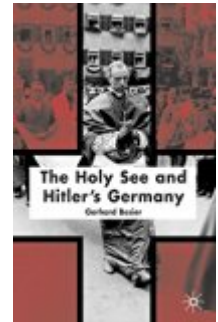


**Gerhard Besier.** *The Holy See and Hitler's Germany*. Translated by W. R. Ward. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 272 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-8831-7.



**Reviewed by** Martin Menke

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**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

Gerhard Besier, the primary author of this work, is one of German Protestantism's foremost historians. He completed the late Klaus Scholder's series on the churches and the Third Reich by writing the third and final volume covering the years 1934 to 1937.[1] He has also written survey volumes on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian church history.[2] Editor of *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, he also served as director of the Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung in Dresden. His latest offering pursues a line of inquiry initially established by Scholder into the political and moral culpability of the Catholic hierarchy in the interwar period. In short, Scholder and his students argue that the Catholic hierarchy in Rome sacrificed the political and institutional interests of German Catholics in favor of diplomatic accommodation with the Third Reich. The German subtitle of this work, *Faszination des Totalitären*, shows that Besier is taking the argument further than Scholder did. (The English translation is missing the subtitle of the German original).[3] Besier and his collabora-

tor, Francesca Piombo, argue that the highest levels of the Catholic Church's hierarchy perceived a common bond between the church's claims to complete authority over its members and the secular claims of Europe's right-wing totalitarian regimes. In essence, Besier is trying to provide support for the "affinity theory," first posited by Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, to explain apparent cooperation between the Vatican and fascist regimes.[4] Interestingly, Besier does not mention Scholder's claims that an academic article on the Lateran Agreements by Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, chairman of the Center Party and advisor to the Holy See during the German concordat negotiations, demonstrated the ease with which Catholic leaders accommodated fascism.[5]

Besier's rich use of the scholarly literature and of the fairly recently opened Vatican archival records of the Berlin nunciature and the Secretariat of State, however, undermines his case. The best example of this problem is found in Besier's description of the continued effort by the Holy See to seek accommodation with the communist

regime in order to protect the faithful in Russia. While these negotiations ultimately failed, they showed that the Holy See was willing to negotiate even with regimes to which it was ideologically opposed in order to win some gain for the faithful and the institutional church. Such negotiations became even easier in cases where the regime shared the church's opposition to communism, as in Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Furthermore, Besier, again building on the scholarly literature, shows clearly how the Holy See carefully sought to avoid taking sides between countries at odds with one another—for example, in the dispute between Germany and Poland over Upper Silesia—even if that meant offending the church at the local level.

Besier also offers a differentiated analysis of the church's dealings with Mussolini's Italy and with Weimar Germany and its Nazi successor. The church was willing to sacrifice Don Sturzo's Partito Popolare Italiano to reach peace with the fascist regime, but insisted continuously on the right of Catholicism to play a role in public life as part of the Lateran Agreements. While Besier tries to show that the Holy See was equally willing to sacrifice the German Center Party in order to reach an agreement with the new Nazi government, the evidence for this claim is thin, and the analogy to the *Popolarifalters* when one compares the history and strength of the Center Party with the always more controversial history of Italy's Catholic party.

Besier is absolutely correct when he uses sources from the Vatican and other Catholic archives to show that the early-twentieth-century Catholic Church felt no particular commitment to democracy and indeed preferred to make agreements with regimes less subject to parliamentary control. In parliamentary systems, as cardinal secretary Eugenio Pacelli's exchange with German chancellor and Center Party leader Heinrich Brüning showed, even Catholic leaders had to take into account coalition partners and the views of the parliamentary opposition. While Besier

does not address the origins of this lack of commitment to democracy, it stems from the late-nineteenth-century Catholic Church's attempt to come to terms with pluralism and secularism. The evolving view, known as accidentalism, held that the form of secular government was irrelevant as long as the ability of the faithful to live their lives according to the teachings of the church remained guaranteed. Twentieth-century developments in Catholic theology were necessary before the church could arrive at the clear preference for democratic government adopted at the Second Vatican Council.

Besier also correctly shows that some church leaders, such as the notorious Alois Hudal, thought that a real commonality of values and ideals existed between Catholics and fascists. As Kevin Spicer has shown in *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (2008), it was possible for Catholics to believe that such a symbiosis was possible. Such Catholics, however, remained a small, vocal minority.

It is also clear that Besier exaggerates his case when he notes as evidence of a preference for totalitarian regimes that the pope is an absolute ruler of the Vatican state; one can hardly infer from the Vatican's form of government a preference for absolutism everywhere. To be precise, it is the Holy See, not the State of the Vatican City, that conducts papal foreign policy. What becomes clear is that, regardless of the form of government in each country, Pacelli measured governments by the extent to which they guaranteed the rights of the institutional church, accepted the role of Catholicism in public life, and tolerated the church's claim to lay down moral and social norms for the faithful. While Besier has shown that the two popes of the interwar period embraced authoritarianism, if not totalitarianism, as a compatible form of government, new research, especially in the newly released Cesare Orsenigo-Pacelli correspondence, also shows that this acceptance of totalitarianism was not absolute, and

was always conditional on an acceptance of an almost medieval view of the church as absolute, even among absolute regimes.

While the work relies heavily on secondary sources, it offers new insights based on an analysis of the recently opened correspondence between the Berlin and Munich nunciatures on the one hand and the cardinal secretary of state's office in the Holy See on the other. This correspondence, however, also weakens Besier's argument. It shows that, from the beginning, Orsenigo and Pacelli had deep doubts about the possibility of working with the National Socialist leadership. This material might even lend some support to the later claim made by church leaders that, by the time the Reich Concordat was ratified, it became a legal and diplomatic defense against Nazi attacks on Catholic life and institutions in Germany. If anything, these documents might serve to improve Orsenigo's reputation as an ineffective representative of Catholic interests and as somewhat too quick to accommodate the Nazi regime.

In the end, Besier offers much useful analysis and insight, but does not consider the full context of the actors and their times. In his differentiated analysis, however, Besier offers a much better study than the previous works by John Cornwell and Daniel J. Goldhagen on the same issue.[6] Therefore, this work can be seen as a useful installment in the so-called Pius wars about the controversial role of Pacelli, first as nuncio to Munich and Berlin, then as cardinal secretary of state, and finally as Pope Pius XII. It seems these "wars" will not end anytime soon.

#### Notes

[1]. Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, vol. 1: Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusionen* (Frankfurt: Propyläen, 1977); Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, vol. 2: Das Jahr der Ernüchterung 1934: Barmen und Rom* (Berlin: Siedler, 1985); and Gerhard Besier, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, vol. 3: Spaltun-*

*gen und Abwehrkämpfe 1934-1937* (Munich: Propyläen, 2001).

[2]. Gerhard Besier, *Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998), and *Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000).

[3]. Gerhard Besier and Francesca Piombo, *Der Heilige Stuhl und Hitler-Deutschland: Die Faszination des Totalitären* (Munich: DVA, 2004).

[4]. Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, *Nationalsozialismus und Kirche: Religionspolitik von Partei und Staat bis 1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974).

[5]. Klaus Scholder, "Altes und Neues zur Vorgeschichte des Reichskonkordats," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 26 (1978): 537.

[6]. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Penguin, 1999); and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

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