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Richard Steigmann-Gall. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 294 pp. $30,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82371-5.

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Richard Steigmann-Gall's lively and sometimes provocative study of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity breaks new ground. He takes issue with those, like this reviewer, who argue that Nazism and Christianity were incompatible, both in theory and practice. Instead he examines more closely the areas of overlap and the consequent ambiguities in the minds of many leading Nazis. He rejects the view that, when Nazi orators before 1933 made frequent use of a Christian vocabulary, it was purely a tactical device to gain votes. Later on, such deceptive religiosity would be discarded as no longer needed. Instead he shows the extensive and consistent appreciation of Christianity as a religious system in the Nazi ranks, even among several members of its hierarchy. Similarly he disputes the claim that those Christians who flocked to the Nazi cause were shallow-minded opportunists, jumping on a popular political bandwagon. Instead, he argues that the stressful conditions of a defeated Germany led many sincere Christians, particularly Protestants, to regard the Nazi cause as theologically justified as well as politically appropriate.

Nazism idealized, even idolized, the German nation and *Volk*. Steigmann-Gall shows how this tendency was already present in the newly-created Bismarckian *Reich*, and was greatly fostered by the Protestant clergy. Their wartime theology in 1914 asserted divine approval of Germany's cause and called down damnation upon her enemies. After her defeat in 1918, the clergy provided the spiritual climate for an apocalyptic view of Germany's destiny, valiantly guarding itself against the onslaughts of the evils of Marxism, Judaism, Bolshevism and materialism. Such dualistic thinking both ran parallel to and nurtured the extremism of the radical political groups of the 1920s, out of which Nazism emerged as the most successful.

Nazism's most notorious characteristic was its antisemitism. Many observers have claimed that the Holocaust was the culmination of centuries of Christian intolerance and persecution. Churchmen, for their part, have sought to draw a line between earlier Christian theological anti-Judaism and the far more virulent Nazi racial antisemitism. But Steigmann-Gall, following Uriel Tal, shows how easily both Catholic and Protestant Germans could merge their religious antipathies with the Nazis' political campaign. On the other side, he shows how many Nazis believed in the religious basis of their hatred of Jews, who formed a negative point of reference for an ideology of national-religious integration. Luther's stance against the Jews could thus be supported, for more than merely tactical reasons. And Hitler's support of "positive Christianity" was an attempt to overcome confessional differences in order to concentrate Christian forces against their arch-enemy, the Jew. To be sure many leading Nazis were anti-clerical. But this venom was principally directed against those priests and pastors who put their institutional loyalties ahead of their national ones. This did not prevent these Nazis from believing that their movement was in some sense Christian. It was on this basis that such Nazis as Gauleiter Wilhelm Kube, the Bavarian Minister of Education, Hans Schemm, and Hanns Kerrl, the Prussian Minister of Justice who later became Reich Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, could seek an alliance with those elements in the churches, especially Protestants, who supported the Nazis' authoritarian, anti-Marxist and antisemitic policies. This was not, Steigmann-Gall believes, a mere opportunistic relationship on either side. Both believed they were adopting a genuinely Christian stance, "following a call to faith from God, which we hear in our *Volk* movement" (p. 73).

Following this interpretation, Steigmann-Gall finds that even those Nazis most hostile to the churches could still have an ambivalent relationship to Christianity. For example, Alfred Rosenberg, in his book, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, made numerous positive references to Christ as a fighter and antisemite, and was even warmer in praise of the noted mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart. If the Church could be purged of its Jew-

ish and Roman accretions, Rosenberg could look forward to a Nordic-western soul faith which would reincarnate a purer Christianity. In this he was only adopting the ideas of at least one extreme wing of "German Christian" Protestantism.

Certainly, these "paganists," as Steigmann-Gall calls them, exercised little control over Nazi policy. Hitler stoutly and consistently rejected any talk of an ersatz religion based on German myths or culminating in Valhalla. The "positive Christianity" of such leaders as Goering continued to stress the advantages of a national non-denominational Christianity in such areas as education or social welfare. And even strident anti-clericals such as Goebbels or Streicher supported the idea of an Aryan Christianity as an admirable moral system. The fact that the churches were the only major institutions which did not suffer *Gleichschaltung* shows, in Steigmann-Gall's view, "the fundamentally positive attitude of the Nazi state toward at least the Protestant Church as a whole." For this reason, in 1934 Hitler refused to back the radicals and in 1935 appointed an old crony and primitive Protestant, Hanns Kerrl, to be Minister of Church Affairs. The kind of Christianity Kerrl affirmed was proclaimed in his speeches: "Adolf Hitler has hammered the faith and fact of Jesus into the hearts of the German Volk.... True Christianity and National Socialism are identical." But Kerrl, who was appointed to co-ordinate the rival Protestant factions, failed. Thereupon, Steigmann-Gall notes, Hitler turned against the churches and abandoned institutional Protestantism once and for all. But even so, according to one source, he still adhered to his original ideas and was of the opinion that "Church and Christianity are not identical" (p. 188).

The differences between this interpretation and those put forward earlier are really only ones of degree and timing. Steigmann-Gall agrees that from 1937 onwards, Nazi policy toward the churches became much more hostile. The influence of such notable anti-clericals as Bormann and Heydrich grew exponentially and was restrained only by the need for wartime compromises. On the other hand, Steigmann-Gall argues persuasively that the Nazi Party's 1924 program and Hitler's policy-making speeches of the early years were not just politically motivated or deceptive in intent. Agreeing with the view taken by Hitler's fellow-countryman, the Austrian theologian Friedrich Heer, Steigmann-Gall considers these speeches to be a sincere appreciation of Christianity as a value system to be upheld. Yet he is not ready to admit that this Nazi Christianity was eviscerated of all the most essential orthodox dogmas. What remained was the vaguest impression combined with anti-Jewish prejudice. Only a few radicals on the extreme wing of liberal Protestantism would recognize such a mish-mash as true Christianity.

Steigmann-Gall is perfectly right to point out that there never was a consensus among the leading Nazis about the relationship between the Party and Christianity. As Baldur von Schirach later commented: "Of all the leading men in the Party whom I knew, everyone interpreted the party program differently [...] Rosenberg mystically, Goering and some others in a certain sense Christian" (p. 232). Ambiguities and contradictions were numerous.[1] Over the years hostility grew despite a lingering desire to uphold an ongoing Christian element, combining antisemitism and nationalism in some kind of positive assessment.

Steigmann-Gall's achievement is to have fully explored the extensive records of the Nazi era in order to illustrate these often conflicting conceptions of Christianity and to assemble the evidence in a carefully weighed evaluation. In so doing, he almost makes a convincing case. But his final view that, in light of the post-1945 ideological imperatives, Nazism had to be depicted as an evil and unchristian empire seems overdrawn. Yet he is undeniably right to point out how much Nazism owed to German Christian, especially Protestant, concepts and how much support it gained from a majority of Christians in Germany. That is certainly a sobering lesson to be drawn from this interesting and well-reasoned account.

Note:

[1]. As an example of the differences between Nazi leaders, the following anecdote is recorded. On meeting Kerrl shortly after his appointment as Church Minister, Heinrich Himmler told him, "I thought you were only acting piously hitherto, but now I see you actually are pious. I shall treat you badly in the future." When the astonished Kerrl asked why, the Reichsfuehrer SS answered, "Well, in your view, the worse you are handled here below, the better marks you will receive later."

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