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The Protestant Churches During the Nazi Persecution
and the Holocaust

Alice L. Eckardt1

The prescribed title is nicely ambiguous insofar as it does not identify the object of Nazi persecution. Were the churches victims of persecution? If so, how much, and on what grounds? That is one question we must consider. Another asks what the churches did or did not do regarding the persecution of others by the Nazi state, and in particular about the persecution and murder of Jews (since that is the basic meaning of the term "Holocaust"). Both these questions apply to churches outside the Third Reich as well as within, but since it was in Germany itself that the churches first faced the test of National Socialism and a totalitarian state, and since that testing persisted throughout the twelve years of the regime, and since the testing included the churches' knowledge of the horrendous crimes of its government, we need to consider the situation there first and in greater detail than elsewhere. Moreover, there was a difference for Christians in Germany as against those in other countries because the issue of national loyalty was primary in the first case but usually was not in the second.

Was the church ^{itself} actually intended to be the next target and victim of the National Socialist regime after the war was won, as most German church members ~~or students of the Nazi era~~ have contended, (at least a few years ago when I and my husband were asking questions)? If so, what did that mean for individual Christians -- bishops, superintendents, pastors, and laity?

the position of Jews and Christians, at least as ultimate victims, clearly is not accurate. Even had the National Socialist state decided on the total destruction of the churches as institutions, individual Christians could have evaded that fate by giving up or modifying their faith and becoming good Nazis or "German Christians" (as many in fact did during the twelve years of the Third Reich). That is what the Party hoped for since 95% of the German people officially belonged to the Protestant and Catholic Churches.² (Only Christians who proved to be too "Jewish" in their Weltanschauung were considered dangerous enough to put in concentration camps and/or be executed.) But Jews could do nothing to evade annihilation; from the perspective of National Socialist ideology, they were, as we know, inherently and incorrigibly tainted and must therefore be "exterminated" (to use the Nazis' own terminology). The very fact that Hitler could see some short-term function in the churches' existence and was willing to consider strategic factors in dealing with them underlines the fundamental difference in his presuppositions and aims regarding church members and Jews.

Most churches and their leaders at the time, on the whole, did not indicate by their words or actions that they believed they were in line for destruction, (4) particularly in the early years which were the crucial ones for any effective resistance. Instead, the churches sought to demonstrate their genuine solidarity with the German nation and Volk, and to work out a place for themselves within the country's new era.

Hitler himself was somewhat vague on the ultimate fate of

the churches (although he showed disdain for the Protestant church, while holding some reluctant admiration for the Roman Catholic church, especially the Jesuits). Within the Party there were widely differing views.

The term "church struggle" is widely used in consideration of the present subject. But the meaning of the term changed in the course of the years with which we are concerned, and there is some significance in those changes, as we will see.

The churches had six basic issues to resolve in their relation to the National Socialist movement and, after 1933, to its Government:

1. The question of the ideology of Nazism vis-a-vis Christian doctrine and theology. Could they be made compatible?

2. The independence of the institutional churches to teach, proclaim the Gospel, and carry out pastoral work (as against submission to directives from and control by the State).

3. The stand to be taken (or not taken) on matters of justice and inhumanity in general.

4. The position to be espoused with regard to Hitler's wars -- whether to support or oppose them or remain quiet on the subject.

5. The issue of whether the church's primary duty was to obey the Government or to take exception to it on behalf of duty to a higher power, namely, God or the gospel. (This basic question underlay all of the issues in fact.)

- Finally, 6. the stand to take -- or not to take -- regarding the Party's and State's ideology about and treatment of Jews, including at last the "Final Solution" (Endlosung).

In Germany Protestantism was primarily Lutheran, with Reformed and Lutheran-Reformed Union churches second. Though there was not the great multiplicity of denominations as in this country, the churches ^ewere nevertheless split up into at least 28 synods and branches. In considering how they dealt with the six issues, we find that there are five time periods within which the fundamental decision-making and crises occurred:

First, the 1920s to 1933 -- during which years National Socialism emerged and challenged other political parties and institutions -- including the churches-- for the people's commitment and devotion.

These churches were heirs of developments of the late-18th and 19th centuries that produced in the German states a counter-revolution as a reaction against anti-clericalism, against democracy, and against emancipation of Jews.³ Consequently, during the crucial decade of the 1920s the German Evangelical churches threw their weight on the side of the anti-democratic forces, since, as one pastor put it, "all efforts to make the State democratic are basically designed to dechristianize the Volk. We Christians remain reactionaries by God's grace."⁴

An even more serious problem was the further extension or modification of Luther's doctrine of the two realms. According to the doctrine, the state and the church were both divinely instituted, each with its own sphere of responsibility and primacy, the state's being that of responsibility for all secular matters relating to its subjects, and the church's, for all spiritual matters. The relationship between the two authorities was effected through their alliance ("Throne and Altar").

