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German Christians

A heterogeneous group of pastors, theologians, and laity within German Protestantism at large, the German Christians represented antisemitic, anti-democratic, militant, and nationalistic ideals. They sought to connect Christianity to National Socialism and thus saw the leader of divine grace and savior of Christianity itself in Adolf Hitler (1889–1945). With the goal of creating a unique German Christianity based on a conceptualization of the German *Volk* as the chosen of God, the German Christians imagined themselves in direct and stark contrast to Judaism. This German-Christian Protestantism typifies a German and Aryan exclusivity that finds its roots in German-Protestant concepts of the late 19th century. Toward the end of the 1920s, various groups of German Christians arose within this wider impulse, binding themselves to the German-Christian Faith Movement on the initi-

ative of and with support from the German National Socialist Workers Party (NSDAP). The church elections of July 1933 brought this movement to power in most of the national Protestant churches. Through Reich Bishop and Hitler confidant Ludwig Müller (1883–1945), the party then sought to establish the foundation of an imperial church by undercutting national churches according to the *Führer* principle. The NSDAP also supported the German-Christian Faith Movement in their efforts to exclude all Christians with Jewish heritage. Even further, it advocated the preservation of a pure Aryan-German race against all supposedly foreign physical and mental influences and also attempted to remove all Jewish references and terms from the Bible. The German Christians saw the German *Volk* as an elect people of God, conceptualizing themselves, in turn, as the heart and soul of the Third Reich and interpreting Christian revelation as decisive for the existence of the German *Volk* itself. The concomitant preference for racial separation meant a permutation of divine will for the German Christians, whereby humanistic thought was rejected as contrary to divine creation and nature. Consequently, in imagining such racial distinction as the divine will for creation, the German Christians conformed Christian faith to the ideology of National Socialism. Race, for them, was the basis of life, interpreted religiously as well. As just one example, the sacrament of baptism was no longer intended to serve as the forgiveness of sin for the attainment of holiness; rather, holiness came through acceptance into the German ethnic community, which baptism allegedly symbolized. The Lord's Supper, moreover, became a means of solidifying the common fellowship of the German-Christian community.

Following the church elections of 1933, the NSDAP ended its active support of the German-Christian Faith Movement. At the same time, alongside various internal conflicts, public support of the Berlin district representative, Reinhold Krause (1893–1980) of the German Christians, brought about a collapse of the Faith Movement into rival German-Christian groups after his rejection of the OT and defamation of Paul as a Jewish theologian. Beginning in the mid 1930s, the radical Thuringian German Christians' Church Movement was able to establish itself as the leading force among the German Christians across the empire. The Confessing Church arose as a counter movement in 1934, responding not only to that complete subordination of church to state which most of these groups demanded but also to the abnegation of the OT as canonical Scripture, which certain factions of German Christians stipulated.

Nevertheless, all German-Christian groups shared a common goal: the creation of a Christian church open only to Aryans, in accordance with reli-

gious and racial separation as ordained by God. The term Aryan was deployed in opposition to Jewish, whereby the German Christians considered Jewish anything and everything that countered their own religious and political conceptions. Only in fits and starts did they develop their own theology, and they refused any rigid church doctrine: instead, they propagated a Christianity of deeds. They projected their religious perspective onto National Socialism, and they sought to implement the term “positive Christianity” into practice, a phrase from Article 24 of the NSDAP’s 1920 party platform. For many protagonists, religious renewal of the German *Volk* and elimination of all Jewish elements from Christianity seemed possible only in the combination of Protestantism and National Socialism. Such removal affected even baptized persons of Jewish heritage, since they remained racial Jews according to German-Christian interpretation: 1936 saw the prohibition of baptizing so-called non-Aryans in the regional churches controlled by the German Christians, and their complete exclusion from said churches came with the antisemitic pogroms of November 1938. Towards the end of that year, in the wake of the November pogroms, representatives of the Thuringian German Christians’ Church Movement resolved once more to promote the “de-judification” of Protestantism in Germany. Eleven Protestant regional churches committed to founding their own church institute in an announcement on April 4, 1939. Church governments of the Prussian Union – from Saxony, Hesse-Nassau, Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg, Rhineland, Palatinate, Anhalt, Oldenburg, Lübeck along with the Austrian Protestant Church – thus stood alongside the regional church of Thuringia. The immediate establishment of the Institute for the Study and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life on the Wartburg in Eisenach (aka the “Eisenach Institute”) was to advance and, with the use of academic methods, buttress the assimilation of previous theological work and churchly projects into the German Christians’ National Socialism.

Already before the Institute’s foundation, however, the German Christians had made other attempts to liberate the Bible, as they saw it, from Jewish influences, taking certain portions of the NT and rewriting them in line with their own interpretive preferences. For the German Christians, the Luther Bible would no longer do since it rendered Christianity’s own Jewish heritage much too starkly and since the question of race would ultimately enter any biblical interpretation. Reich Bishop Müller loosened Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from its historical and religious context and interpreted it instead on the basis of National Socialism’s blood and soil ideology. That same year, in 1936, Bremen bishop Heinrich Weidemann (1895–1976) published a new translation of the Gospel of John with

all references to the OT and Jesus’ Jewish background removed in their entirety. Weidemann further stylized Jesus as a heroic proponent of the *Führer* principle, the paragon of National Socialism. Through Müller and Weidemann, then, racial conceptions and Nationalist-Socialist terminology found their way into the Bible as early as the mid-1930s. The OT remained a point of contention among the German Christians until the very end, for many saw it as nothing other than a Jewish book of law. With OT severed from NT, the former proved neither necessary for salvation nor fundamentally meaningful anymore. Other German Christians, such as OT scholar Johannes Hempel (1891–1964), advocated retention of the OT given its ability to illustrate how religion can create a people. Moreover, the OT putatively demonstrated Judaism’s fall from God and thus served as a warning for the German *Volk* to obey the national will of God. The OT was thus reinterpreted as an antisemitic book critical of Judaism itself.

