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Nazism, Political Religion, and ‘Ordinary’ Germans

Samuel Koehne.

The study of Nazism and religious belief has been a vibrant field of historical inquiry in recent years. This topic has been the subject of an ever-increasing number of studies, both ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ There have been arguments (as well as counter-arguments) about whether the Nazis were advocating a particular form of faith called ‘positive Christianity,’ whether there might be a kind of ‘special path’ of development in Germany when it comes to religion, whether there may be ‘Catholic roots’ to the Nazi Party, or whether we should understand Nazism fundamentally in terms of a racial-biological Darwinian narrative.¹

There has also been a fascinating shift towards revising our understanding of the role of the churches in Germany and their support for or opposition to the Nazi Party in power. In 2010 an exhibition at Berlin’s German Historical Museum on ‘Hitler and the Germans’ had one piece in particular that ‘caused the crowds to stop and stare.’² It was a 1935 tapestry that combined the Lord’s Prayer, a church and the swastika flag. This was an object made by ordinary people, by Christian women, in genuine belief that these three should be interwoven. What seems to have fascinated visitors was that the expectation of a disjunction between the bounds of Christian faith and National Socialism did not exist for those who had made the tapestry.

¹ See variously: George S. Williamson, ‘A Religious Sonderweg? Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular in the Historiography of Modern Germany,’ *Church History* 75 (2006): 139-56; Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Derek Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism: Religious Identity and National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Richard Weikart, *Hitler’s Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). My own recent work has focused on this topic: Samuel Koehne, ‘Reassessing *The Holy Reich*: Leading Nazis’ Views on Confession, Community and “Jewish” Materialism,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (2013): 423-45.

² ‘Hitler Exhibit Explores a Wider Circle of Guilt,’ *New York Times*, 15 October 2010.

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Numerous recent works have shown that there were indeed Christians who saw their faith as entirely commensurate with National Socialism. As Manfred Gailus put it in an edited collection, it was generally ‘not a good performance’ for the churches.³ The point that surprised crowds in 2010 had already been noted by James Zabel in 1976: ‘Ideas which today may appear to be essentially unchristian were considered by sincere people in the decade of the 1930’s to be at the basis of right belief.’⁴ Susannah Heschel has pointed out that there is an urgent need to understand this as historians, and grasp ‘the complexity of how religion functions rather than defining its “essence.”’ There were clearly complicated and intertwined relationships that existed between ‘ordinary Germans’ and the Nazi State, and this was no less true of Christian communities.⁵

When it comes to the notion of religious opposition there are two key problems. One of them is the issue of historical complexity and the other is how to define ‘resistance.’ This becomes all the more difficult when trying to provide information to a general audience. For example, there are important internet resources that are beginning to become available, such as the dual language website ‘Protestant Christians under the Nazi Regime.’ As Kyle Jantzen has noted, this is an ‘innovative attempt to present the history of Christian resistance’ during the Nazi period but he also notes that it is

³ Manfred Gailus, ‘Keine gute Performance: Die deutschen Protestanten im “Dritten Reich,” in *Zerstrittene Volksgemeinschaft: Glaube, Konfession und Religion im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Manfred Gailus and Armin Nolzen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 96-121. While Gailus deals with German Protestants, Spicer deals with German Catholics in the same work: Kevin P. Spicer, ‘“Tu ich unrecht,...ein guter Priester und ein guter Nationalsozialist zu sein?” Zum Verhältnis zwischen Katholizismus und Nationalsozialismus’ (66-95).

⁴ James A. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors: A Study of the Ideas of three Deutsche Christen Groups* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976), 226.

⁵ Susannah Heschel, ‘Historiography of Antisemitism versus Anti-Judaism: A Response to Robert Morgan,’ *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2011): 272-73. On the study of ‘ordinary Germans’ and ‘everyday life’: Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989). Heschel points out that Peukert’s work, while excellent, ‘says nothing about the churches.’

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incumbent on those producing such resources to deal with ‘all aspects...from the heroic to the disgraceful.’⁶

In his classic work, John Conway gives a good summary of this process away from a hagiography of groups like the ‘Confessing Church,’ which was that they and the Catholic Church were ‘uninterruptedly the opponents of Nazism.’⁷ There are several authors have been very important in problematizing German church history. For instance Robert Ericksen, Kevin Spicer, Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel have all dealt extensively with the topic of theologians and Christians who found much to agree with in Nazism.