From the end of the 18th century a "broadstream of religious feeling with a pietistic colouring found its way into budding German patriotism," so much so that "'whole conceptual structures from pietism' were transferred directly into patriotism." The idea of a social contract between people and state was discarded, and the relationship was interpreted as a "community of love and faith," entry into which would provide "supreme fulfilment." Freedom was only freedom for the state. And, most significantly, death for the Fatherland was equated with Christ's redeeming death: "'Like the blood and wounds of Christ, the blood and wounds of the patriot bring salvation and victory, and as the dying Christ redeems Christianity [sic], so the dying patriot redeems the Fatherland.'"⁵ Dr. Klaus Scholder finds that this "nationalistic Protestantism [was] the distinctive expression of the character of the Protestant church and piety in the nineteenth century." And the concept of God "transformed so that he became "the Lord of history, . . . the Lord of peoples and kingdoms, the great God of battles. . . ." The German Volk were God's Volk, and therefore Volk, Volkstum, and its nation state were a "supreme order of creation." "Service of Volk and Fatherland [were] the service of God, and dedication to society [was] the supreme moral demand."⁶ At the 1927 Kirchentag of the Evangelical Churches this theme of obligation to uphold volkish solidarity by being a Volkskirche was the central affirmation.⁷ (The word "Evangelical"/Evangelisch must not be understood to mean "low" church or fundamentalism, but rather "under the Word" of God as set forth in the gospel.)

In 1933 most voices of the German Evangelical Church were raised

in celebration of the rebirth of the German nation and the decisive breakthrough in German history which Adolf Hitler and his Party represented.⁸ Only a few perceptive churchmen believed that the National Socialists would actually intervene to deny the churches their freedom. The majority position cut the ground from under their opposing Hitler's so-called "political" actions -- which actually meant almost anything outside the spiritual realm. Thus the churches did not oppose the Nazi ideology until or where it directly threatened their own ideology (theology). While it appears to us that all of Nazism did directly threaten everything the church should stand for, it did not appear so to most Protestants at the time.

On the issue of the Christian's and the church's primary loyalty, repeatedly church officials insisted that they were committed to obeying the state since it was one of the divine orders of creation intended by God to order and protect society. This continued to be true for the Confessing Church when it came into being, and was held by them right up until the end of the regime, even in its one most critical public statement about the Nazi state and its policies made in 1943 -- the Breslau declaration (about which I will say more shortly.) Only a handful of individual Protestants came to see in the years after 1933 that the duty to God's commandments required them to refuse obedience to this state and therefore to go into active resistance. An even smaller number of these few were prepared ultimately to pray for Germany's defeat and/or enter into plans for assassinating Hitler.

Why did some Evangelicals of Germany find it necessary to

form the Confessing Church? And what was its goal?

In the period from 1933 to Fall of 1935 the Party achieved power and proceeded to eliminate opposition, moved step by step to eliminate so-called non-Aryans from roles in society, including from the churches; and opposition within the Protestant churches began to arise.

Hitler stubbed his toe (as it were) on the fact that the churches had come to cherish the independence from government that the Weimar Constitution had bestowed on them, and were ready to defend it against the Nazi regime when it sought to make the church subservient to the Party and state. The extreme views advocated by the party of "German Christians" within the churches, and Hitler's use of them to gain control of the churches, further alerted some other Christians to the heresy that was being proposed and to resent such people being given exclusive power over the new centralized church. In short, the National Socialists "drove Protestant leaders into opposition."⁹ An additional influence for a number of clergy was Karl Barth's theology and his outspoken denunciation of Nazism.¹⁰

Hitler and his Party were convinced that the Protestant churches could easily be "coordinated" into a single Reich Church supporting the National Socialist government under a Reich Bishop, and they proceeded to act on that plan soon after taking power -- and appeared, at first, to have succeeded.¹¹ But it was just at the moment of the regime's apparent success that opposition began to gather within the churches. Over the summer and in November of '33 the German Christians, thinking themselves securely in control, overstepped themselves with huge public

celebrations. Their speakers called for the ejection from the churches of everybody with Jewish blood, the rejection of large parts of the Old Testament, and the removal of certain passages from the New Testament, especially the writings of the "Jew Rabbi" Paul. They affirmed that National Socialism was the doing of God's Will, the swastika was the secular form of Christ's cross, that German Christianity was not dependent on the Apostle's Creed but on the Party and the F hrer, and that the F^ührer was the herald of a new revelation.

As the theological significance of the controversy began to become evident, the previously used phrases "church dispute" or "church troubles" was replaced by "church struggle." For the emerging church opposition this meant a struggle against the German Christians within the church on behalf of having the church remain faithful to the Reformation confessions.

In many ways this period was the high point of the Protestant opposition, at least in numbers and initiative. For example, in September 1933 thirteen hundred pastors joined Martin Niemöller's Emergency Pastors' League to combat the German Christian heresy, and membership reached 7,000 in 1934. (After that it declined as a result of state and SS actions.) Then in May of '34 representatives of all the churches¹² met at Barmen as an all-German synod. Curiously enough, the police and Gestapo did not interfere either before or during the Synod, and this fact alone led many churchmen to continue to misinterpret the policies and goals of the regime. The Declaration adopted at Barmen with its six theses and six repudiations was fundamentally a theological declaration; its clear enunciation that "Jesus

Christ . . . is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death" was a positive stand against National Socialism as a political religion, and should have been heard as a strong word against any representation of Hitler as herald of a new. Further, it repudiated the idea that "the State . . . should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life"; that was "false doctrine." Such a statement would seem to have been a clear throwing down of the gauntlet to the regime's totalitarian claims.

