, which, according to his own figures, represented about 20% of Protestants.²⁴ He dismisses the Deutsche Christen, the main enemy of the Confessing Church, as a heretical party trying to use state power to control the church. He also dismisses all those in the middle: “There can be no point in writing a history of the middle party. Even if one recognizes the peaceful intentions of good men, no history emerges. At no time was there a clear line to be recognized, much less an important

act.”²⁵ Thus, for Wilhelm Niemöller the history of the Protestant church cannot and will not include that large majority of Protestants in Germany, those who supported Hitler rabidly, as did the Deutsche Christen, or merely enthusiastically, as did most of those in the middle.

In another publication, Niemöller notes his intent: “This book will not avoid passing judgment. It proceeds from the ‘pre-judgment’ that the Son of God calls his chosen congregation (*ausgewählte Gemeinde*) to eternal life through his spirit and his word, gathered, protected, and held from the beginning to the end of the world in unity with the true faith.”²⁶ These pastoral words represent no anomaly for Niemöller. Elsewhere he writes, “[I]t almost seems as if some are satisfied with the short-sighted conclusion that the methods of church history and profane [secular] history do not differ from each other.”²⁷ But for him, he adds, “... it is always about the Yes or the No, it is always about decisions. Only where that is the result do research and writing assume legitimacy.”²⁸

Several things clearly result from the historical approach of Wilhelm Niemöller. First, the story of the Confessing Church is told as if that were the story of the Protestant Church, even though it represented only one-fifth of Protestants. Furthermore, material will be selected and presented for its ability to honor the “Son of God” or further the mission of the church. Few historians today accept such assertions, nor the obvious ways in which such an approach will distort actual history. However, church historians in Germany still work in the Bielefeld archive created by Wilhelm Niemöller, and there lingers a strong temptation to identify and research that very small number of Confessing Church pastors and laity who really did oppose the Nazi state, really did protest the mistreatment of Jews, or really did work to rescue Jews.

The most famous “good guy” in the German Protestant church of that time is probably Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eberhard Bethge edited Bonhoeffer’s works after Bonhoeffer himself had been executed for his participation in the Canaris Conspiracy against Hitler. Bethge also produced a fine biography of Bonhoeffer.²⁹ In 1984 Bethge, John de Gruchy, and Desmond Tutu visited Seattle to attend a fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Barmen Declaration, the statement on which the Confessing Church established its identity. At the time both de Gruchy and Bishop Tutu based their scholarly interest in Dietrich Bonhoeffer at least in part on their desire to effect political change in *apartheid* South Africa. Although some suggest Bonhoeffer had feet of clay, or at least a couple of clay toes,³⁰ he remains an admirable and heroic figure who took

the stance most Christians in America probably think he should have taken, a stance in moral opposition to the Nazi state. I have nothing against the study of Bonhoeffer and the willingness to hold him up as a model and an inspiration. Can we be satisfied, however, with a history lesson that looks only for heroes?

Both within and outside the German scholarly world there has been a temptation to look for Christian heroes. The remarkable story of Le Chambon, for example, tells us of French Huguenots who parlayed their pacifist Christian ideals into a system of aid for Jews, rescuing perhaps 5000 potential victims.³¹ That is a remarkable story of human decency and courage, well worth the telling, but it should not be presented as if it were typical of Christian behavior. First, most Christians in Europe did not behave in this manner. Furthermore, national identity must be considered alongside religious belief in assessing such stories. Many Christians opposing Nazi policies in France, or in any other occupied territory, acted in large measure in harmony with their patriotic as well as their religious values. By contrast, Christians in Germany, if they had both the impulse and courage to resist, had to place their own sense of moral values above obedience and loyalty to their national government, perhaps even to the point of juridical treason. Some set of universal Christian values was not the only motivating force at play. Finally, individuals in Le Chambon, when asked, tended to explain their protection of Jews in terms of simple humanity, rather than in terms of Christian belief.³² This is consistent with other research on rescuers, evidencing that religious motivation does not seem to be the most important variable in differentiating between those who did and those who did not risk their well-being to save Jews.³³ Scholarship that highlights behavior that merits our admiration is certainly not a bad thing. It can show us the reality of an alternative behavior rather than that which we criticize. But it should not be described as “church history” in the way that Wilhelm Niemöller tried to define the term.

