

Fatal Coincidences in 1933

Nazism's Triumph and Martin Luther's 450th Birthday

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By the fall of 1933, right at the time of Martin Luther's 450th birthday, the triumph of National Socialism in Germany was complete.¹ Competing political parties had been abolished, unions had been dissolved, all youth organizations were pressured to merge with Nazi youth groups. Beginning in April, civil servants with a Jewish background as well as civil servants with liberal or socialist convictions were being dismissed from their positions. The ranks of university professors had been purged. Thousands upon thousands of those who were not welcome in the new *Reich* had decided to flee, to emigrate. Thousands upon thousands of those whom the Nazis considered their enemies had been put into concentration camps. As early as March of 1933, democratic forms of government and the rule of law were discontinued as an emergency law had given Hitler's government extraordinary political powers. In several German cities Storm Troopers (SA) murdered opponents of the new regime without being brought to justice. Early in April of 1933 Jewish shops had been boycotted and many of them were vandalized. In May, in German university towns books of authors considered spreading "un-German values," were thrown into bonfires. By the summer of 1933 Nazi propaganda dominated public discourse; Nazi slogans permeated all spheres of life, including schools.

Even before 1933, some German Protestants had been among the most active and loyal supporters of the Nazi movement. In some Protestant territorial churches more than half of the pastors joined the Nazi party before Hitler came

1. This essay is a revised version of the lecture given by Professor Lehmann on the occasion of him being awarded an honorary doctorate by the Faculty of Theology at Lund University in 2017.

to power. In the elections of 1928 and 1932, the Catholic Center party and the Social Democrats were able to retain most of their public support. By contrast, the vast majority of Protestants voted for the Hitler party.² When *Reichspräsident* Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934) appointed Hitler as *Reichskanzler* in January of 1933, thus entrusting the central government to the National Socialist Party, Protestants all over Germany rejoiced. They believed that a new and better chapter in the history of Germany had begun. With very few exceptions Protestants backed the new regime without any reservations. It was not that some Protestants failed to recognize that harsh and unjust measures were taken by the Nazis, but they dismissed any objections with the remark that any new beginning demanded some sacrifice. An idiom that minimized the effects of the disaster became very popular in 1933: “Wo gehobelt wird, da fallen Spähne.” In English: “You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.” This sentence is an indication of the public, indeed the Protestant mood and of the way Nazi violence was not taken seriously. Those who supported Hitler did not care about the early victims of Nazi rule and did not comprehend the political and cultural implications of Hitler’s quest for totalitarian rule.

I plan to analyze three aspects of this story. First, we have to try to answer the question why the vast majority of German Protestants was so enthusiastic when Hitler came to power. Second, it is necessary to demonstrate what the rise of a Germanic, or “brown”³ variety of Protestantism meant for the celebration of Martin Luther’s 450th birthday. Third, I will conclude with at least a brief look at the views of a young dissident, the views of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), during this turbulent year.

German Protestants Rejoice in 1933

Ever since the Reformation, most Protestants believed that a strong state was God-given. Early on in the turbulent process that historians call the Reformation, Luther’s personal destiny, and the future of his reform-movement, depended on the support given to him by the Saxon Elector Frederick the Wise (1486–1525). Without the protection granted by this sovereign, Luther would not have survived papal persecution, and certainly not the confrontation with Emperor Charles V (1500–1558) at Worms in April of 1521. In the following years, Frederick the Wise and some of his fellow territorial princes helped to establish mainline Lutheranism as an independent tradition. They eradicated any influence of early dissenters, enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*) as they were called. At the same time, they used the Luther movement to extend their power within the Holy Roman Empire. The secularization of monasteries filled their coffers. In those territories that turned Protestant, the new church became a stable ele-

2. Jürgen W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler*, Munich 1991; Hartmut Lehmann, *Protestantische Weltansichten: Transformationen seit dem 17. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 1998, 130–152.

3. The Nazi Storm Troopers, the SA, were wearing brown shirts.

ment in the emerging territorial absolutism within less than a generation. By the time of the peace treaty of Augsburg in 1555, within Protestant communities, confessional indoctrination replaced independent reading of biblical texts, and the strong hand of secular rulers gave church-leaders power over their opponents, in particular those believing in adult baptism.

In the next few centuries, the ties between Protestant hierarchy and those in power did not weaken. To be sure, there were some conflicts, but Lutheran theologians never developed theories of resistance in cases where the authorities failed to observe their duties. Rather, Protestants were able to accommodate themselves to changing regimes like absolutism, enlightened despotism, or the union of throne and altar in the era following the French Revolution. In different periods, a strong state always seemed to safeguard Protestant positions against their enemies, first and foremost Roman Catholics, but in later decades also against socialists and free-thinkers. After the fall of the Hohenzollern monarchy in 1918, Protestants, with few exceptions, rejected the new forms of democratic government as spelled out in the Weimar Constitution. They detested parliamentary debates as signs of weakness, and political compromise as an indication of lacking political strength. But then came Hitler with his promise to do away with the so-called system of Weimar, with the promise to abolish the Treaty of Versailles and to lead the Germans back to political independence and greatness. Most Protestants rejoiced.