Their works have considered prominent Protestant theologians, Catholic priests, the ‘Faith Movement of the German Christians’ which sought to establish a specifically ‘German’ Church, and those involved in the establishment of the ‘Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life.’⁸ There have also been recent studies that examine the movement for a neo-pagan ‘German Faith.’⁹ Then there has been a growing field of studies, led by Manfred Gailus and Kyle Jantzen, that examines ‘parish politics’ and the responses of individual congregations in recognition of the fact that we need to understand the full diversity of Christian response. This is

⁶ The English version of the website is a valuable educational tool (in conjunction with other materials) and offers an interactive chronology: <http://en.evangelischer-widerstand.de/#/karte/>. For Jantzen’s review, which raises the issue of defining ‘resistance’: <http://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2013/03/review-of-the-internet-website-evangelischer-widerstand/>

⁷ John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933–45* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), xxi–xxviii. See especially: Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, trans. Victoria Barnett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

⁸ Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

⁹ Karla O. Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

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particularly important because there has been some assumption in the historiography that ‘national and regional church-political issues...were simply replayed locally.’¹⁰

For those who wish to quickly gain an understanding of the most recent research, I would recommend the journal *Contemporary Church History Quarterly*, which not only counts many of the major authors amongst its editors but also offers free access to reviews of current literature.¹¹ In addition there is a forthcoming book (*Catholics, Protestants, and Nazis*, edited by Mark Ruff) that aims to offer a comprehensive introduction to the debates on this topic and access to some of the major primary source documents, as much of the material is still only available in German.¹²

So how do we begin to make sense of all of these diverse trends? What I would like to do in this paper is examine the topic by taking one of the dominant schools of thought—that Nazism was a ‘political religion’—and dealing directly with an issue that I have often encountered when teaching the history of the Nazi Party. A common question raised by students is this: what could be known about the Nazis when they came to power? While formulated in different ways and sometimes with a different chronological focus the core of this question is one of historicism. It may be abundantly clear to us now what the Nazis stood for, how racist and antisemitic they were, but then we are looking back to the topic with knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust. So what could be known by people then, and how did they view the Nazis? Given my sense that many teachers encounter this questions I believe it may be a useful prism through

¹⁰ Kyle Jantzen, ‘Propaganda, Perseverance, and Protest: Strategies for Clerical Survival amid the German Church Struggle,’ *Church History* 70 (2001): 296. See also Kyle Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001).

¹¹ See <http://contemporarychurchhistory.org>.

¹² A number of the most significant documents have been translated by Peter Matheson, *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A Documentary Account of Christian Resistance and Complicity During the Nazi Era* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).

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which to view Nazism and religion. Moreover, it offers us an opportunity to deal with some of the approaches mentioned above.

The Revival of ‘Political Religion’

One of the simplest ways in which we can answer the question ‘what could be known?’ is by examining how people actually understood Nazism on the cusp of the so-called ‘seizure of power’ (*Machtergreifung*) in 1933.¹³ In fact, the idea that Nazism forms a ‘political religion’ is not only a dominant theoretical strand, but also marks a return to ideas expressed at the time. Many of those who argue in favour of ‘political religion’ consciously draw on Eric Voegelin’s characterisation of Nazism and Communism in precisely these terms by 1938, though he was not alone in such views. As Emilio Gentile notes, ‘the first scholars who used the concept of political religion (or any of its synonyms, such as secular religion and lay religion) in order to interpret totalitarian movements, were Protestant and Catholic intellectuals and theologians.’¹⁴ Gontier has pointed out that Voegelin himself stated in a 1973 interview that his work ‘conformed to the usage of a literature that interpreted ideological movements as a variety of religions.’¹⁵

Much modern work is focused on the manner in which Nazi rituals and ceremonies were comparable to those of ecclesiastical tradition and the ways in which Nazism (as an ideology) might become a substitute or replacement for religion. A major proponent for the use of ‘political religion’ as a ‘heuristic tool’ is Hans Maier, who has argued that two major methods by which to examine totalitarianism are the analysis of ‘rituals and celebrations through which a “community of believers” constitutes itself’ and the consideration of ‘totalitarian political understanding, through which at least a minimal

¹³ See the special issue on this topic in *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14 (September 2013): 321–448. See also Richard Bessel, ‘The Nazi Capture of Power,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004): 169–88.