Those who follow Wilhelm Niemöller’s historical paradigm give too much credence to what we wish would have happened and are tempted to leave too many questions unasked, too many suspicions unexplored. As for Niemöller himself, he never mentioned in his historical writing that he had joined the Nazi Party as early as 1923; nor did he acknowledge that he and his brother Martin had voted for Hitler through the elections of 1933 and welcomed Hitler’s rise to power as enthusiastically as many other pastors and priests in Germany.³⁴ If Wilhelm Niemöller had been less interested in writing a history to glorify God and the German Protestant church, he might have

wrestled with the very important question of how and why Hitler had seemed so attractive to so many Christians in Germany, including himself.

THE NEW TRAJECTORY

There is now a trajectory in the treatment of German churches and the Holocaust very much like the trajectory I mentioned in relation to *Ordinary Men*, or the role of the *Wehrmacht*, or the place of the Gestapo in the Nazi state. This story is now seen as much more complicated, the complicity of Christians in the Nazi state is recognized as much more pervasive. For example, in 1970 Wolfgang Gerlach submitted a dissertation that examined the Confessing Church in terms of its relationship to Jews. He discovered that members of the Confessing Church almost never stood up for Jews or protested mistreatment of them. The Barmen Declaration did not mention the word “Jew” nor did it allude to the issue. Furthermore, many Confessing Church leaders routinely accepted the antisemitism of their time and place. Otto Dibelius, for example, a leader in the Confessing Church and a postwar president of the World Council of Churches, casually noted in an Easter letter to his clergy in 1928, “Despite the evil ring that the word has acquired in many cases, I have always considered myself an antisemite. It cannot be denied that Judaism plays a leading role in all the corruptive phenomena of modern civilization.” Gerlach’s only problem in exposing such attitudes in 1970 was that he could find no publisher, so his book first appeared in print in 1987.³⁵

The story of the *Kirchenkampf* is now seen as primarily an ecclesiastical battle inside the German Protestant church, not a battle against the Nazi state.³⁶ That helps explain all those members of the Confessing Church who were also members of one or another Nazi organization, or all of those Confessing Church statements that professed loyalty to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. John Conway described much of this complexity in his book of 1968, even though his title, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, implies that the story is one primarily of conflict, rather than a story in which Christians found it very easy to like Hitler.³⁷

My book on theologians came out in 1985, describing the many ways in which major, representative Protestant theologians found reasons to like Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology.³⁸ Victoria Barnett produced a study in 1992, *For the Soul of the People*, in which she shows some of the complexity to be found within the Confessing Church, and she produced another story of complicated religious and ethical values in

Bystanders, which appeared in 1999.³⁹ Gerhard Besier began a prolific career of publication with three books that came out in 1985 and 1986.⁴⁰ One describes the fact that Bishop Marahrens of Hannover, though not a member of the Deutsche Christen, insisted that the Hitler salute and “Heil Hitler” would mark the daily rituals within the bishop’s office and that no word of reproach would be whispered against the man or the movement that had saved Germany from democracy and the weakness of the Weimar Republic. One of Besier’s students, Gerhard Lindemann, went on to publish a massive study delineating the ways in which the Hannoverian church mistreated and failed to support its very few pastors of Jewish descent.⁴¹