Yet the Confessing Church "never left any doubt that [beyond the question of its confession and church self-government it held] unconditional political loyalty to F hrer and Reich."¹³ And it said not a word about the treatment of Jews, not even within the church. Dr. Burton Nelson grants that the Barmen Declaration certainly was not a "broadside against Adolf Hitler [or] National Socialism." And certainly it "was not a frontal attack on the malady of antisemitism nor a clarion call to join in solidarity with the sufferings, harassments and persecutions of the Jews." It was not even "a trumpet sounding for political action, involvement, and resistance to Nazi policies [or] a charter of political protest

In October '34 at the Synod at Dahlem the Confessing Church set up its own provisional church government and called on all congregations and pastors to obey only its instructions. This was probably "the only major public body established after 1933 against the wishes of the state and Party."¹⁵

Another plus for the church opposition at this time was th

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staunch support the Bavarian and Württemberg Protestants gave their respective bishops (Meiser and Wurm) when the German Christian Reich Bishop attempted to remove them from office for resisting his church government. The people's protests, even against the bishops' house arrest, led Hitler to countermand the orders, to allow those Landeskirche to remain self-governing, and to dismiss the Reich Bishop.¹⁶

For a brief time it appeared that the church resistance had succeeded in its goal of establishing its internal freedom.

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However, the temporary success also began the downslide because it broke up the unified front. The Bavarian and Württemberg churches decided to follow their own separate policies, seeking to influence Hitler and the Reich officials by moderation and loyalty.

Hence, by the Fall of 1935 the Confessing Church was using the term "church struggle" to stand for both the past struggles against the German-Christians and the present controversy over new state intervention in church affairs. The limited nature of the struggle is revealed by Otto Dibelius's comment to the new Reich Minister: "Let the church order its affairs in real freedom. . . then the church struggle can be over in three months."¹⁷

From Fall 1935 into 1938 a see-saw struggle between the Reich government and various groupings of the church opposition ensued.¹⁸ 1936 and '37 were crucial years for the Party was consolidating its state power everywhere including over the church resistance. By December 1936 the term church struggle stood for what those still in the Confessing Church now saw as a

more fundamental battle between Christianity and National Socialism.¹⁹ Consequently in May 1936 the Provisional Government of the Confessing Church sent a private Memorandum to Hitler which, for the first time, directly criticized the government politically. It denied that blood, race, and nationality conferred a special status on the German people, and insisted that the Christian is obliged by the First Commandment to reject this scale of values. Any antisemitism that demanded hatred of the Jew was a negation of brotherly love. It objected to the misuse of the loyalty oath (to make protest impossible), "to the manipulation of the electorate, the concentration camps, and the lack of rights in the face of attacks by the Gestapo."²⁰ This was the only official declaration by the Confessionals on the subject of antisemitism during the Third Reich. And even here the main emphasis was not on the victims so much as on the effect of the antisemitic policies on Christian conscience. We need to remember also that the Confessing Church was always a minority within the Evangelical Church.

The state immediately responded to the '36 memo by a series of reprisals: arresting pastors (500 in '37), seizing Church funds and restricting church collections, banning church publications, excluding Confessing church youth from universities, refusing teaching certificates to young theologians, and drafting pastors. The success of these moves was demonstrated by the signing of personal loyalty oaths to the Führer by many pastors after 1936, with the rest following suit in the summer of 1938 after Bishop Marahrens had ordered all in his diocese to sign it.²¹

The fourth period -- March 1938 to June '41 -- was a period of national expansion by political terrorism and war, along with further restrictions and physical assaults on Jews in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland; and the fifth period -- June '41 to May '45 -- saw total war, and total war against Europe's Jews. Church resistance was further weakened and undercut by national loyalty and obedience, even though war was not generally welcomed.

Even a Confessing Church prayer service of confession and intercession, drawn up at the ~~time~~ time of the Czech crisis in October '38, was held to be ^e treasonous because it did not include prayers for the Führer, the Sudeten Germans, or German victory. Conscientious objection was not an acceptable position within any of the churches because of the duty to obey the state, which had the right to use warfare in order to protect its people. Many pastors saw their being drawn into the military engagement as an "inner liberation" from a sense of guilt and impotence.

Hitler's government was almost never confronted or opposed on the policies that condemned millions to death. Only with regard to the so-called euthanasia program did churchmen make significant, repeated, and public protests. The churches and their hierarchies did not publicly raise objections to the concentration camps, the abolition of the Constitution and its means of protecting human rights, the anti-Jewish decrees, the wars of aggression, oppressive occupation policies, use of foreign slave labor, or the "Final Solution" itself. However, finally in October 1943 the Confessing synod of the Old Prussian Union, meeting at Breslau, issued a genuine political protest --

"the only major public protest of the war."²² The focus of the document was the Fifth Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." While it repeated the Church's belief that the state had a right to protect society by waging a just war, it asserted that "the state was no longer waging a just war." By killing non-belligerents, the defenseless, hostages, prisoners, the unhealthy, and the wounded, it had overstepped the bounds of a just war and "flagrantly violated the Fifth Commandment." It accused the Nazi regime of having "provoked other peoples to war, taken delight in the spilling of blood and in the suffering of others, and [of being] guilty of hatred and the thirst of revenge." Yet even here the phrase "liquidation of the Jews" was deleted from the final form. In its place the Breslau declaration declared: "The life of the people of Israel is sacred to God . . . and other people may not take it upon themselves to punish Israel for its unbelief." The first part of the document concluded, "we have the responsibility to do what is right before God and to obey God rather than men."²³

Those who had been involved in producing the declaration, and in reading it from their pulpits expected at the very least to be arrested. Strangely enough, "there is no evidence of reprisals by the regime." But this was the last political protest the Confessing Church made.²⁴

With regard to the sixth issue -- what stand to take, if any, on the treatment of and ideology about Jews, including the extermination campaign -- we have already had indications of the churches' reluctance.