Ever since the Reformation, up until the second half of the nineteenth century, Protestants had believed in individual conversion. Since the 1880s, however, under the influence of missionaries working among African tribes, more and more Protestants came to the conclusion that God had not only created individuals, individuals who could be converted, but whole peoples, *Völker*. Just as whole tribes could be converted, they believed, also in Europe whole peoples that had drifted away from Christianity could be rechristianized. Furthermore, some Protestants believed that not all *Völker* were equal, but that God had created a hierarchy of peoples. According to this theory, some *Völker*, some peoples, had been endowed by God with better qualities than others. Not surprisingly, Germanic peoples, including Anglo-Saxons, were considered superior to those with a Latin background who in turn seemed superior to peoples of Slavic origin. However, the hierarchy of peoples was not stable. Rather, as Darwin had explained the origin and development of species, *Völker* were constantly fighting for superiority. In this battle for ultimate superiority, God rewarded those *Völker* who were obedient to his commands while punishing those who persisted in sinning.⁴

4. Hartmut Lehmann, "Von der irrationalen Hoffnung des deutschen Volkes vor und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg auf Erlösung", in Alexander Deeg & Christian Lehnert (eds), *Wir glauben das Neue: Liturgie und Liturgiewissenschaft unter dem Einfluss der völkischen Bewegung*, Leipzig 2014, 17–30; Manfred Gailus & Hartmut Lehmann (eds), *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten in Deutschland (1870–1970): Konturen, Entwicklungslinien und Umbrüche eines Weltbilds*, Göttingen 2005.

In the late nineteenth century, the German language was flooded with compound words containing the term *Volk*: *Volkskirche*, *Volksheer*, *Volksmission*, *Volkspredigt*, *Volkskörper*, *Volksgesundheits*, *Volksempfanden*, and so on. No term captured the minds more than the term *Volksgemeinschaft*. In English: The common bond, or the unity, of a people. The term *Volksgemeinschaft* was supplemented by the term *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, that is the common destiny of the people, and during the First World War *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* was understood as *Kampfgemeinschaft*, that is as the companionship of those fighting. All of this happened before the Nazis came to power. But once the Nazis were in power, the term *Volksgemeinschaft* overshadowed all other political terms completely. Every German was expected to be an enthusiastic member of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and everyone was called a *Volksgenosse*. Protestants did not protest, quite to the contrary. Most of them liked the idea that the whole German people had been united under the swastika. When groups of storm troopers attended church in the spring of 1933, and some of them even got married in church, Protestant pastors concluded that the German people had become, once again, God's chosen people.

The notion that people were accountable to God was also applied to times past. In the German case, a vast majority of Protestants was convinced that God had elected them to fulfill a special task for humankind by choosing their own Martin Luther to renew religious life in his native Germany and the world. As many Germans decided not to follow Luther, punishment followed in the form of the Thirty-Years-War. But according to this national version of salvation-history, God did not give up on the Germans as his chosen people. Rather, after punishing them through Napoleon, God recognized the beginnings of a thorough religious awakening during the opposition against Napoleon. God's reward: the victory over Napoleon in 1813.

This unique story continued until 1933. Accordingly, the revolutions of 1830 and of 1848/1849 were interpreted as God's punishment. By contrast, the German victory over "sinful France" in 1871 was seen as a unique reward. Obviously, leading Protestants concluded, God had observed the work that some Protestants were doing in the field of foreign and domestic missions since 1848. But much to the dismay of pious Protestants, German unification in 1871 was not followed by a religious revival of the whole German people. Sadly, they concluded, the rise of socialism and terrorist attacks against the life of the German emperor William (1797–1888) led to another divine punishment. But the belief in this cycle of reward and punishment did not wane. When the German government decided to go to war in August of 1914, hopes that God would reward the Germans with victory as in 1871 again captured the minds of most German Protestants. Now, at last, Germany would become what they thought it should be: a country united under God, pious and God-fearing. In November 1918, with unconditional defeat, all vaunted hopes were shattered. The

money Protestants had invested in war bonds was lost. Protestants wondered, had they not prayed enough? Had God not taken into account that so many of their sons and fathers had lost their lives on the battle-field? But rather than interpreting events in the context of their peculiar theory of punishment and reward and concluding that the Germans may have been too sinful after all, a majority of German Protestants now took refuge to an explanation offered by Germanic myth, that is the stab-in-the-back-legend. At the end of the First World War, rather than repenting their sins and showing remorse, most German Protestants were convinced that the German army had been undefeated and had lost the war only because the home-front, that is socialists and Jews, had selfishly left the army without support, just as devious Hagen had stabbed courageous Siegfried in the back.