¹⁴ Listing ‘Luidi Sturzo, Adolf Keller, Paul Tillich, Gerhard Leibholz, Waldemar Gurian and Eric Voegelin’: Emilio Gentile, ‘Political Religion: A Concept and its Critics: A Critical Survey,’ *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (2005): 22.

¹⁵ Thierry Gontier, ‘From “Political Theology” to “Political Religion”: Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt,’ *The Review of Politics* 75(2013): 25–6.

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religious dimension shines through.’¹⁶ Maier also points out that there were those at the time who saw ‘the new despotisms’ of ‘Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler’ as ‘surrogates for religion.’ He cites both Eric Voegelin and the novelist Franz Werfel, who wrote in 1932: ‘Communism and National Socialism are primitive stages in the process of overcoming ego. They are ersatz-religions, or if you prefer, ersatz for religion’; ‘the two most important movements of contemporary times, Communism and National Socialism, are anti-religious, yet they are systems of belief acting as religious surrogates and by no means just political ideologies.’¹⁷

While certainly not as widely known as Voegelin’s work there were others in the early 1930s who described Nazism and Communism as ideologies which were ‘ersatz religions’ and their adherents as seeking something akin to ‘secularised churches.’ These were the exact expressions used by the Protestant theologian Hermann Sasse in 1932 in the renowned *Church Yearbook*. Sasse drew out this comparison even further, arguing that in Nazism or Communism:

[T]here are sacred writings (e.g. *Das Kapital* by Marx) in which one believes, even if one does not know it precisely. Here there are confessions of faith with all the characteristics of a genuine Credo, for example, with the formulas regarding the rejection of false teachings (*Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 3) or with the prohibition of modification (“The Programme is unalterable,” Constitution of the NSDAP). In these confessions a doctrine is pronounced, which is so self-evident for the faithful that it needs no proof...¹⁸

¹⁶ Hans Maier, ‘Political Religion: A Concept and its Limitations,’ *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (2007): 14.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9-10. Maier himself argues ‘that Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler were not founders of religion’ (12). See also Michael Burleigh, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion,’ *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 1 (2000): 1-26.

¹⁸ Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, *Kirchliches Jahrbuch für die evangelischen Landeskirchen Deutschlands*, ed. Hermann Sasse, vol. 59 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1932), 34. Sasse later moved to Australia and taught at the Immanuel Seminary in Adelaide, now the Australian Lutheran College. An outline of his life can be found in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

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What is intriguing is that precisely these points are now reappearing in some of the most recent literature, including Rainer Bucher’s fascinating work *Hitler’s Theology*.¹⁹ Bucher makes the point that Hitler believed ‘two lessons could be learned from dogmatic form for the Nazis’ “political confession”: certainty and intolerance.²⁰

While Nazism was viewed as fundamentally racial and as an ‘ersatz religion’ or a ‘political religion’ by theologians and intellectuals, what about those who might be termed ‘ordinary Germans’? What is fascinating is that the same conclusions were reached in a minor German Christian community known as the Temple-Society (*Tempelgesellschaft*) by 1932.²¹

A Liberal Christian Response: The Temple-Society

One major problem with the notion of ‘ordinary Germans’ is that no such creatures exist, and the Templers are in some ways very much extraordinary. Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons for examining such a small and theologically liberal Christian community. To begin with, the relative obscurity of the Temple-Society considerably increases its usefulness. Given that this organisation has operated essentially since its foundation as an independent body with a voluntaristic membership, it was largely free of the sorts of church-political and strategic concerns that existed in the large German ‘state churches’ (*Landeskirchen*, funded through taxation).²²

The study of such a group also answers the call (issued by Gailus and Jantzen) for the consideration of diverse communities of German Christians. Indeed, this was a

¹⁹ Rainer Bucher, *Hitler’s Theology: A Study in Political Religion*, trans. Rebecca Pohl (London: Continuum, 2011).