Of course the negative attitudes and ideas about Jews were

not created ex nihilo by the Nazis or Hitler. The long history of antisemitism in Germany combined with the strong emotional commitment to the Volk to make the public particularly susceptible to the National Socialist antisemitism.²⁵

And throughout the 1920s the anti-Jewish platform had been bolstered and given validation by the Church press, which spread "legitimate 'Christian' antisemitism" to its estimated six million readers in the middle and lower-middle classes. The Jews were held responsible for all that was amiss or that was lacking in the contemporary situation.

The churches generally emphasized the divine curse imposed upon Israel (rather than the alternative of God's choice of and promise to the Jewish people as remaining intact). as for example Martin Niemöller's sermon in 1935 delivered on the Sunday dedicated in the German church to the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. He spoke about

the dark mystery that envelopes the sinister history of this people which can neither live nor die, because it is under a curse which forbids it to do either . . . Until the end of time the Jewish people must go its own way under the burden which the Word of Judgment of Jesus has laid upon it. . . .

(Niemöller then rather contradictorily cautioned his congregation not to show hatred to this divinely accursed people at a time when "God's Judgment" was in full swing.)²⁶

When the Nuremberg racial laws were proclaimed and put into effect, no Protestant church contested the right of the State to pass such laws, and none protested against such treatment of fellow countrymen.

The same was true for Kristallnacht (Nov. 9-10, 1938). In its aftermath a Protestant pastor in Munich sermonized: "The Scriptures predicted the blood of Christ would be visited upon the Jews. . . the hour seems to have struck and the Jews' fate to have been ordained by divine will."²⁷

The churches never comprehended the extent of Nazi antisemitism and its policies, or was willing to face its implications.

Even after the murder camps were in operation, and knowledge was certainly in the hands of high ranking churchmen, the church said nothing publicly. "²⁸

It was not until mid-'43 that Bishop Wurm began to write a series of private letters to various Reichministers expressing his horror at the treatment of Jews. ²⁹ Why did Wurm wait until the middle of 1943 to do this when he could have been in no doubt about the "Final Solution" at least in 1942? None of the Protestant bishops shared with their congregations what they knew about the crimes the state was committing, nor did they challenge them (or offer them the opportunity) to stand up as Christians and do right. And of course the very few criticisms came far too late.

Ironically, the Nazis themselves knew that Wurm and Meiser constituted major roadblocks on the way to total nazification of the nation.³⁰ And these two bishops remained free because of the mass support they had from their church people. So the potential for different behavior, with possibly different results, was there. Yet Sarah Gordon finds in her study that there was more antisemitism among church attendants than among those who had

ceased to attend church services.

A statement produced by a small group of laymen and clergy in 1943 (the Munich Laymen's Epistle) in Bavaria demonstrates the other side that needed to be developed:

As Christians we can no longer tolerate the Church in Germany keeping silent about the persecution of the Jews We recognize our share of the blame for neglect [of the right exercise of the preaching office]. . . . [Now] . . . at last [the Church can begin] to do what she ought to have done so long ago."

The concluding words are perhaps the best denial of there having been any real church struggle, and they were written by contemporaries:

"Everything that has hitherto been done in this matter [of the persecution of the Jews] by the Church in Germany cannot be regarded as [proper] witness, for it has neither taken place in public nor has it been in its content correctly aligned to the genuine task of the preaching office."³¹

Klaus Scholder adds today: The term "church struggle" must not be used "to suggest continuous political resistance by the churches against National Socialism."³²

For the church to have addressed the real threat that National Socialism posed to the nation it would have had to have gone further than Barmen's theological stance and have taken a stand on grounds of justice and humanitarianism. And this it was not ready to do. The church was still hampered by its Lutheran tradition that allotted all "political" matters to the state's domain, including human rights and racial matters. (Just as it

was hampered regarding the Nazis' Jewish policies by its traditional supersessionist theology that could not find a positive place for Jews as Jews but only as potential converts.)

The free churches (Methodists, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Quakers) and sects in Germany (which contained a very small number of members) capitulated to Nazism, either in order to survive, or because of being convinced by Nazi ideology, with only one exception: the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Adventists (who numbered about 36,000 in 1933) so heartily endorsed the National Socialist program and were so successful in adapting to the new state -- despite their initial handicap of seeming to most resemble Jews -- that their ministers alone among Protestants were exempted from bearing arms.³³ The Adventists made no public statements condemning the euthanasia program and even came to welcome the sterilization measures as good for the nation and therefore in accord with Christianity.³⁴

What about churches outside Germany?

The Scandinavian countries are particularly interesting because, although having an established Lutheran church as did Germany, they behaved so differently.