In 1998 Susannah Heschel published a book describing a nineteenth-century scholar, Abraham Geiger, and his contribution to the question of the “Jewish Jesus.”⁴² She has since written on German Protestant attempts to de-judaize Christianity, even to the point of proclaiming an “Aryan Jesus.”⁴³ Her book-length study of these issues will appear in 2008. Doris Bergen published *Twisted Cross* in 1996, the best study available on those most enthusiastic Nazis within the Protestant Church, the Deutsche Christen.⁴⁴ On the Catholic side, in 2002 Beth Griech-Poelle published a volume that placed—in more accurate historical perspective—Bishop von Galen, a man whose heroic opposition to euthanasia had hidden from sight various aspects of his career much friendlier to the Nazi worldview.⁴⁵ Suzanne Brown-Fleming produced in 2006 a book on Cardinal Aloisius Muench, an American Catholic posted to Germany in the immediate postwar period.⁴⁶ She describes the many ways in which Bishop, later-Cardinal Muench encouraged German Catholics *not* to take responsibility for what had happened in the Nazi state, nor to question whether their own attitudes or beliefs had contributed. He also exhibited a good deal of antisemitism himself as he trod over issues that today seem desperately in need of greater historical insight and moral sensitivity.

Brown-Fleming’s work on Cardinal Muench shows that it is not just Germans who made mistakes that earn our criticism today. Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* also implies that the problem of the Holocaust is a human problem, not just a German problem. I have no inclination to diminish our criticism of Germans who helped Adolf Hitler rise to power and then participated in the regime that perpetrated such barbarous crimes. Choices were made each step of the way. We increasingly know that many, many Germans in virtually all professions and under the auspices of many different organizations were more likely to support than oppose, more likely to

participate than withdraw from participation. That is a human tragedy and worthy of our careful attention. The pervasiveness and complexity of participation should encourage us to look not just at Germans, however, but also at ourselves.

The only sort of historical understanding that might teach us something useful is surely historical understanding that tries to look at the full breadth of human behavior in Nazi Germany, without narrowing the focus to “a few criminals” or generously placing our postwar condemnation of Nazi policies into the hearts of Germans prior to 1945. This also must be historical work that follows wherever the evidence might lead. To return once again to Gerhard Kittel, he admitted a mistake after 1945 and said it had been to “misunderstand” Hitler. Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz accepted this analysis and continued to explain Kittel’s problem as a “*Fehleinschätzung*.” Such an explanation is simple and comfortable. It suggests that decent people who make a proper assessment would always oppose someone like Hitler.

I believe, by contrast, that Gerhard Kittel assessed Adolf Hitler quite accurately and liked what he saw. That would explain why Kittel’s antisemitism grew more intemperate between 1933 and 1944 and why he never apologized after 1945, but energetically defended his own harsh attacks upon Jews. He claimed that his antisemitism had been entirely consistent with his Christian faith and no harsher than the antisemitism of Jesus or Paul.⁴⁷ His only concession was to acknowledge the obvious, that the death camps could not be defended. I think this understanding best explains Kittel but also helps us understand those many other church leaders, pastors, theologians, and lay people who applauded Hitler, who called 1933 a year of rebirth, and, in the words of Paul Althaus, considered Hitler “a gift and miracle from God.”⁴⁸ The problem was not that they misunderstood Hitler, but that they so readily reconciled their consciences and their Christian identities to the harshness of the Nazi state.

Why? I have not tried to address that question here, but the short answer is this: They were so hurt by World War I and the national humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, they were so opposed to the open society created by democracy and the Weimar Republic, they were so frightened by the economic crises of hyper inflation and then the Great Depression, and they were so threatened by the sociological changes of the modern world that someone as ideologically aggressive as Adolf Hitler seemed an answer to all their problems. He was the candidate of military strength and national pride; the candidate of family values, promising, among other things, to put women back in the home where they belonged; and the candidate whose antisemitism fit their

own preconceptions and concern that Jews did not really belong in an ideal, unified Christian society.⁴⁹ Based upon their hopes and dreams, Christians and other Germans found it easier to march behind Adolf Hitler than we would like to think. An honest assessment of the historical record seems to make that clear. It cannot be the legitimate task of historians to bury, ignore, try to hide or try to ignore that complex reality.