The rest of the story can be summed up in just a few words. As I have already mentioned, the vast majority of German Protestants never accepted the democracy of Weimar as a political order sanctioned by God. When the Nazi movement promised to overthrow this order, they did not hesitate to believe that God was about to initiate yet another stage of this national version of salvation history. What happened in 1933, therefore, was interpreted as a final stage in a story that had begun with the Reformation, continued with the victories over Napoleon in 1813 and over France in 1871, and could be glimpsed in the emotional beginning of the First World War in 1914. God should be thanked, they thought, that he gave the Germans yet another chance in 1933, indeed, in all likelihood their last chance to live up to God's promise that the Germans were his chosen people.⁵

Moreover, ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, some Protestant theologians believed that whole peoples, *ganze Völker*, could experience a revival and rebirth. No doubt, such revivals could constitute a religious experience. But they were much more. As part of religious rebirth, political divisions would also be overcome, social ills would be healed, in order that the whole nation would become God-fearing. This, it seems, was the situation that Protestants of all convictions had in mind as the National Socialists came to power.

Within this story of a hierarchy of peoples, of struggle for superiority, of revivals, and of punishment and reward, within all this what appears in retrospect as a rather odd view of history, Jews played a significant role. They were not included into the hierarchy of *Völker*. Rather, they were seen as a pariah people, settling among other peoples as often as they could in order to corrupt the very essence of their host nations. Early on in the eighteenth century, Pietists in Halle had initiated a programme for converting Jews to Christianity (*Judenmission*). In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, those believing

5. Hartmut Lehmann, "God Our Old Ally": The Chosen People Theme in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century German Nationalism", in William R. Hutchison & Hartmut Lehmann (eds), *Many are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, Harrisburg, PA 1996, 85–107.

in a Darwinian approach to history argued that *Judenmission* was a futile and in fact a counterproductive undertaking. True Jews could never become true Germans, racist Protestants argued. Jews could never assimilate, as their blood was stronger than baptismal water. Segregation was the call of the hour, they claimed, not attempts to include Jews into the body of the German nation. Not surprisingly, these circles quoted Martin Luther's tract on *The Jews and Their Lies*, written in 1543. After 1918, attacks against those believing in *Judenmission* became even stronger. In 1933, even the Jews who had converted to Christianity, who had studied theology and had been ordained as pastors, came under fire. Most congregations in which they lived and served as pastors distanced themselves from them, and so did fellow pastors. While some of them decided to leave Germany, a number of Nazi pastors claimed that no sector of German society was so clean of Jewish blood as the families of Lutheran pastors as they had, following Luther's advice, rejected intermarriage with Jews ever since the Reformation.⁶ It was on this basis that the most ardent followers of Hitler among German Protestants demanded the introduction of the *Arierparagraph*, a clause demonstrating pure Aryan ancestry, into the Protestant churches.

In sum: in 1933, the belief in *Volkgemeinschaft* and the superiority of Germanic peoples, the assumption that Christianity could and should be accommodated to the racial profile of the Germans, thus creating Germanic Christianity, the belief finally, that God might then reward the Germans with a huge revival, all now created the emotional setting in which state and church began preparations for Luther's 450th birthday in 1933.⁷

The German Christians Celebrate Luther's 450th Birthday

In comparison to 1917 or 2017, preparations for the 1933 event began relatively late. First plans were made at the end of 1932. In order to strengthen tourism, weeks of festivities were to be held in Eisleben, Wittenberg, and Eisenach during August and September of 1933. Since the Nazi take-over of power, however, nothing happened for many months, probably because of the rapidly changing and turbulent political situation. In May 1933, finally, Alfred Bierschwale (1883–1945), the *Reichskulturwart* of the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*), that is the official responsible for cultural affairs, presented a programme for a celebration all across Germany on the day of Luther's birthday, 10 November. Ludwig Müller (1883–1945), candidate of the German Christians for the position of *Reichsbischof*, was supposed to be the main speaker. At that time, i.e. in May 1933, the German Christians, despite internal differences, rapidly gained

6. See, for example, Hermann Werdermann, *Die deutsche evangelische Pfarrfrau: Ihre Geschichte in vier Jahrhunderten*, 2nd edn, Witten 1936.

7. Detailed account by Hansjörg Buss, "Der deutsche Luthertag 1933 und die Deutschen Christen", *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 26/2 (2013), 272–288. The following paragraph is based on the article of Hansjörg Buss. Translations of quotations from German into English are my own.

influence within German Protestantism.⁸ The majority of these believed in a radical version of *völkisch* religion, that is Germanic Christianity. Their utmost values were race, nation, and *Volkstum* plus antisemitism.⁹ A minority among German Christians was somewhat more conservative. But they also supported the political programme of the Nazi regime.