In Norway the Lutheran churchmen followed closely the reactions of the German Lutheran church to the rise of Nazism, and were disturbed to find that supporters of National Socialism within the church also endorsed the anti-Jewish legislation. They were encouraged by the emergence of the Confessing Church, and particularly its 1936 memorandum to Hitler. After the German

invasion of Norway (April 1940) the church was granted a period of non-interference by the Nazis. However, the German promise to observe the Hague Convention regarding full religious freedom in occupied regions soon proved to be a delusion; the churches were expected to fully support the Nazi-appointed Quisling and his Norwegian Nazi Party (Nasional Samling). But the Norwegian church "was ready to do battle" against the intent to nazify the Norwegian people, and Bishop Berggrav became the leader and spokesman of this resistance.³⁵ In October 1940 the church opposition agreed on a consolidation under a Christian Joint Council for the Norwegian Church.³⁶

In January 1941 the Norwegian Bishops directly challenged the state, on the basis of the Norwegian Constitution, on three issues: the "systematic rule of terror by the Norwegian Nazi stormtroopers;" the conditions that had led the Supreme Court to resign; and interference by the state with the ministers' Oath of Silence. They sent their communication to all the churches as a pastoral letter, establishing a policy consistently followed of keeping their people informed of their actions. A pertinent sentence read: "When those in authority in the society tolerate violence and injustice and oppress the souls of men, then the Church is the guardian of men's conscience." (This letter also reached London and was broadcast to the world.)

Harassment of clergy -- arrests, confiscation of their property, and threats of deportation and even death -- followed by the state's dismissal of the dean of the Trondheim Cathedral led the Bishops unanimously to "cease administrative cooperation with a State which practices violence against the Church." On

April 5, 1942 they set up a new church independent of the Norwegian Nazi state. The founding declaration made clear when obedience was due to the state and when protest and opposition were called for (by non-violent resistance). God's sovereignty came before all ideologies. The "Berggrav Church" insisted that the state could be considered a divine creation "only if it did not force one to act against God's commandments. Only a state based on justice could demand obedience." Please note: "This was a new interpretation of the Lutheran concept of the State."³⁷

The local pastors read the founding declaration to their congregations, and then resigned as civil servants, but continued to function as clergymen. Out of a total of 699 ministers, 645 resigned.³⁸ The Norwegian Church was no longer a state church but a free church dependent on their congregations for financial support, which was provided generously. The State churches with their Nazi-appointed bishops and ministers were empty while the Berggrav churches were packed.

In the fall of '42 a full scale attack on Norwegian Jews went into operation, with men arrested on October 26, and women and children a month later. This latter group was put on a troop transport that very day and sent to Auschwitz. In November the Temporary Church Leadership sent a sharp protest to Minister President Quisling against the persecution of Jews.

Unfortunately, prior to this time, as the anti-Jewish measures were being instituted one after another,³⁹ the church had remained silent and had done little to "stem the tide of rising antisemitism in Norway." This was a case where Berggrav's strategy of waiting to allow the German's true

intentions to reveal themselves before making protests proved disastrous. As Arne Hassing points out, with regard to the Jews of Norway, this strategy "sacrificed moral principle on two counts": First, since the Nazi treatment of Jews was based on race right from the start, this alone "violated Christian theological and moral principles"; second, the decision showed "willingness to sacrifice human beings . . . on the altar of strategy." The reinstatement of the Constitution's exclusionary clause on March 12, 1942,⁴⁰ the use of questionnaires about racial identity, and the insertion of "J" on Jewish identity cards ought to have "sufficient provocation for church intervention." If the church had publicly denounced antisemitism and defended Jewish rights from the outset, it "could have created a public awareness of Nazi policy toward Jews as a special point of Christian conscience and moral principle."⁴¹

The Germans' brutal treatment, arrests, and deportation of Jews in October and November '42 aroused the Norwegian people and "this sense of agony was articulated by the Norwegian Lutheran Church."⁴² The letter of protest challenged Quisling to live up to his promise to protect the basic Christian values and stop the violation of God's commandment" "Stop the persecution of the Jews and stop the race hatred which . . . is being spread in our land." Signatures to the protest came from all sections of Norway's Protestant community.⁴³

The Norwegian Lutherans asserted that it was the "Church's God-given duty as the conscience of the State to object" to the antisemitic measures.⁴⁴ The protest had widespread support throughout the country,⁴⁵ and also abroad.

For example, the Swedish Bishops quoted the Norwegian letter in their pastoral letters that expressed their own protest.⁴⁶

In May 1943 the church leadership had to go underground following the arrest of two signers of another protest. Even so, hundreds of ministers were deported to other parts of the country or German concentration camps (where 2 died).

Dr. Samuel Abrahamsen considers that the Church of Norway was "a bastion of resistance," supported by the people of Norway, the majority of whom "showed repeatedly, by word and act, their complete and uncompromising opposition to Hitler and Quisling in their attempts to establish a Nazi-Norwegian Church" and a nazified-Norwegian society.⁴⁷ (We have already noted Arne Hassing's modification of that praise.)

The outstanding response of the people of Denmark is too well known to be repeated here. Although that rescue operation was much more than a church action, the Danish Lutheran Church played a significant role. It should be noted that even before the war, in November 1938, a Danish Bishop spoke at a church service about the deep pain that the Christians felt as they learned about the persecution of Jews in Germany.⁴⁸ For the Danes the struggle during the German occupation was "not just a question of the Jews and their rights; [but of] the right of a small nation to exist [on] the basis of democracy: equality and human dignity."⁴⁹

When the roundup of Jews began on October 1-2, '43, the immediate protest (which had been planned for ahead of time in case it would be needed) reminded the Occupation authorities that

although as Danish Bishops they were conscious of their responsibility to be law-abiding citizens, who would not needlessly revolt against those who hold authority, they were "obliged" by their conscience to "maintain the law and to protest against any violation of human rights."⁵⁰

The Danish Church resistance began early and let its people know that it intended to take a firm line on antisemitism and on all issues of injustice. It did not vacillate, and it prepared for what might happen.