²⁰ Samuel Koehne, ‘Nazism and Religion: The Problem of “Positive Christianity”,’ *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 60 (2014): 38.

²¹ The major history of the Temple-Society is Paul Sauer, *The Holy Land Called: The Story of the Temple Society*, trans. Gunhild Henley (Melbourne: Temple Society Australia, 1991). There have been two histories that deal with the ‘Templers’ in Palestine and Nazism: Heidemarie Wawrzyn, *Nazis in the Holy Land 1933–1948* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013); Ralf Balke, *Hakenkreuz im Heiligen Land: die NSDAP-Landesgruppe Palästina* (Erfurt: Sutton, 2001).

²² Shelley Baranowski, ‘The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections: Machtpolitik or Accommodation?’, *Church History* 49 (1980): 298–315.

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Christian community whose members were both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ when it came to the rise of the Nazis. The emphases of their faith (including millennialism) had led them to establish nine major communities or ‘colonies’ in Palestine under Ottoman rule, but in doing so they still strongly maintained their German identity.²³ In contemporary publications, they were listed as ‘overseas Germans’ and by 1938 they were even used in a racial case-study as to whether German ethnic groups could flourish in a foreign land.²⁴ Despite this perception, there has been a German Temple-Society in Stuttgart since 1873. This German community formed a base for Templar activities, including publishing the Temple-Society’s newspaper, *Watchtower of the Temple* (*Die Warte des Tempels*) from 1921–1935. The *Watchtower* was almost the sole means of linking all Templar communities together (including some in Russia and the United States).

Another reason to consider the group is their very liberality of faith, as some of those who most enthusiastically joined Nazism and Christianity adhered to a liberal theological tradition.²⁵ As Heschel notes, the desire of many liberal theologians was to be ‘modern,’ so that some theologians ‘gravitated towards racism as a tool to modernize Christianity and to demonstrate that its principles were in accord with those of racial theory.’ This offered ‘a veneer of sophistication’ because ‘racial theory’ appeared (at the time) ‘intellectually avant-garde.’²⁶ But this does raise the question as to the response of those who were simply members of a liberal Christian group.

The Temple-Society actually began with a strict interpretation of scripture, including a very direct reading of prophecy that meant they sought to establish themselves as the ‘people of God’ in ‘the Holy Land’ before the end of the world came.

²³ Alex Carmel, *Die Siedlungen der württembergischen Templer in Palästina 1868–1918: Ihre lokalpolitischen und internationalen Probleme*, trans. Perez Leshem (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1973).

²⁴ H. Kremer, ‘Beitrag zur Volksbiologie der in Palästina siedelnden Deutschen (Templer),’ in *Auslandsdeutsche Volksforschung*, ed. Hans Joachim Beyer (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1938), 138–51.

²⁵ Though by no means exclusively so. Zabel noted ‘it was possible for a German to ally with National Socialism from almost any church position’: Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors*, 226.

²⁶ Respectively Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 285–86; ‘Antisemitism versus Anti-Judaism,’ 272.

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However, their founder (Christoph Hoffmann) quickly moved them away from what might be termed a fundamentalist Christianity. In a series of circulars in the 1870s he denied the divinity of Christ, declared that baptism and holy communion were not binding as sacramental rites, and that the doctrine of the triune God was false.²⁷ Jesus became a model for living, and one’s ‘conscience’ became the ‘primary source’ for knowledge of God. This removed the authority of the Bible, which was no longer seen as ‘the word of God.’²⁸

It is certainly true that this liberality in matters of faith made it difficult to argue against the kinds of ideas of purging the Old Testament or creating a ‘German’ Church that came to the fore with the German Christian movement. By 1938, the President of the Temple-Society found himself having to contend with Elders who were speaking out ‘publicly from the pulpit against Christianity and the Bible.’²⁹ One of the German leaders, Dietrich Lange, had written of his ‘objections to the Old Testament’ by 1936. A year later he was arguing in favour of ‘new religions’ like Wilhelm Hauer’s neo-pagan ‘German Faith’ and Mathilde Ludendorff’s bizarre beliefs (which were anti-Christian).³⁰