NOTES

1. Robert P. Ericksen, "Theologian in the Third Reich: The Case of Gerhard Kittel," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977), 595–622.
2. Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, "Die Evangelisch-theologische Fakultät Tübingen in den Anfangsjahren des Dritten Reichs II; Gerhard Kittel und die Judenfrage," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 4 (1978).
3. Gerhard Kittel, *Die Judenfrage* (Stuttgart, 1933).
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 61, 69.
6. Siegele-Wenschkewitz, 80.
7. Gerhard Kittel, "Das Rassenproblem der Spätantik und das Frühchristentum," a lecture delivered by Kittel at the University of Vienna, June 15, 1944. I found this lecture in typescript in the theological library, the University of Tübingen.
8. Gerhard Kittel, "Meine Verteidigung" (a manuscript dated June 1945, Tübingen, that Kittel prepared in his own defense and that circulated among his supporters), 27. I am indebted to the late Professor Herman Preus of Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN, for access to this document.
9. See, for example, Robert P. Ericksen, "Hiding the Nazi Past: Denazification and Christian Postwar Reckoning in Germany," in Robert P. Ericksen and Michael J. Halvorson, eds., *A Lutheran Vocation: Philip A. Nordquist and the Study of History at Pacific Lutheran University* (Tacoma, 2005).
10. Christopher Browning has made this comment on several occasions, including when he gave the Raphael Lemkin Lecture at Pacific Lutheran University in October 2004.
11. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1961).
12. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).
13. Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1939–1945* (Oxford, 1990); and *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York, 2001).

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15. Johannes Neuhäusler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Der Kampf des Nationalsozialismus gegen die katholische Kirche und der kirchliche Widerstand* (Munich, 1946).
16. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Der deutsche Katholizismus im Jahre 1933: Eine kritische Betrachtung," *Hochland*, 53 (1961), 215–39. See also an English version of this article, "German Catholicism in 1933," *Cross Currents*, 11 (1961), 283–304.
17. Kurt Sontheimer reports on this response to Böckenförde in his "Einleitung" to Hans Müller, *Katholische Kirche und Nationalsozialismus: Dokumente 1930–1935* (Munich, 1963), viii–ix.
18. Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy* (New York, 1964), which originally appeared as *Der Stellvertreter* in 1963.
19. Critics include, for example, John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope* (New York, 2000), Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New York, 2000), and David Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Antisemitism* (New York, 2001). Defenders include Robert Graham, S.J., *Pius XII's Defense of Jews and Others, 1944–45* (Milwaukee, 1982), Margherita Marchione, *Consensus and Controversy: Defending Pope Pius XII* (Mahwah, NJ, 2002), Pierre Blet, *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican* (Mahwah, NJ, 1999), and Ronald Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope* (Huntington, IN, 2000).
20. See Robert P. Ericksen, "The Göttingen University Theological Faculty: A Test Case in *Gleichschaltung* and Denazification," *Central European History* XVII (1985), 355–83, and also my "Hiding the Nazi Past." See also Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945–1949: Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit* (Munich, 1989).
21. A letter from the "Evang-Luth. Landeskirchenrat an sämtliche Dekanate," June 1, 1946, Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin (EZA), 2/318, 281. This archive also includes a twelve-page instruction from Bishop Meiser of Bavaria to his clergy, advising them on how to emphasize the right legal issues, such as "active resistance" to the regime and "actual suffering." He advised that participation in the *Kirchenkampf* should be considered active resistance, a claim that today would be considered at least questionable and perhaps fraudulent, and that actual suffering could include "spiritual stresses." "Evang-Luth. Landeskirchenrat an die sämtliche Dekanate der Bayerischen Landeskirche," Sept. 10, 1946, EZA, 2/321, 85–90 (both sides). See also Ericksen, "Hiding the Nazi Past," 144–46.
22. Bishop Alois Hudal, a German working in the Vatican during these years, became particularly notorious for his willingness to give false identities and falsified papers to virtually any postwar German who wanted to flee to South America. See, for example, Ernst Klee,

Persilscheine und falsche Pässe: Wie die Kirchen den Nazis halfen (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), esp. 32–50. See also Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York, 2007), 563.