By contrast the Protestant churches of The Netherlands did not prepare itself or its people; they failed to maintain unity in resistance; they did not act early enough; and they vacillated under German threats of severe reprisals (for which it is hard to blame them since Germany treated the Dutch much more harshly than any other western European nation).⁵¹

In France "the first clear voice of opposition from among non-Jews to Vichy's antisemitism came from French Protestantism" despite their initial fear that they themselves would become victims to Vichy's "National Revolution" especially since they had often been linked with Jews and the rest of "anti-France." Even as late as the summer of 1941 the rumors were rife, "After the Jews and the Freemasons, the Protestants."⁵²

Following up on "discreet objections" made by Pastor Marc Boegner to the government against the anti-Jewish laws (Statut des juifs) at the end of 1940,⁵³ a politely worded written protest was sent to Admiral Francois Darlan (himself of

Protestant origins) in March '41 and to the Grand Rabbi of France (Isaie Schwartz) (which was published in the press of the Occupied and Unoccupied Zone). The letter referred to the French Protestants' own history of suffering and persecution in the past and its sympathy for the Jewish community now suffering from "misfortune," and assured the Jewish community that they would continue in their efforts to have the law altered.

After the second Jewish law was passed in June 1941, more protests were made, including a letter from Boegner to Marshall Petain.⁵⁴ Even a strong appeal made to Petain by a close friend, Rene Gillouin, against Vichy's anti-Jewish policy as a Christian heresy and its adoption by France as a "denial of its spiritual faith and its moral personality" failed.⁵⁵ Petain did nothing.

In mid-'42 the wearing of the yellow star was required, and the rounding up and deporting of thousands of Jews from all over France followed. The Protestant voices of protest were viewed as "troublesome" but "marginal."⁵⁶

A Protestant group CIMADE, organized in 1939 out of a youth movement to assist internees, took on more and more clandestine help to Jews.

Of course the best known instance of French Protestants working as a united community under the inspiration and direction of two pastors (Andre Trocme and Edouard Theis) is Le Chambon, which sheltered thousands of Jews who managed to reach the village, and helped many to cross into Switzerland. It is less well known that other Protestant villages in the Haute Loire, the Hautes Alpes, and the Tarn also gave this kind of aid (though in smaller numbers than Le Chambon). Despite the risks they ran,

these Protestant communities refused to cease offering help.

Two further items about the French Protestant churches:

1. There was a conservative and independent Calvinist church (Eglise reformee evangelique independante) which "was far more respectful of Vichy and favorable to the anti-Jewish laws than the Protestant mainstream," which was deeply distressed over the anti-Jewish legislation.⁵⁷

2. There was a strongly theological basis for the Protestant position, which was spelled out at a meeting of sixteen leaders in September 1941 (at Tarascon in the Bouches-du-Rhone):

. . . the Church recognizes in Israel the people that God elected to give a Savior to the world, and that is to be, amidst the nations, a permanent witness to the mystery of its fidelity. That is why, while recognizing that the state finds itself faced with a problem which it has to solve, it raises a solemn protest against any law placing Jews outside the human community.⁵⁸

In sum, the church had to have a clear conviction of its commitment to the one God of creation and to the rights of all God's children to justice, equality, and life. It needed to be ready to defend those commitments against any infringement, including by its own national government. It needed to act at the first signs of injustice and misuse of state power. And it needed to seek allies from any who shared the basic commitment to humanity regardless of doctrinal differences. Even so, it might not have been able to stop the Nazi state, especially in its Jewish policies. But the church's fidelity would not now be so

subject to suspicion and criticism. A different foundation for the post-war churches would have been created.

Have we ourselves learned these lessons? Where are our churches today? How would they respond if faced with a similar challenge?

Notes

1. This paper was delivered at Wheeling Jesuit College, Wheeling, West Virginia, at the conference "The Impact and → of the Holocaust on Jews and Christians," on April 27, 1992.

2. In 1925 the population of Germany was 65,000,000, of whom 40,000,000 were members of the Evangelical church (by 1933 the percentage had increased slightly to 62.2%) and 21,000,000 were Roman Catholics. Of the remainder 620,000 belonged to sects or Free Churches (70,000 Baptists, 49,000 Methodists, and 187,000 in the Evangelical Free Churches). The five largest sect groups included the Christian Scientists, the Mormons (12,000 in 1923), the Seventh Day Adventists (about 36,000 in 1933), Jehovah's Witnesses (20,000 in 1933), and the New Apostolic Church (in 1933, 250,000 members with 15,435 in Berlin alone).

3. German Jews did not receive rights to full citizenship until 1869.

4. Cited by Richard Gutteridge, Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb, p. 35. Italics added.

5. Gerhard Kaiser, Pietismus und Patriotismus im literarischen Deutschland (Wiesbaden, 1961), cited by Klaus Scholder, A Requiem for Hitler (London: SCM, and Philadelphia: Trinity Press Interantional, 1989), p. 50.

6. Scholder, p. 51.

7. Paul Althaus was the principal architect of the Theology of the Divine Orders of Creation.

8. A few warning voices were raised against National Socialism: Otto Dibelius of the Brandenburg Church in March wrote to pastors in the Berlin and Brandenburg Churches that they must be ready to defend their faith against all intolerant ideologies, including Nazism. → (He was quickly removed from his post as General Superintendent.) → In April Lutheran Bishop Rendtorff of Mecklenberg predicted that the Nazis were bound to interfere soon in the internal affairs of all the Churches.

