

**Confronting the Nazi War on Christianity: The
Kulturkampf Newsletters.**

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Professor Richard Bonney

Seventy years ago, Britain declared war on Germany because of Hitler's policy of aggression in Europe: the pretext was Poland, but previous invasions could have triggered the war. Today, the war is held to be synonymous with Nazi aggression and the Holocaust. Yet unless they have made a special study of the Third Reich, few people today understand that the war resulted not just from Hitler's foreign policy but from the very nature of his regime; nor is the collective memory sufficiently aware of the threat to Christianity posed by National Socialism.

The republication of the fortnightly newsletter entitled *Kulturkampf. News Bulletin of the Religious*

*Policy of the Third Reich*¹ is intended to remind us, seventy years later, of the nature of that threat. It has been an unusual project because it has combined elements of local, national and international history and covered a range of issues which are, in many respects, still remarkably current.

In a letter to Bishop George Bell on 7 January 1938, Erwin Kraft, who financed the publication of the Newsletter in England commented: ‘it is ... my hope that the Kulturkampf Association may grow into a movement capable of bringing home to the English speaking world the true facts about Nazism. You may have noticed that our committee, apart from Mrs Kraft and myself, consists of six Protestants and six Catholics, and I hope it will be possible to obtain [a] growing measure of support

¹ Richard Bonney (ed. and trans.), *Confronting the Nazi War on Christianity: The Kulturkampf Newsletters, 1936-9* (Studies in the History of Religious and Political Pluralism. Vol. 4. Peter Lang, 2009). 588 pp., 5 ill. ISBN 978-3-03911-904-2. £50.00

from the press ...'² The Newsletter claimed to be 'the only regular source of information as to the religious crisis in Germany' and documented the entire range of issues on which Nazi ideology challenged traditional freedoms and the German way of life.

The English publication was a translation from a French edition – not printed professionally – which was the result of a collective effort by German Catholics from the dissolved Centre party who had emigrated to France, with Karl Spiecker as Editor.³ The Newsletters were not only extremely well informed; they were also well written and carefully argued. They provide a chronology of Nazi policy against the Churches at a critical moment before the outbreak of the European war when Hitler's intentions were still unclear. It was perhaps only with the war on the Soviet Union in 1941 that Hitler's

² Ibid. 13.

³ Ibid. 14.

radical vision of a 'racial restructuring' of Europe became clear.⁴ It was during the war, too, in a secret document from 1943, written exclusively for Adolf Hitler, that Nazi religious policy was finally clarified: 'immediate and unconditional abolition of all religions after the final victory not only for the territory of Greater Germany but also for all released, occupied and annexed countries ... proclaiming at the same time Hitler as the new Messiah.'⁵

Now had the Nazi regime been prepared to declare this as its position in 1933 or at any point before 1939, then the Christian Churches would have been forewarned as to what to expect and to some extent forearmed. But this did not happen. Important sections of the Nazi Party sought the complete elimination of Christianity and its substitution by a purely racial religion, but

⁴ Ibid. 15.

⁵ Ibid. 16.

considerations of expediency made it impossible for the National Socialist leadership as a whole to adopt this radical anti-Christian stance as official policy. Instead, the aim was to reduce the Churches' influence in all areas of public life through the use of every available means, yet without provoking the difficulties – diplomatic as well as domestic – which an openly declared war of extermination might have caused.

This policy of deliberate ambiguity was calculated to deceive contemporaries and to some extent it was successful in so doing. More than that, it has continued to deceive some historians. To what extent was there a 'plan' to subordinate the Churches and restrict their role in German public life even before the Nazi seizure of power? To what extent was there a concerted endeavour to implement a pre-conceived plan, subject to the

differences between the Catholic and the Protestant Churches, once the Nazis had gained power? Revisionist arguments tend to emphasize a lack of co-ordination by the Nazis, differences within the regime, and the compliance of a significant section of the Churches. The *Kulturkampf* Newsletters provide the necessary corrective to such arguments. 'The best evidence now available as to the existence of an anti-Church plan', a report for the Nuremberg prosecutors argued in 1945, 'is to be found in the systematic nature of the persecution itself. Different steps in that persecution, such as the campaign for the suppression of denomination and youth organizations, the campaign against the denominational schools, the defamation campaign against the clergy, started on the same day in the whole area of the Reich or in large districts, and were supported by the entire regimented press, by Nazi

party meetings [and] by travelling Party speakers.’⁶ These ‘different steps’ in the persecution were all recorded punctiliously in the Newsletters.

