

RESPONSES OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT TRADITIONS

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The Challenge to Faith

All Christians living within the Germany of the Third Reich faced, whether they recognised it or not, a challenge to their faith. National Socialism was, in its aspirations and in practice, much more like a rival religious creed than a political dogma. It offered a view of history in which the new German Empire and its 'Aryan' peoples would fulfil a mystic destiny. It had its satanic enemies, the Jews, its own religious language of blood and fire and sacred liturgies and ceremonies. The language and concepts of paganism were intermingled with those of Christianity and the Nazi Party espoused a public campaign for family values and the defeat of atheism and communism. To many Christians, mainstream and minority, National Socialism appeared, at first sight, to offer Germany an opportunity for moral renewal. Nevertheless, within a short time, many would receive a direct challenge to their faith and their leaders would need either to articulate a stand or to negotiate a safe harbour. Members of the minority churches were often amongst the first to face up to this challenge.

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The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators as a central act of state during the Second World War; as night descended, millions of other peoples were swept into this net of death.

*Report to the President,
President's Commission on the
Holocaust.*

The Other Christians

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Germany was already home to a number of religious groups standing alongside the majority Catholic and Protestant churches, although their numbers represented a very small percentage of the population. Such groups ranged from branches of the European Evangelical Free Churches, the Baptists and Methodists, to a large number of small groups, many of them American in origin, like the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Christian Scientists and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Free Churches

Whilst there were differences within the highest ranks of the Nazi party about what attitude should be taken towards the Catholic and Protestant churches, there were even more immediate questions to be asked about the Free Churches and the sects. There was some suspicion in Party ranks about the international connections of the Free Churches and their various evangelical alliances, yet

members were believed to be largely loyal, patriotic and conservative in their values. Whilst, as with all sections of society, there were those who made an individual moral and practical stand against the regime, the leadership of the Free Churches managed to negotiate the survival of their institutions. By minimising their European links and by quiet allegiance they were able to escape serious attention from the Gestapo to whom they presented no particular challenges.

Minority Christian Religious Groups

There was more unanimity within the higher ranks of the Nazi Party about what should be done with the American based 'sects'. They were seen as potentially very dangerous, offering a focus for internationalism, pacifism, communism and other anti-German attitudes and actions. More importantly, many of these groups make extensive use of the language of the Hebrew Scriptures and therefore could be seen as pro-Jewish and Zionist. The Gestapo was therefore ordered to draw up a catalogue of 'dangerous sects' and to set about investigating their activities. Such investigations led, in most cases, to a ban on their activities, starting as early as 1934, and a clear policy decision was made to close down all such groups speedily and finally.

Survival Strategies

Members of these minority Christian groups therefore faced an immediate challenge to their beliefs and to the future of their religious work. Many had members, like the two major churches and the Free Churches who, as patriotic Germans, had fought in the First World War and who supported the Nazi campaign against atheism and communism. None had positioned themselves as critics of the new regime and its policies. Once the challenge came, however, they were under an intense spotlight and, having few friends and many critics from within the ranks of the major churches and the Party, were isolated and vulnerable. In the new context they had a number of stark choices.

- * Members could leave Germany and continue their work in a safer context.
- * Groups could submit to the ban and cease to meet and work as a religious community.
- * Beliefs and practices could be changed in line with Nazi teachings, either for reasons of survival or from conviction, or a mixture of both. Whilst this did not guarantee freedom of worship, it clearly made this more easily negotiable and ensured that there was at least a chance that the group might be able to continue its important work in German society.
- * They could decide that it was important to continue their missionary work and meetings without any compromise and at whatever cost to the group and to individual members and their families.

'We may or may not share their beliefs, but the fact that the vast majority were willing to face imprisonment and death rather than, as they saw it, deny their God, did make a difference.'

For Reflection

If I had been a member of a Free Church or minority Christian group in Germany in 1933, could I reasonably have been expected to see that Nazism was in conflict with my beliefs?

What can we learn from the story of the Jehovah's Witnesses about the power of refusing to compromise in the face of evil?

If I had been living as a Christian in Nazi Germany, what would have been my concerns and what would I have done?

What obligation do we have to stand up for people whose beliefs we do not share?

THE CHURCHES AND NAZI PERSECUTION



Bochum, Germany. Five of the Kusserow children play outdoors at a family picnic in 1932. The children wear garlands of flowers on their heads.

For Further Reading

The video and work book *'Stand Firm'* tells the story of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich. It is a Jehovah's Witness publication but involves a large number of independent scholars and is an objective and scholarly account.

'Jehovah's Witnesses', a booklet on the Witness story produced by the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC.

C.E.King *'The Jehovah's Witnesses'* in *'A Mosaic of Victims'* edited by Michael Berenbaum, New York: University Press, 1990.

