

The Role of the Churches: Compliance and Confrontation

Victoria J. Barnett

The list of “bystanders” – those who declined to challenge the Third Reich in any way – that emerges from any study of the Holocaust is long and depressing. Few organizations, in or outside Nazi Germany, did much to resist Nazism or aid its victims. Assisting European Jews was not a high priority of the Allied governments as they sought to defeat Hitler militarily. The courageous acts of individual rescuers and resistance members proved to be the exception, not the norm.

To a great extent, this inertia defined the organized Christian community as well. Churches throughout Europe were mostly silent as Jews were persecuted, deported and murdered. In Nazi Germany in September 1935, there were a few Christians in the Protestant Confessing Church who demanded that their Church take a public stand in defence of the Jews. Their efforts, however, were overruled by Church leaders who wanted to avoid any conflict with the Nazi regime.

Three main factors shaped the behavior of the Christian Churches during the Nazi reign of terror in Germany and abroad. The first was the theological and doctrinal anti-Judaism that existed in parts of the Christian tradition. Long before 1933, this anti-Judaism – ranging from latent prejudice to the virulent diatribes of people like Martin Luther – lent legitimacy to the racial antisemitism that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

The second factor was the Churches’ historical role in creating “Christendom” – the Western European culture that, since the era of the Roman emperor Constantine, had been explicitly and deliberately “Christian.” The Churches’ advocacy of a “Christian culture” led to a process that theologian Miroslav Volf, in another context, has described as the “sacralization of cultural identity”: dominant, positive values were seen as “Christian” ones, while developments viewed negatively (such as secularism and Marxism) were attributed to “Jewish” influences. Moreover, particularly in the German

Evangelical Church (the largest Protestant church in Germany), the allegiance to the concept of Christendom was linked to a strong nationalism, symbolized by German Protestantism's "Throne and Altar" alliance with state authority.

The third factor was the Churches' understanding of their institutional role. While most Christian religious leaders in Germany welcomed the end of the Weimar Republic and the resurgence of nationalism, they became increasingly uneasy about their institutions' future in what was clearly becoming a totalitarian state. Moreover, some leading Nazis were overtly anti-Christian. While wanting to retain their prominent place in society, the churches in Nazi Germany opposed any state control of their affairs. Thus, the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches sought to maintain some degree of independence by entering into certain arrangements with the Nazi regime. The 1933 concordat, signed by representatives of the Nazi regime and the Vatican, ostensibly secured independence for Catholic schools and other Catholic institutions in Nazi Germany. The Protestant churches behaved cautiously, avoiding public confrontation and negotiating privately with Nazi authorities, in the hope that this would ensure institutional independence from direct Nazi control. Throughout Hitler's Germany, bishops and other Christian religious leaders deliberately avoided antagonizing Nazi officials. When Christian clergymen and Christian women deplored Nazi policies, they often felt constrained to oppose those policies in a muted fashion. Even in the Protestant Confessing Church (the church group in Germany that was most critical of Nazism), there was little support for official public criticism of the Nazi regime, particularly when it came to such central and risky issues as the persecution of Jews.

The role of anti-Judaism in Germany's Churches during the Nazi era was a complicated one. Throughout the 1930s, there was ample evidence of antisemitism in many sermons and in articles that appeared in German church publications. Some church leaders proudly announced that they were antisemites. Others warned their colleagues against any public show of support for the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. Christian antisemitism often complemented other factors – notably, the strong nationalism in the German Protestant churches. The most extreme example of this combination of

antisemitism and nationalism was the so-called German Christian Movement, a Protestant group that embraced Nazism and tried to Nazify Christianity by suppressing the Old Testament, revising liturgics and hymns, and promoting Jesus as an Aryan hero who embodied the ideals of the new Germany.

It must be said that the churches' theological attitudes about Jews did not always take the form of anti-Jewish diatribes or other kinds of explicit antisemitism. Often they manifested themselves in a determination to convert Jews, and so Nazi policies confronted the Christian churches with an unresolvable theological problem: in a society that was determined to eradicate the Jews, the Christian Gospel claimed that the Jews were God's chosen people and should be the special objects of Christian proselytization. This led to deep divisions among German clergy about what they really believed and what they were supposed to do in their new situation.

During the Nazi era, these various influences essentially paralyzed the churches and prevented them from facing the challenges posed by Nazism. The German churches stumbled, and they stumbled badly. Church leaders spent a great deal of time delineating a "viable" position: one that would conform to Christian doctrine, prevent their church from dividing into opposing factions, and avoid antagonizing the Nazi authorities. In any examination of the German churches' public statements from this era, what is most striking is their painstaking attempt to say neither too much nor too little about what is happening around them. This ruled out any consistent or firm response to the Nazis' persecution of Jews and others. This institutional inaction gave individual Christians throughout Germany an alibi for passivity. More tragically, those individual Christians who did express solidarity with the persecuted Jews – such as the Catholic priest Bernhard Lichtenberg and the Protestant deaconess Marga Meusel – received no public (and little private) support from their respective churches.

Energetic debates took place within the German churches about where to stand firm against Hitler's regime and where to compromise, when to speak out and when to remain silent. Ecumenical documents show that there were Christian leaders inside and outside Germany who agonized about what they could do to stop Nazism and help its victims. The historical complexities

suggested by these factors should never lead us to condone the churches' failures during this period; they can, however, help us to understand the specific nature of those failures so that we may learn from them.

Perhaps at the heart of those failures was the fact that the churches, especially in Nazi Germany, sought to act, as institutions tend to do, in their own narrowly defined "best" interests. There was little desire on the part of the churches for self-sacrifice or heroism, and much emphasis on "pragmatic" and "strategic" measures that would supposedly protect their institutional autonomy. This public institutional circumspection, and a fatal lack of insight, are the aspects of the churches' behavior during the Nazi era that are so damning in retrospect. The minutes of German Protestant synodal meetings in 1942 reveal how oblivious the participants were to what was happening in the world around them. While innocent victims throughout Europe were being brutally murdered, Christian leaders were debating what points of doctrine and policy were tenable. This is especially haunting, of course, because the Christian clergy and laity never thought of their respective churches as mere institutions, but as religious bodies called to witness to certain values, including love of neighbor, the sanctity of life and the power of moral conscience.

Reflection on the churches' failure to challenge Nazism should prompt us to ponder all the others – individuals, governments and institutions – which passively acquiesced to the tyranny of the Third Reich. Even the wisest and most perceptive of them, it seems, failed to develop adequate moral and political responses to Nazi genocide and to recognize that the barbarism of Hitler's regime demanded something new of them.

Ultimately, the churches' lapses during the Nazi era were lapses of vision and determination. Protestant and Catholic religious leaders, loyal to creeds professing that love can withstand and conquer evil, were unable or unwilling to defy one of the great evils in human history. For this reason, the Holocaust will continue to haunt the Christian churches for a very, very long time to come.

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Irena steinfeldt ,*The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 55-58