As early as 1928 Erik Peterson wrote to Harnack, "Sociologically and in outlook the Protestant Church corresponds roughly with the mentality and sociological status of the German National People's Party" Peterson, cited by Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr, (), pp. 65-66; and also by Edwin Robertson, "A Study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews, January - April 1922," Remembering for the Future, I, Yehuda Bauer, et al, eds., (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), p. 121).

9. Frederick O. Bonkovsky, "The German State and Protestant Elites," The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 130.

10. Barth's ^(theology? position?) theological was both good and bad: good in that it sought to reinstate God and Christ at the center of the church's life and theology (in place of the new idols of Führer, State, and Race), but bad in that it tended to orient the church as inward looking and strictly theological as against being involved with the world's problems (including those designated as "political".)

11. Hitler delivered a radio speech on the eve of church elections on behalf of the German Christian candidates for provincial church offices that resulted in an overwhelming victory for them.

12. "All" refers to those affiliated as the Evangelical Church: Lutheran, Reformed, Luther-Reformed Union, plus the Kirchentage, and community groups. It does not refer to the small free churches and religious associations in Germany. See more on these further on.

13. Scholder, p. 103.

14. F. Burton Nelson, "1934: Pivotal Year of the Church Struggle," Remembering for the Future, III, p. 2992. Robert Ericksen has asserted, "Politically, Barmen and the Confessing

Church failed by not going far enough. They protected their own domain, the autonomy of the church; but they did not defend their weaker neighbors nor attack the evil of the Nazi regime."

At the time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wanted the Barmen Synod to take a public stand against the Aryan Paragraph being introduced into the church. By 1935 he had moved much further and was passionately concerned for the "whole defenseless Jewish people," not just the baptised Jews. He believed it was time not merely to withstand the Reich Bishop but also to oppose the State's legislation (Gutteridge, p. 128). Karl Barth later confessed his failure in not including the Jewish issue in his writing of the Barmen document.

15. Peter Matheson, The Third Reich and the Christian Churches, p.49.

16. We must be careful not to ignore the aspect of south German provincial loyalty against Berlin and north Germany in all of this.

17. Scholder, p. 94.

18. The struggle was confused by the fact that there were actually two church policies the National Socialists were engaged in. One wanted to pacify and preserve the Evangelical Church as a force loyal to the state, while the other wanted to rid Germany of the church and Christianity in general. The strategems followed varied from one time or another, and any diagram of the organizational structures of the Protestant churches during this time is hopelessly complicated and confused.

19. Earlier in 1936 the Confessing Synod of the Old Prussian Union Church issued a resolution condemning the "racist-volkisch world-view" and stating that "the state loses its authority, when it . . . makes itself the supreme and ultimate authority in all spheres of life." 700 pastors who refused to heed the ban on making the resolution public were arrested.

20. In part, Scholder, p. 111.

21. The hold-outs were subjected to various other treatments, including, when war began, drafting them and sending them to the most dangerous fronts. Pastor Martin Niemoeller was brought to trial in Feb. 1938, but when the judgment amounted to a virtual acquittal, Hitler intervened and ordered him sent to a concentration camp as his personal prisoner.

22. The protest had been in preparation since August 1942, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer a member of the committee.

23. The second part was a confession of sins and a call to repentance using the ringing biblical form of admonition, including "Woe to church and people for violations of the Fifth Commandment, especially the killing of unhealthy persons and members of another race!"

24. All the material regarding the Breslau declaration is taken from Donald D. Wall, "The Confessing Church and the Second World War," Journal of Church and State 23, 1 (Winter 1981): 29-31.

25. During the 19th century when the debate was carried on over whether Jews should receive full citizens rights (which they did not receive until 1869) three fundamental positions emerged in German Protestantism. None took a positive stance toward Judaism, and each failed to accept Jews as persons on their own terms. In the most favorable view, the Old Testament and Judaism in its entirety were understood as an early or childlike form of God's revelation. In the least favorable view, Judaism was presented as fundamentally evil, directed against both Christ and God, and even the Old Testament was seen to be anti-Jewish. In line with these views, Jews should be treated either as children to be enlightened about the truth, or as people against whom the Christian state must protect itself. The continuous debate, together with the rise and spread of racial antisemitism and "respectable" Christian antisemitism, "magnified the original problem of the [civil] status of the small Jewish minority . . . out of all proportion." Probably the most ominous change that emerged was that instead of insisting that Jews totally dissociate themselves from their religious and national "peculiarity" in order to become assimilated to the German nation and culture (as had previously been the demand), Christian conservatism turned to condemning most strongly the Jews did most clearly identified themselves with the national culture -- though without converting to Christianity. Now they were the most suspected of being atheistic or anarchistic, and of seeking to destroy the Christian German Volk and Fatherland, or, even worse, of inherently lacking those spiritual capacities that would lead them to adopt the "higher forms" of religious expression. (David Charles Smith, "Protestant Anti-Judaism in the German Emancipation Era," Jewish Social Studies, XXXVI, 3-4 (July - October, 1974): 216-17.)

26. Gutteridge, p. 104. A Lutheran bishop of Baden (Kuhlewein) expressed a commonly-held position in 1936 when he said:

When the Jews crucified Jesus, they crucified themselves, their revelation and their history. Thus the curse came upon them. Since then that curse works itself out from one generation to another (Gutteridge, p. 71).

27. Rita Thalman and Emmanuel Feinerman, Crystal Night (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1974), p. 70.

