Christian Churches

When Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in early 1933, many church groups in Germany, both Catholic and Protestant, supported the new government. They did so for several reasons. First, the Nazis claimed that they would support "positive Christianity," and thus won the backing of many Christian groups. Second, many Christians, especially Catholics, were violently opposed to Soviet Communism and its anti-religion ideology, and they believed that the Nazis would suppress the spread of Communism. Third, many Christians supported the Nazis' anti-Jewish stance. For nearly 2,000 years, Christians had been persecuting Jews due to their belief that Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus; because of their ingrained notion that Jews deserved to be punished for failing in their role as the original chosen people; and because of the idea that Christianity had replaced Judaism.

However, soon the Nazis began showing their true colors when it came to religion: they started interfering in various church matters, such as religious education. The idea that the government was free to decide what the church would teach was unacceptable to both Catholic and Protestant leaders. The Catholic Church tried to solve the problem by making an official agreement with the Nazis. In July 1933 the Vatican's secretary of state, Eugenio Pacelli, signed a "Reich Concordat" with Nazi Germany, which stated that the Vatican recognized the political legitimacy of Nazi Germany, in exchange for a guarantee that the Nazis would not interfere with Catholic institutions and religious schools. Just six years later, that very same man who signed the pact—Eugenio Pacelli—was elected Pope Pius XII in Rome.

The German Protestant church dealt with the problem of Nazi interference into its affairs differently: it split. Supporters of the Nazis, called "German Christians," were prepared to follow the Nazis' orders at all costs, and even demanded that all Jewish elements be removed from Christian prayers and rituals. Opponents of the Nazis created a breakaway church, called the Confessing Church. Members of this new church vehemently opposed the Nazi regime, but they did not challenge the Nazis for passing anti-Jewish

legislation and were more interested in saving Jews who had converted to Christianity, rather than all Jews. Only a small group of Confessing Christians made active efforts to hide Jews or help them escape the country. Moderates in the Protestant church may have opposed the Nazis' actions, but they wanted to avoid a fight, so they were willing to compromise with the German government. Some Protestants, such as the bishop of Wurttemberg, Theophil Wurm, supported the "German Christians" at first, but turned away from the Nazis in late 1933, when Nazi efforts to impose their worldview on society grew stronger. An expression of this was the Nazi attempt to put church institutions under their control and subject them to Nazi ideology. At that point, Wurm joined other prominent Protestants in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller, all of who were later imprisoned for their opposition to the Nazis.

In general, the Catholic Church's attitude towards the Nazi persecution of Jews during the Holocaust was rather ambivalent. The official agreement made between the Vatican and the Reich in mid-1933 made it impossible for large groups of German Catholics to get together and protest the Nazis' activities. As a rule, the church was more interested in protecting itself and its members than in saving Jews. Thus, the church was silent both during the issuing of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and during the massive *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938.

Pope Pius XII himself was mixed in his attitude towards the Jews. Soon after his appointment in 1939, he procured 3,000 visas to Catholic Brazil for Jews who had been baptized. However, a year later he ignored requests to intervene on behalf of Jews in Spain and Lithuania who were in danger of being sent back to Germany. In addition, the Pope refused to directly condemn the Nazis in his pronouncements. It is possible that the Pope was not willing to speak out publicly in defense of the Jews, but supported the rescue of Jews from behind the scenes. Catholic clergy in Italy played a very large role in hiding Italian Jews, while representatives of the Vatican stationed in Slovakia, Hungry, and Romania did their best to pressure the governments of those countries to stop deportation of Jews to extermination camps, and in fact, these efforts led to the rescue of some Jews.

In other countries, the Christian reaction to Nazi persecution of Jews was also mixed. In France, many Catholic clergy were held back by the traditional idea that they were not obligated to help the Jews, classically considered to be an inferior group, and their hatred of foreigners, which many of the Jews in France were. However, some younger clergy decided that helping the Jews was a natural part of resisting the German occupiers, so they and their constituents helped hide many Jews, especially children, and organized escape routes to Spain and Switzerland.

The Reformed (Calvinist) churches in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Hungary were also more helpful to the Jewish victims of the Nazis. Throughout their history, members of these churches had also been victims of persecution, so they identified with the Jews' plight, and were more willing to come to the rescue. One notable example was the French Protestant village of Le Chambon-Sur-Lignon, whose inhabitants protected some 3,000--5,000 Jews from the Nazis at the encouragement of their pastor, Andre Trocme. In addition, the Lutheran churches of Norway Sweden, and Denmark loudly protested the persecution and extermination of European Jewry.

After the war, both the Catholic and Protestant churches admitted the fact that Christians had not done enough to help the Jews during the Holocaust. This recognition has led them to rethink Christianity's attitude towards and relationship with Judaism and Jews.