B.Bailey *'A Quaker Couple in Nazi Germany'*. York, England: William Sessions Limited, 1994.

What Happened

Many of the very small groups were simply closed down and ceased to operate within Germany. For the relatively larger organisations, however, it became essential to articulate rapidly what it meant to be a member of that group living within secular society and what the group was and was not prepared to sacrifice in order to continue in existence. The history and theology of each of the groups influenced these decisions. Responses ranged from the more sophisticated, like that of the Mormon Church which was able to point to the legality of the Nazi regime and to the positive elements of its social and welfare policies, to attempts to buy time. Christian Scientists, for example, only found themselves at serious risk after America's entry into the war. Seventh Day Adventists offered an immediate public statement of nationalism and support for the Party. They implemented changes to remove the language of the Hebrew Scriptures from their liturgy and arranged to co-operate with the state in their extensive church welfare and medical care schemes. Most of the groups were able to welcome elements of National Socialism and to persuade the authorities that they did not present the immediate threat that had been feared.

The Nazis had intended to close all sects and undoubtedly could have done so, but there emerged a series of pragmatic compromises in which the sects either voiced support for the Party or gave practical aid where they could, or went quietly underground. Whilst their activities were carefully monitored, no immediate action was taken against them. Their ultimate fate, like that of the Free Churches, once the war had been won, was different. For the time being, they had purchased, one way or another, a right to an uneasy co-existence with the Nazi state.

From within the minority groups who managed, one way or another, to purchase a stay of execution, there emerged individuals or groups of individuals who faced arrest and even death for making a personal stance, particularly against Nazi racial policies. Members of the schismatic 'Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement' refused, for example, all compromise and faced bitter persecution. Christian Scientists and Quakers, amongst others, found themselves in prisons or camps for their 'anti-Nazi activities' and particularly for having given assistance to Jewish people. Three young Mormons were involved in active resistance to Nazi policies. They were arrested for their activities and one of them was beheaded. Such individuals were undoubtedly influenced by their religious beliefs, but it was as individuals that they took action whilst the religious institutions to which they belonged were largely silent or even compliant with the public face of National Socialism.

The Case of the Jehovah's Witnesses

The Jehovah's Witness story stands out as radically different in this context of confusion, political naïveté and compromise. This group made the decision from a very early date to ignore the ban on

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their missionary work and meetings and to continue to preach and meet. In their literature they publicly identified the evils of the regime, including what was happening to the Jews. The consequences were severe as members met the full force of police and Gestapo brutality. Initially imprisoned in civil prisons, by 1935 they were amongst the first Germans to be thrown into the labour camps. By 1945 there were Witnesses in all the major concentration camps across the Europe of the Third Reich. Here they were subject to special tortures and humiliations, whilst maintaining their faith and refusing even the smallest compromises, even when such could buy their freedom from the camp.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they are living in the 'last days' and are witnesses to Jehovah here on earth. Whilst tax paying, law abiding and following a highly moral code of behaviour, they consider themselves citizens not of any 'earthly' state but of God's kingdom and soldiers in his holy army. Thus they would not enlist in Hitler's army or offer the Hitler salute as a sign of Nazi citizenship. They continued to 'witness' in their door-to-door missionary work and to meet and share bible readings and teachings.

Such a response to National Socialism hit at the very heart of what that movement professed. National Socialism claimed the hearts and minds all its citizens and it demanded a loyalty beyond political compliance. The Witness resistance and their continued and obstinate refusal to bow the knee, whatever the personal cost, was something the system could neither understand nor tolerate. Thus it threw at this tiny movement, with a mere 20,000 members out of a population of over 60 million, the full brute force of the regime. Brutality was no answer in the face of the Witnesses' faith and their work continued, in and out of the camps, even as Witness children were taken away to be brought up in Nazi homes and families were split by imprisonment and death.

All Christians in Nazi Germany had choices not open to Jewish citizens. It is very dangerous to make judgments, in retrospect, about the choices made by the religious minority groups and about the information and understanding available to them at that time. The Witness story demonstrates, however, that it was possible for even a very small and politically powerless group of people to make a firm stand against what they quickly identified as evil. Witnesses were strengthened and informed in their behaviour by their beliefs and their membership of the movement, but it is important to acknowledge that each Witness faced their own challenge as an individual and made their own choices. We may or may not share their beliefs, but the fact that the vast majority were willing to face imprisonment and death rather than, as they saw it, deny their God, did make a difference. It continues to make a difference to our analysis of the difficult questions facing Christians during the Third Reich.



Helen Gotthold with her children Gerd and Gisela. Gotthold was a Jehovah's Witness and held anti-Nazi views. She was convicted, condemned to death and beheaded in the Ploetzensee concentration camp, December 8 1944. Gerd and Gisela survived the war.

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