In the present era, readers will probably approach the Newsletters to find out certain quite specific things. Firstly, they may wish to ascertain the impact in Germany of the Papal Encyclical against racism, *Mit brennender Sorge* (‘With burning concern’), issued secretly to every Catholic Church in Germany and read out solemnly on Passion Sunday 1937.⁷ To act in this way against the core ideology of the Nazi regime was a bold measure indeed. And in its fury at being caught unprepared, we know that the Gestapo acted with particular severity against anyone they could find who was associated with the process of distribution.

⁶ Ibid. 11.

⁷ Ibid. 160–3, 487–8.

A second type of enquiry may well concern the area of ecumenical relations as we would call them now. Relations between the Catholic and Lutheran Churches in Germany had, for the most part, been strained in the past – and although they proclaimed the wish to ban religious ‘sectarianism’ from the Third Reich, the Nazis in fact sought to exploit differences between the two denominations whenever possible. Realizing that it would be difficult to take the Catholic Church head on when his own power was not consolidated, Hitler endorsed the signing of a Concordat with the Papacy in 1933. Yet this did not guarantee the position of Catholicism under the new regime. Quite the contrary, the Nazi state and party sought to undermine the Concordat consistently until all its clauses were worthless; and then, when the treaty was completely undermined, to proclaim that it had been signed illegitimately and had sought

concessions from the totalitarian regime which were *ipso facto* invalid.⁸

The position of the Lutheran Church was much weaker at the outset and easier for the Nazis to penetrate and subjugate from within. The story of the trials and tribulations of the Confessing Church and Pastor Martin Niemöller, its most outspoken leader, is well known and is retold in somewhat different detail in the Newsletters. Above all, it is the 'German Christians' and their leader, so-called *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller, who receive the most attention. Müller called for the Nazification of the German National Church and subsequently amended crucial passages in the New Testament, including the Beatitudes, to make them conform to Nazi racial doctrine.⁹ A 'National' Protestant Church never emerged in Nazi Germany because of the opposition

⁸ Ibid. 214-15, 223-4, 331-3.

⁹ Ibid. 49-50.

of brave Lutherans who were prepared to face the consequences of their actions in opposing the regime. But there were plenty of Lutheran ministers who made their pact with the regime – far more did so than did Catholic priests.

The Nazis sought to divide and rule. And yet, remarkably, the Newsletters provide testimony of practical co-operation that in later, more peaceful times, would be termed the ecumenical movement. ‘It is against all expectation that the Kulturkampf in the Third Reich has had this positive consequence’, the Newsletter noted on 11 August 1937.¹⁰ ‘Pastor Boegner’s statements’ – the President of the French Protestant League had expressed support for the Papal encyclical – ‘are yet one more testimony of the growing solidarity of all Christians, as opposed to totalitarianism, to the comradeship of Catholics and

¹⁰ Ibid. 22, 233.

Protestants, which is growing closer in Germany and throughout the world' (12 November 1937).¹¹

A third area of enquiry that is likely to be of concern to the modern reader is the state of relations between the Christian Churches and other faiths – particularly Judaism, because of the racial laws and the overt persecution of Jews prior to the adoption of the policy of extermination. Almost every statement of a Nazi regime supporter recorded by the Newsletters is replete with anti-Judaic statements, and the crucial role of Julius Striecher in co-ordinating the campaign – and Hitler's support for him – is highlighted.¹² The Newsletters record statements of support for the Jews from prominent individuals within the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany and abroad. This comes as little surprise, though it is a matter of regret that

¹¹ Ibid. 22, 276.