As a result of all this, the history of the Templers both reflects and challenges some of the conventional narratives of this period. Finally, the group has a direct connection to Australia. During World War II, the Palestine Templers were interned by the British, then many of them were deported to Australia and interned at Tatura. As

²⁷ Christoph Hoffmann, *Sendschreiben über den Tempel und die Sakramente, das Dogma von der Dreieinigkeit und von der Gottheit Christi, sowie über die Versöhnung der Menschen mit Gott* (Stuttgart: J.D.Bock, 1878); Christoph Hoffmann, *Viertes und fünftes Sendschreiben über Wesen und Einrichtung der christlichen Gemeinde*, ed. Dr. J.H. (Canstatt: Wolfgang Drück, 1905).

²⁸ *Warte JG-92* (1936): 12. I will refer to *Die Warte des Tempels* as *Warte*, and each yearbook as *JG (Jahrgang)*.

²⁹ *Warte JG-94* (1938): 122. However, he believed that Nazism and Christianity were compatible: *Warte JG-95* (1939): 34.

³⁰ *Warte JG-92* (1936): 131, *Warte JG-93* (1937): 2-4.

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they became migrants at the end of the war, the centres of the Temple-Society are now Melbourne and Stuttgart.³¹

Antisemitic, Dictatorial, and a ‘New Faith’: Perspectives on Nazism by 1932

The rise of the Nazis, we should remember, was a gradual process and very much contingent on historical context. It has been argued by a number of historians that their ultimate rise to power cannot be understood without considering the impact of Hitler, although Ian Kershaw points out that we require both an understanding of ‘Hitler’s absolute centrality while at the same time placing the actions of even such a powerful dictator in the context of the forces, internal and external, which shaped the exercise of his power.’ Moreover, he emphasises the desire for ‘national salvation’ as a key driving force.³² Nationalism and the desire for a ‘German Mussolini’ were also the way in which the Templers were introduced to the Nazis.

The first mention of the Nazi Party appeared in an article in 1923.³³ In this, Dietrich Lange gave a positive (though brief) assessment of the National Socialist movement, focusing largely on the Nazis as a nationalist movement. The article was published on 31 May, meaning that the NSDAP was promoted prior to the attempted Munich Putsch in November and the consequent fame derived from this. Lange argued for the importance of unity in Germany, and included the curious combination of Gandhi and Mussolini as role-models for nationalism. In his opinion National Socialism represented a key nationalistic movement, symptomatic of a broader trend away from ‘internationalist sentimentalism.’ This contradicts the stated international perspective of

³¹ Suzanne D. Rutland, “‘Buying out of the Matter’: Australia’s role in Restitution for the Templer Property in Israel,” *Journal of Israeli History* 24 (2005): 135-54; Samuel Koehne, “‘You have to be Pleasing and Co-operative’: Australia’s Vision Splendid for Post-World War II Migrants,” *Traffic* 5(2004): 27-45.

³² ‘The Uniqueness of Nazism’ in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 347.

³³ *Warte JG-79* (1923): 78-9.

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the Temple-Society but makes some sense in the period after the First World War, when Germany appeared to have been treated as a pariah state.

Another Templer (Theodor Fast) queried the appropriateness of such a discussion in the *Warte*. He saw Lange’s article as presenting far too simplistic a picture and believed that such ideas would eventually only lead to fresh bloodshed.³⁴ Opposing the closed nature of nationalist views that promoted an ‘us or them’ paradigm, Fast called for empathy instead. He saw the Templers’ mission as encompassing more than just Germany and was astounded that it should be proposed ‘salvation’ should be expected from the ‘Fascists in Italy and National Socialists in Bavaria.’

By 1931 Dietrich Lange returned to the same topic in what he saw as a time of extreme crisis. He argued Germany’s ‘ship of state’ was ‘in the highest danger on the seas,’ threatened by party confusion and strife. Yet he cautioned that it remained to be seen whether the ‘Third Reich’—‘so desperately looked for and imminently expected’—would lead to smooth sailing.³⁵ Otto Rubitschung thought that it was more important for Germans to work together than rely on the ‘vague hope of a powerful revolution or of a German Mussolini.’³⁶ Despite these reservations, both statements indicate that the idea of a Nazi revolution was in the German *Zeitgeist*, undoubtedly because of the extraordinary success of the Nazis in 1930, when they moved from holding 12 seats in the German federal parliament to holding 107.