23. See Robert P. Ericksen, “Wilhelm Niemöller and the Historiography of the Kirchenkampf,” in Manfred Gailus and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten: Konturen, Entwicklungslinien und Umbrüche eines Wertbildes* (Göttingen, 2005), 433–51.

24. For a discussion of this and other statistics, see Wilhelm Niemöller, “The Niemöller Archive,” in Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit, 1974), 51–53.

25. Wilhelm Niemöller, *Die Evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich: Handbuch des Kirchenkampfes* (Bielefeld, 1956), 46–7.

26. Wilhelm Niemöller, *Bekennende Kirche in Westfalen* (Bielefeld, 1952), 5.

27. Wilhelm Niemöller, *Wort und Tat im Kirchenkampf: Beiträgen zur neuesten Kirchengeschichte* (Bielefeld, 1969), 15.

28. *Ibid.*, 34.

29. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary* (New York, 1970).

30. For an explanation of the argument that even Bonhoeffer retained certain supercessionist and hence anti-Jewish assumptions typical of his era, see Kenneth Barnes, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler’s Persecution of the Jews,” in Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, eds., *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis, 1999), 110–28.

31. See Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York, 1978).

32. See, for example, interviews conducted by Pierre Savage in his film about Le Chambon, *Weapons of the Spirit* (1987).

33. See, for example, Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (Oxford, 1987). See also Patrick Henry’s recent assessment concerning rescue at Le Chambon, *We Only Knew Men: The Rescue of Jews in France During the Holocaust* (Washington, DC, 2007).

34. See James Bentley, *Martin Niemöller 1892–1984* (New York, 1984), 41, and Jürgen Schmidt, *Martin Niemöller im Kirchenkampf* (Hamburg, 1971), 47–50, and 91, n. 127. See also my treatment in “Wilhelm Niemöller and the ... Kirchenkampf,” 433–4, 444, and 451, n. 41.

35. Wolfgang Gerlach, *Als die Zeugen Schwiegen: Bekennende Kirche und die Juden* (Berlin, 1987). This book appeared in English, translated by Victoria Barnett, under the title, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews* (Lincoln, NE, 2000). The Dibelius quotation is found on p. 14.

36. See, for example, Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, "German Churches and the Holocaust," in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (London, 2004), 296–318.
37. John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933–1945* (New York, 1968).
38. Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, 1985).
39. Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (Oxford, 1992), and *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (New York, 2000).
40. Gerhard Besier and Gerhard Sauter, *Wie Christen ihre Schuld bekennen: Die Stuttgarter Erklärung 1945* (Göttingen, 1985); Gerhard Besier and Gerhard Ringshausen, eds., *Bekennnis, Widerstand, Martyrium: Von Barmen 1934 bis Plötzensee 1944* (Göttingen, 1986); and Gerhard Besier, "Selbstreinigung" unter britischer Besatzungsherrschaft: *Die Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers und ihr Landesbischof Marahrens 1945–1947* (Göttingen, 1986).
41. Gerhard Lindemann, "Typisch jüdisch": *Die Stellung der Ev.-luth. Landeskirche Hannovers zu Antijudaismus, Judenfeindschaft, und Antisemitismus 1919–1945* (Berlin, 1998).
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44. Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, 1996).
45. Beth Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism* (New Haven, 2002).
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47. See my *Theologians under Hitler*, ch. 2.
48. Paul Althaus, *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen, 1934), 5.
49. See, for example, Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

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