28. Bishop Marahrens' private letter to Reichminister Frick in January 1943 expressed his grave disquiet only about the sufferings of certain Christian non-Aryans, with not a word about the millions of Jews as such. "As a strict Lutheran he admitted it was not his business to criticize the political decisions of the government, and that the racial question was a volkish and political one. . . . [Only] responsible political leadership . . . possessed the sole right to take the necessary measures for maintaining the purity of the German blood, and alone bore the

41. Hassing, pp. 510, 521, 521, 522. Hassing believes that Norwegian "anti-pluralsim" and latent antisemitism is the only way to account for the failure of the Norwegian churches to act earlier or more decisively on the Jewish issue -- the only explanation he can find considering that the people were "otherwise so humanitarian and imbued with the Christian ethic" (521).

42. Abrahamsen, p. 10.

43. Abrahamsen, pp. 10-11. In typical Lutheran fashion, the Bishops "emphasized in closing that this appeal had nothing to do with politics."

44. The Norwegian church did not accept the interpretation of Luther's conclusion that the people do not have the right to resist the authorities. They used other sources from Luther than the German Church did, along with the Augustana Confession.

45. Hassing points out the silence on the treatment of Jews from "every other quarter": the universities, labor movement, home front, the London government-in-exile (pp. 521-22).

(Göteborg?) 46. A large protest meeting was held in Stockholm; the dean of the Gothenburg Cathedral said that "the churches in Sweden cannot remain silent when such things happen on our borders" (Abrahamsen, pp. 11-12).

47. Abrahamsen, pp. 13, 3.

48. Johan M. Snoek, The Grey Book (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Comp. NV, 1969), p.58.

49. Snoek, p. 163. This sentiment was expressed in a letter written to Rabbi Friediger by a pastor.

50. Snoek, pp. 164-68.

51. The protests of the Protestant churches of Holland (when they were made) often showed a much deeper biblical insight than those of other countries. The Dutch Church saw that National Socialism was attempting to substitute a new god for the Creator Lord. And during the Occupation the church began to see that its attitude towards the Jews "would be the criterion of its obedience before the revelation of God." One Dutch statement affirmed that "the separation between Jews and non-Jews can in no way be accepted, since it would mean that we would sever our relation with Jesus Christ, Himself born from Israel, of Jewish blood. . . ." A pastoral letter secretly circulated in 1941 said: "We reject as a deadly error that the Kingdom of God is concerned only with the soul and eternity and that any other Kingdom may claim us for this earthly life. For how may we expect justice before the judgment seat of Christ if we have not sought justice here on earth?"

Johan Snoek says that prior to the German invasion the churches did not speak out publicly on any subject, and the

Impact of National Socialism (1919-1945) (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1982), p. 320.

53. Boegner was a member of the Vichy National Council due to his church position.

54. Apparently Boegner also had a direct hand in getting Cardinal Gerlier to the make a protest on behalf of the Catholics (Marrus and Paxton, p. 204).

55. Gillouin added that the repeal of the Edict of Nantes was "a picnic beside your Jewish laws."

56. Marrus, "French Churches . . .," p. 328.

57. Marrus, "French Churches . . .," p. 323.

58. Marrus, "French Churches . . ." pp. 322-23.

responsibility before God and before history for so doing" (Gutteridge, pp. 240-41).

29. In his letter to Hitler that the murders of the Jews "were in plainest contradiction to the Laws of God, and were an outrage against the very foundation of western civilisation, and . . . altogether against the divinely given right of human existence and of human dignity" (Gutteridge, p. 243).

30. At the Brown House in Munich it was said that "the Third Reich would not really come into being until Wurm had been hung upon the gallows" (Gutteridge, p. 246).

31. Gutteridge, p. 350, 351, 352; see also p. 285.

32. Scholder, p. 95.

33. Christine Elizabeth King, The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity (New York & Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), p. 98. On Kristallnacht a number of Adventist homes and businesses had been vandalized in the belief that they were Jewish (p. 101).

34. King, pp. 100, 101.

35. Samuel Abrahamsen, "The Role of the Norwegian Lutheran Church During World War II," Remembering for the Future, I, p. 4.

36. This included only the Norwegian Lutheran Church bodies; it did not bring in the Free Churches, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church, all of which were classified as "Dissenters." However, as long as Berggrav was free to function, he regularly consulted with the leaders of the Free Church "Congress of Dissenters".

37. Abrahamsen, p. 8. See also Arne Hassing, "Ecumenical Aspects of the Norwegian Free-Church Experience in World War II," Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 28, 1 (Winter 1991): 23.

38. Those who retained their connection with the state were isolated from their colleagues and their congregations.

39. From the invasion in April 1940 on actions had been taken against Jews, including confiscation of their radios, painting of their shop windows with antisemitic slogans, arrest of Jews in northern Norway after the invasion of the USSR in June '41; registration of Jewish property, confiscation of Jewish firms, and mass arrests, dismissal of Jews from professional and civil services, the stamping of ID cards and passports with a large "J," changes in the marriage laws so that a non-Jewish spouse married to a Jew became a Jew (Abrahamsen, pp. 9-10).

40. This was a reinstatement of a clause of the 1814 Constitution that excluded Jews from the kingdom of Norway, which had finally been repealed in 1851 (Arne Hassing, "The Churches of Norway and the Jews, 1933-1943," Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 26:3 [Summer 1989], p. 497).