A growing awareness of the Nazis as a significant factor, and as a movement that ‘we here in Germany are daily reminded of’ led the Templers Richard Hoffmann and Alfred Weller to write a series of critical articles on the NSDAP in 1932.³⁷ This was the Templers’ first detailed introduction to Nazi ideology. They could not help but pay

³⁴ Ibid., 92-3.

³⁵ *Warte* JG-88 (1931): 185-86.

³⁶ Ibid., 83.

³⁷ *Warte* JG-89 (1932): 25-7, 33-5, 83-6 (here at 25).

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attention to such a detailed and lengthy assessment, which spanned five issues of the *Warte*.³⁸ As part of their detailed study, Weller and Hoffmann printed the entire Nazi Programme, giving the Templers the Party’s stated aims.³⁹ They noted that Hitler had declared this Programme unalterable, but in order to understand it they turned to a range of Nazi sources, not least *Mein Kampf*.⁴⁰

While Hoffmann and Weller wished to examine the Party as a political group, they did note from the outset that the NSDAP was not so easily categorised, blurring the lines between the political and ideological, and spilling over into an ideological movement.⁴¹ This is a continuing difficulty in current historiography regarding the Party Programme: that it represented both a political and ideological statement. While Hoffmann and Weller began by stating that there were difficulties in understanding exactly what the Nazis stood for, four definite themes appear: Hitler’s importance; the uncertainty about what the Nazis would do in government (aside from establish a dictatorship); the centrality of race and antisemitism to the Party; and that the movement was more a faith than a political party. This was a point that Richard Hoffmann made outright: ‘National Socialism appears to me largely to be a faith, to which people either adhere or do not.’⁴²

The centrality of Hitler was clear. They began with a history of the NSDAP, but included a biography of Hitler, viewing him as the driving force behind National Socialism.⁴³ Indeed, the NSDAP was referred to as the ‘Hitler Movement.’ The Templers were also made aware that the Nazis were founded on racial antisemitism. Relying on *Mein Kampf*, Hoffmann and Weller stated unequivocally that while one of the men who

³⁸ *Warte* JG-89 (1932), Issues 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12, from 28 February to 30 June 1932. This series of articles is discussed in: Sauer, *Holy Land*, 169; Wawrzyn, *Nazis in the Holy Land 1933–1948*, 67–8.

³⁹ *Warte* JG-89 (1932): 26–7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25–6. They relied largely on *Mein Kampf* and Theodor Heuss’ book, *Hitlers Weg*.

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inspired Hitler (Karl Lueger) had been antisemitic on religious grounds, ‘Hitlerian antisemitism’ was racial.⁴⁴ Much of the rest of Hitler’s biography dealt with the failed 1923 Putsch.

Already, there were some elements of the ‘Hitler myth.’⁴⁵ While generally viewed in a negative light, Hitler was credited with an excellent ability to read behaviour and understand psychology, which allowed him not only to characterise those who were killed in the Putsch as martyrs but also to join the disparate strands of the movement together and rule them ‘with a strong hand.’⁴⁶ In order to define the essence of Nazism, the Party Programme was studied in detail. Weller and Hoffmann were hard pressed to find specific practical measures, but were clear that Hitler wanted a dictatorship, an autocratic state in which the will of the *Führer* would be paramount. In their view, the Nazis wished to make the state into the image of the Nazi Party itself, to the extent that they believed the term ‘leadership’ (*Führung*) was in reality a synonym for ‘dictatorship’ (*Diktatur*) in the Nazi lexicon.

The focus of the Nazi ‘faith’ was very much one of ‘national salvation.’ As Weller and Hoffmann put it, Hitler argued he was going to oust the ‘November criminals’—those who had ended WWI by signing the armistice—and set in place a regime that would make ‘everything better.’⁴⁷ This was fairly appealing given some of the historical circumstances, and Germany’s very real economic and political crises were emphasised by Richard Hoffmann in a series of articles on reparations payments that ran parallel to the articles on the NSDAP.⁴⁸ What was also appealing to Christians in Germany was the notion of a strong ‘moral’ basis to the NSDAP (including a hard-line attitude to crime

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26. See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Houghton Mifflin & Co, 1943; repr., London: Pimlico, 2004), 109-10.