¹² Ibid. 104 n 83, 105 n 84, 300, 307, 476, 514–15.

relatively few among the Catholic hierarchy in Germany were prepared to be so open in their condemnation, having apparently fallen for the Nazi myth that the Jews formed a powerful lobby and were more than capable of defending themselves. (Conversely, and in flat contradiction to the arguments of John Cornwell in his book *Hitler's Pope*, the Nazis regarded Cardinal Pacelli, the future Pius XII as their most inveterate enemy and his election to the Papacy in 1939 was seen as a setback to their policy.)¹³ As war approached, the Newsletter of 29 May 1939 noted the publication abroad of a book by a German Catholic, Herrmann Steinhausen, entitled *The Jewish Question – a Christian Question*. ‘In the worldwide chorus of Christian protest against the infamous persecution of the Jews in Germany, only one thing failed. This was a book by a German-speaking Catholic author on the subject. That such a

¹³ Ibid. 493.

book has not been produced in Germany itself is, of course, explicable on the grounds that there it would not have been allowed to have been published, and its author would have probably passed the rest of his life – perhaps a shortened one – in a concentration camp. But now a German-speaking Catholic in a free country has written such a book, which we heartily welcome and believe worthy of appearance in other tongues and lands. The book is no purely humanitarian plea, but a work of philosophical and historical importance.’¹⁴

One important point made in passing in the Newsletter of 24 January 1938 is that whereas the Nazis sought the complete elimination of Judaism – and the condemnation of all that smacked of Judaism within Christianity (the Old Testament *in toto*, the complete writings of Paul and any non-

¹⁴ Ibid. 516.

Aryan manifestation in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, who was to be projected as a persecutor of the Jews) – it sought both a practical as well as an ideological accommodation with Islam. In so doing, it misunderstood the nature of that faith; but the Nazi tribute to Islam because of its alleged fatalism¹⁵ is nevertheless remarkable, particularly when we bear in mind the vilification of Muslims by the extreme Right in both this country and Europe in our own era.

No doubt the modern reader may have many more questions to ask of the evidence of the Newsletters, but the final one to be considered here is the nature of the Nazi regime and whether, as Bishop Walter Mixa, the Catholic Bishop of Augsburg, argued in his Easter Sunday sermon in 2009, it was an ‘atheist’ regime.¹⁶ If that had been so, everything

¹⁵ Ibid. 315.

¹⁶ Ibid. 23 n 46.

would have been much simpler for contemporaries. Goebbels commented at Christmas 1939, ‘the Führer is deeply religious but entirely anti-Christian’.¹⁷

Fittingly, it was in its last newsletter before the outbreak of World War II, on 8 August 1939, that *Kulturkampf* considered whether or not National Socialism was a religion. It concluded that it was, both in the phenomenological sense of the term, as also in practical reality, since it sought the unity of the reign of nature, the reign of this world and the reign of God. ‘National Socialism wishes to uproot Christianity in Germany, not in order to establish a fully secular state, but to establish an anti-Christian theistic state. National Socialism is the state religion of a regime whose ruler, the Führer, is both god and high priest.’ It was true that there were two wings within the National Socialist Party on the question of

¹⁷ Ibid. 21.

religion. ‘However, these two wings do not disagree as to whether National Socialism should be the state religion. They disagree only as to whether Christianity should be entirely excluded from the state religion or only subordinated to it.’¹⁸ The historian Michael Burleigh notes the importance of the analysis presented in this number of the Newsletter: ‘Nazism was not some heretical deviation from Christianity, not merely a “substitute for religion”, he writes, ‘but rather a “substitute” religion ... The Germans were not living in an atheistic state, but in one where a religion other than Christianity had burgeoned within the public domain ... The Nazi “God” was the power of nature, conceived as the brutal role of the strong ...’¹⁹

The truth of this verdict is to be found throughout the detailed analysis of the *Kulturkampf*

¹⁸ Ibid. 19, 530–6.

¹⁹ Ibid. 19 n 36.

Newsletters. It is a truth which Christians would do well to remember when we ponder about the justice of war, and whether the war against Nazi oppression that broke out seventy years ago this year was the clearest example in history of a war that was not only necessary but just.