Discrimination of Jews in Germany intensified even more after the November pogroms, and the National Socialists began to deport Jews into concentration camps, aiming to make German cities “Jew-free.” Through German-Christian support of the National-Socialist ideology, political changes had an immediate impact on the German-Christian faith, which was finally to become “Jew-free” as well. The Eisenach Institute hence initiated a project in 1939 that was to modify the NT Bible in accordance with newer socio-political exigencies. Since portions of the Bible did not correspond with the worldview of National Socialism, the entire OT along with Revelation and its Jewish apocalypticism were no longer incorporated into the German-Christian NT published in 1940 and entitled *The Message of God*. In addition to updating the Bible’s antiquated language for the laity, this edition was to have its truth content evaluated and – when scientific research deemed it necessary – questionable passages rewritten. Such revisions sought to extricate Jesus’ true message from the Gospels, for Jewish-Christian influences had supposedly concealed that original message whose accessibility was to be restored for the German *Volk* anew. Reformulation of individual passages came with subtlety. Expressed in John 4:9 as “You are a Jew,” for example, Jesus’ relationship to Judaism was to be detached from any concrete Jewish ancestry, and thus the phrase was replaced with a simple statement of provenance: “You come from Judea.” In this way, the Bible aided in separating Jesus from Judaism; for the German Christians, Jesus was no Jew. The tradition of Jesus’ circumcision, told in Luke 2:21, disappeared completely, since a non-Jewish (and, where possible, Aryan) Jesus would not have received his name by a Jewish ritual. While all passages potentially pairing Jesus with Judaism were re-

vised, those passages which either promoted antisemitic stereotypes or could be interpreted as Jesus combating Judaism were preserved: the declaration “Salvation comes from the Jews” (John 4:22) – certainly problematic for the German Christians – was replaced therefore with “The Jews are our misfortune,” a statement quite popular among antisemites. The Gospel of Matthew, whose understanding of Christianity the German-Christian ideology considered far too Jewish, required extraction of Jesus from the prophetic context, thereby dissolving the connection with the OT. Beyond rewriting the Gospels, this work also portrayed Jesus’ activities in terms that corresponded to the ideology of National Socialism, phrases like “his fight,” “his victory,” or “the fight in Judea.” As for Paul’s Jewish ancestry, equally problematic for the German Christians, it was simply repressed, though plans did develop to remove Paul from German-Christian theology altogether given his ostensible advocacy for a Jewish Christianity. This “dejudified” Bible of the German Christians’ Church Movement, which totaled a circulation of ca. 200,000 copies, received official recognition in the regional churches of Saxony and Thuringia; in the regional church of Transylvania/Romania, which the German Christians dominated, *The Message of God* was the mandatory text for religion classes, while reading the OT in church service was prohibited altogether.

Alongside restructuring canonical texts, from the late 1930s onward the German Christians sought to prove an opposition between Christianity and Judaism by scientific means, be it interpretation of the Gospels or emphasis of certain passages, as with John 8:42–44, for instance. Through historical-critical methods and a biblical interpretation inclined to antisemitism, German-Christian ideologue and Professor for “Völkische Theologie” and NT Walter Grundmann (1906–1976) construed the Gospel of John as a text polemical against Judaism: therein lay a clear opposition between Jesus and Judaism, with Jesus being the greatest opponent of Jews. Likewise, for Grundmann it was not through a Jewish Christianity but rather one influenced by Greeks that Jesus’ message gained currency in the world, whereby Christianity’s Jewish ancestry was once again renounced. Grundmann further believed he could demonstrate Jesus’ non-Jewish ancestry. He argued that the Galilee of Jesus’ birth may have been occupied by Jews, but its inhabitants were converted only by force. Accordingly, the population’s ethnic heritage was non-Jewish; even more, Aryan features appeared alongside other non-Jewish ethnicities. Grundmann also used the genealogical traditions of Luke and Matthew to prove the non-Jewish descent of Mary and Joseph: he interpreted these gospels’ divergent accounts of Jesus’ forebears as evidence of a concealed non-Jewish grandfather. Already circulating for some time, the Pantera leg-

end, which held that Joseph’s father bore the epithet Pantera, supposedly revealed that non-Jewish inhabitants of Galilee were forced to convert at the time of Jesus’ grandfather, thereby remaining non-Jews ethnically. In this way, not only did the German Christians deploy a constructed biblical antagonism to Judaism in order to transform Jesus into the champion of a “Jew-free” national church, but they also availed themselves of arguments from renowned theologians to deny Jesus’ Jewish ancestry altogether.

Beyond substantial dissemination of the German-Christian Bible throughout regional churches, a corresponding biblical interpretation made its way into religious instruction through extensive seminars organized for pastors nationwide. The social recognition of professors who participated in German-Christian academic work together with their public presentations during lecture tours helped advance German-Christian ideas all the more, which were now supported by science. The Bible was not a fixed canon for the German Christians, nor was it an essential book for faith. Instead, they exploited select parts of the NT to legitimize their own religio-political perspective and promote their antisemitism. The organizational structure of the various German-Christian groups were completely outlawed with the collapse of the Third Reich; nevertheless, previous members quickly found positions in Protestant churches or continued to work as biblical exegetes even after 1945. The German Christians may have ended organizationally, but their biblical interpretation and concomitant antisemitic stereotypes persisted in German post-war theology, though surreptitiously articulated and without a National-Socialist framework.

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