⁴⁵ Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁶ *Warte JG*-89 (1932): 33. This is a fairly accurate assessment.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 75-6, 76-7, 81-3, 89-92.

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and pornography) and Hoffmann and Weller stated that Hitler had sought to ‘march against the Babylon of Sin, Berlin’ in 1923.⁴⁹

While Hoffmann pointed out that there were major problems, he and Weller did not see the Nazis as the solution in any sense, particularly as they expressed doubt about what the Nazis actually intended to do in power.⁵⁰ They did note that the Nazis wished to base the entire economic system on *Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz*, but pointed out that the Nazi perception of this as a battle between ‘Germanic’ socialism and ‘Jewish’ capitalism made no sense. Hoffmann stated that the Nazi argument that economic systems were racially defined was ‘simply false.’⁵¹ It was largely on these grounds that they saw Nazism as having no rational foundation, forming an expression of faith rather than reason.⁵² The Nazis themselves played on such concepts and Leni Riefenstahl’s film of the 1933 Nuremberg Nazi Party rally was entitled *The Victory of Faith*.⁵³

The only definite point Hoffmann and Weller could find, the one clear thing that the Party stood for, was antisemitism. They stated ‘antisemitism plays a fundamental role in the Party,’ pointing out that the Nazis believed that Jews could not be citizens of Germany (Point 4 of the Nazi Programme), and that they sought to fight the ‘Jewish-materialistic spirit’ (Point 24).⁵⁴ Taking the definitions in *Mein Kampf* of Jews as ‘culture destroyers’ and Aryans as ‘culture creators,’ they demonstrated Hitler’s hatred of the Jews.⁵⁵ As they concluded, ‘it comes as no surprise that Hitler is of the opinion that the most important factor in the destruction of Germany is a lack of understanding of the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27. Berlin in the Weimar period was often seen as the ‘Babylon of the World’: David J. Diephouse, *Pastors and Pluralism in Württemberg, 1918–1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 14.

⁵⁰ *Warte JG-89* (1932): 81.

⁵¹ Ibid., 35.

⁵² Ibid., 81–2.

⁵³ It is not as famous as Riefenstahl’s later work on the 1934 rally (*Triumph of the Will*) because Hitler ordered copies of the film destroyed after the Röhm Putsch, as Ernst Röhm had featured prominently: Steven Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* (United Kingdom: Little, Brown, 2007), 121, 131.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁵ Ibid. They quoted Hitler’s idea of Jews as ‘parasites’ in the body of the *Volk* (84).

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race problem,’ while adding that it was illogical that 600,000 German Jews could cause Germany’s downfall.⁵⁶

Hoffmann and Weller also addressed the question of ‘positive Christianity,’ which appeared in Point 24 of the Nazi Programme. As I have explained elsewhere, the longer history of this term related to traditional and doctrinal Christian faith (orthodox Christianity) and it was certainly understood in this sense by the Templers.⁵⁷ In 1917 the Templer President Christian Rohrer specifically wrote of ‘two religions’ in the Protestant Church: the ‘positive’ and the ‘liberal.’ He viewed ‘positive’ as synonymous with ‘orthodox,’ and described the liberal and positive views as divided according to their ‘positions regarding the traditional dogmatic creed.’⁵⁸

Hoffmann and Weller were clearly conversant with this understanding, but argued that Point 24 was so vague that nothing could be gleaned from it by itself.⁵⁹ They offered brief synopses of some of the dominant views on Christianity in the Nazi movement, and made points that have been prominent in the historiography in recent years. For instance, they argued that there were those in the Nazi movement who simply accepted it ‘as true’ that ‘Jesus was an Aryan.’ They went on to argue that ‘thereby National Socialists are offered the possibility, that they can retain Christianity as a religious confession’—which would not be the case if Jesus was Jewish. They also noted that those who could not accept ‘that Jesus was an Aryan’ were driven to ‘a rejection of Christianity’ and returned instead ‘to the Germanic cult of gods (cult of Odin, etc.).’⁶⁰ They noted Alfred Rosenberg’s importance as a Party leader and considered his work *Myth of the Twentieth Century* (*Mythus*), which they described as based on a racial conception

⁵⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁷ Koehne, ‘The Problem of “Positive Christianity”’, 28–42.

