

The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945

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Martyn Housden

The Holy Reich comes with substantial praise attached. According to the blurb on the back, Michael Burleigh says it is 'an important and original book' which 'deserves as wide a readership as possible'. Helmut Walser Smith regards it as 'a brilliant and provocative work that will recast the whole debate on Christianity and Nazism'. He adds that study has 'deep revisionist import'. Richard Evans's comments are a bit more 'empirical'. He notes that the book displays well the ambivalent attitudes Nazis had towards specifically Protestantism and that Nazism was associated with an whole array of religious beliefs. So what do you get for your money?

Without doubt Richard Steigmann-Gall has undertaken a massive and careful research project to detail comprehensively the way Nazism touched and drew upon especially Germany's Protestant heritage. His archive work is impressive and the text's story is pieced together with both thought and art. Its sweep takes in everything one would expect and displays well the competing tendencies within Hitler's movement (from Nazi paganism and anti-Christianity, to the efforts to create a Reich Church). More unusually it also discusses possible connections between Christianity and Nazi social policy, which centred around the creation of a *Volksgemeinschaft*.

The author makes a case that his study is re-casting knowledge in a fundamental way. Thus he maintains, for instance, that Nazism was 'a movement long believed to be at best unrelated to Christianity, and at worst as anti-Christian as it was antisemitic or anti-Communist'.(p. 3) Noting that Fritz Stern had regarded Nazism as something which replaced defunct religion, he says, 'I suggest that, for many of its leaders, Nazism was not the result of a 'Death of God' in secularized society, but rather a radicalized and singularly horrific attempt to preserve God against secularized society.' (p. 12)

Steigmann-Gall buttresses his case with a wealth of information drawn from across the period of National Socialism's existence. Hans Koch remained a card-carrying Christian even after 1945; Josef Goebbels once interpreted Nazism as involved in the struggle of Christianity against Marxism; and Dietrich Eckart used images of Christ on the cross in his work. So the purpose of the author's discussion becomes the case that many Nazis understood themselves to be the true political expression of Christianity.(p. 49) On this basis, and in due course, he echoes Rubinstein's observation that Christianity brought with it slavery, wars and exploitation. It has been responsible for as much darkness as light. Steigmann-Gall adds:

The discovery that so many Nazis considered themselves or their movement to be Christian makes us similarly uncomfortable. But the very unpleasantness of this fact makes it all the more important to look it squarely in the face.(p. 267)

Without doubt, the author is to be commended for blending such an interesting study of the ideas about religion which leading Nazis held. In the process he gives any reader plenty of pause for thought. But it is the power of the wider claims of the book which is most likely to be debated. The possible existence of ties between Nazism and Protestantism was first raised quite some time ago, for example by W. M. McGovern, whose work was first published in the 1940s.(1) It is well enough established that the German Christians came from within the Protestant Church; F. Zipfel made the point clear in 1965 and it is even reflected in at least one text only aimed at students.(2) So of course some Nazis saw their politics and religion as intermeshed. In fact, given that Christianity helped frame the traditions of culture inherited by Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, it was just about inevitable that its themes would be reflected in a political movement which, after all, was seeking to control the nation as a whole and which was drawing its minions from it.

The core of the issue here is probably one of balance. Did religious terms drive leading Nazis, did they influence them in a more low-key way, or were they more background features? Obviously the precise balance must have differed by individual (and Steigmann-Gall's study certainly makes this clear), but when individuals read his text, they may wonder whether the overall impression of Nazism is quite right. Was Christianity, in general terms, really so significant; or has a relatively subordinate point been over-egged? Readers should consider the issue for themselves.

This leaves us with the Janus face of Christianity. Steigmann-Gall is quite right that the idea that some Nazis had religious motives is uncomfortable. The point is well worth making. But obviously it is also true that some of the resisters had Christian motives too. There were the German Christians, but there were also people such as Yorck von Wartenburg for whom involvement in the events of 20 July was bound up with religious conviction. In other words, given that Christianity was part of the cultural framework of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, the interesting point is that some people saw it as grounds to support participation in Nazism, whereas others saw it as grounds to resist. Conformity or resistance; intolerance or tolerance; Inquisition or charity? The religious texts stay the same, but what people have done with them always has varied greatly. This makes us ask, 'Why'? Was it religious belief per se that influenced behaviour in the case of every 'Christian' (whether Nazi sympathiser or resister), or maybe something else was at work – perhaps something more fundamental which drove, channelled or gave meaning to the belief itself? It is impossible to avoid wondering whether concern with the place of Christian belief in the Third Reich really does get to grips with the heart of that particular political phenomenon, or whether (for very many individuals) some more important (general or personal) motivation overshadowed their professions of religious belief. In this

light, we can ask whether Germany really did experience a 'Holy Reich' between 1933 and 1945, or whether such an image (if it existed all) was more the cynical exploitation of a contemporary cultural resource, or even a hypocrisy of religiously-minded careerists.

So are the comments on the back of Richard Steigmann-Gall's book exaggerated? Maybe a bit, but all the same it is an engaging read. The text is enjoyable, the research effort has been substantial and the ideas do make you want to argue. That's good enough for me.

Notes

1. W. M. McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler. The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (first publ. 1941; this edn, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. F. Zipfel, *Kirchenkampf in Deutschland 1933-1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter. 1965), pp. 36-7; M. Housden, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 52.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Dr Steigmann-Gall thanks Dr Housden for his review, and does not wish to comment further.

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