⁵⁸ *Warte JG-73* (1917): 57–8; essentially that positive Christianity was in support of the ‘dogmatic creed’ while liberal Christianity challenged it.

⁵⁹ *Warte JG-89* (1932): 84.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 85. See Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Poewe, *New Religions*.

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of the world and as intellectually bankrupt. In this regard, they cited the circularity of Rosenberg’s argument that the Nordic race was the most important creative force in world history, so that any ‘creative’ historical figure must have been Nordic.⁶¹

Having discussed the fact that the movement did not allow any place for women, except as ‘wives and mothers’, the writers concluded with the important point: ‘We live in a time of crisis.’ Hoffmann and Weller described the Nazis as very much a party of the ‘negative campaign,’ unable to provide (or even indicate) genuine and concrete solutions to Germany’s problems. Instead, they saw the Nazis as hanging out a political shingle that was colourful but uninformative, pinning their hopes on formulaic slogans.⁶²

‘The Nazis’ success was attributed to a good use of mass-psychology by Hitler but also to Germany’s crises: ‘The crisis, in which we live, is not only one that applies to the economic field, but also to the intellectual-spiritual.’ In their view the rise of the Nazis had to be understood in a societal context where there was a trend towards mysticism, to sects and movements of faith: to the irrational. It was in this category that they placed the NSDAP. Ultimately they concluded that Nazism was an ersatz religion, whose members were anchored in a religious understanding of the Party rather than in a rational allegiance to political objectives, and ‘where reason has nothing more to say, one moves to the field where faith reigns.’⁶³

Conclusion

Like the Protestant Church leadership, the Templers had a clear perspective of the Nazi Party, its aims and objectives, before the Nazis took power.⁶⁴ It is also important that these come from contemporary observers, and writers who were

⁶¹ *Warte* JG-89 (1932): 84-5.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁴ The Protestant Church leadership was well aware of the NSDAP’s antisemitism, political violence and revolutionary aims: J. R. C. Wright, *‘Above Parties’: The Political Attitudes of the German Protestant Church Leadership, 1918–1933* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 58, 74, 83-4, 98-100, 112.

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members of the group itself. Hoffmann and Weller did state that it was unclear how the Nazis would act if they actually achieved power. From their perspective, this was because the Nazi Programme was vague as to practical measures, and the possibility existed that the movement would change once it reached a position of power. This possibility offered the disjunction between stated purpose and action that some Germans clung to, the hope that the Nazis’ actions might be different from their stated objectives.

So, what could be known about the Nazis? A great deal—but how that knowledge then was either used or ignored is perhaps the more pertinent matter. The Nazi Party was described as seeking to build an antisemitic dictatorship, and Nazism was seen as a substitute faith, yet approximately 17% of the Templers in Palestine ended up joining the NSDAP.⁶⁵ Germans could be very well aware of what the Nazis stood for by 1933. But whether this mattered to ‘ordinary Germans’ is another question entirely, particularly in the ‘revivalist’ atmosphere that characterised the early years of the Nazi regime.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ As NSDAP membership did not include children or Hitler Youth members, Balke estimated every third adult was an NSDAP member: *NSDAP–Palästina*, 69, 190–91. Wawrzyn states: ‘approximately 33% of all Palestine-Germans participated in the NS network, and almost 19% of the Palestine-Germans were NSDAP members’: Wawrzyn, *Nazis in the Holy Land*, 73–8, Appendix II.

⁶⁶ See Gailus’ excellent work, in which he argues that 1933 formed a kind of ‘Protestant experience’ that contained notions of a national and spiritual revival: Manfred Gailus, ‘Overwhelmed by their own Fascination with the “Ideas of 1933”: Berlin’s Protestant Social Milieu in the Third Reich,’ *German History* 20 (2002): 462–93.