At the same time, also in May 1933, the *Evangelische Bund*, the Evangelical League, a conservative confessional society founded in 1886, following the celebrations of Luther's 400th birthday in 1883, also came forward with specific plans for Martin Luther's 450th birthday. In the elections of 1932 and in the spring of 1933, the *Evangelische Bund* had supported the Nazi party. Within the next few weeks, both initiatives, the one by the German Christians and the one by the *Evangelische Bund*, were merged. New members were asked to join, for example the Central Committee of Domestic Missions and the *Gustav-Adolf-Verein*, another confessional organization specialized in spreading Lutheranism. On 15 July, a new programme was made public. Luther's birthday should be celebrated as a day of unity for all German Protestants (*Tag der Einigung*) and as a *Volksmisionstag*, i.e. as a day when all Germans should rediscover the true sources of their faith and the true foundations of German *Volkstum* as they had been given to the Germans by the Reformation.

At the end of August, that is less than three months before Luther's birthday, the platform that had been created in July was expanded, once again. In the meantime, the organizers had asked *Reichspräsident* Hindenburg and Ludwig Müller, by then elected Bishop of the Old Prussian Union Church, to act as patrons of the event. They had created an *Ehrenpräsidium*, i.e. an honorary chair, and an *Ehrenausschuss*, an honorary committee, consisting of 157 members, among them leading members of the German Christians like professors Emanuel Hirsch (1888–1972) and Karl Fezer (1891–1960), but also the bishops of those territorial churches which the German Christians had not been able to take over like Hans Meiser (1881–1956) from Bavaria, August Marahrens (1875–1950) from Hannover, and Theophil Wurm (1868–1953) from Württemberg. Prominent National Socialists were also included, as for example Hermann Göring (1893–1946), Wilhelm Frick (1877–1946), and Franz Selde (1882–1947) as members of the honorary chair as well as Bernhard Rust (1883–1945), Robert Ley (1890–1945), and Wilhelm Murr (1888–1945) as members of the honorary committee. In late August, the chair of the *Evangelische Bund* had asked Hitler to join the project as one of the patrons. For reasons that are not completely clear, but probably because he disliked the infighting and confusion among the

8. Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, Chapel Hill, NC 1996.

9. Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Princeton 2008; Annette Göhres, Stephan Linck & Joachim Liß-Walther (eds), *Als Jesus "arisch" wurde: Kirche, Christen, Juden in Nordelbien 1933–1945*, Bremen 2004.

German Christians, Hitler decided not to be involved in the Luther festivities in an official way.

In early October of 1933, the Minister of the Interior announced the plan to give all civil servants a holiday on 10 November. But then came chaos. Hitler decided that elections for the *Reichstag* should be held on 12 November in combination with a vote on the question whether Germany should leave the League of Nations. The organizers of the so-called “German Luther Day” tried in vain to defend their plans for Luther’s birthday. They even argued that praising Luther’s legacy for the Germans could be interpreted as a vote for Hitler’s foreign policy. Their efforts were in vain, and the “German Luther Day” had to be rescheduled to a new date, 19 November. The organizers could not even prevent the Nazis from choosing 19 November as a day for special collections for the *Winterhilfswerk*, the Nazi welfare organization.

19 November 1933 was a Sunday. Therefore civil servants lost the holiday that they had been promised. But aside from that everything went as planned. Together with the flags of the German Christians and the black-white-red flag of German traditionalists, the swastika was raised at many church steeples. Within the churches, many altars were also draped with the swastika. Delegations of German Christians marched to the services together with groups of Storm Troopers and the Hitler Youth. The main service was held in the *Berliner Dom*, with *Reichspräsident* Hindenburg attending, followed by a mass rally of German Christians in the *Berliner Lustgarten*. Joachim Hossenfelder (1899–1976), member of the Nazi party since 1929 and *Reichsführer* of the German Christians was the main speaker. “We want to preserve the heritage of the Reformation,” he declared,

because we want to preserve the true gospel, because of our fathers and those who have lost their lives in the world war, as well as because of the brown army and the *Volksgenossen* who, together with Adolf Hitler, have achieved the great work of our national unity.

In most German cities and towns, and even in most villages, similar events were staged. Through this, the celebration of Luther’s 450th birthday became a massive show of German Christian propaganda.

In some of the smaller places, e.g. Eisleben, one could also observe elements of traditional folk culture with songs and plays like in 1883. But on 19 November 1933, on the occasion of the “German Luther Day,” perhaps for the first and last time, the German Christians were able to dominate the public scene completely. Let me illustrate this with a quote from a declaration issued by *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller:

We want to carry the Lutheran fighting-spirit which demands clear decisions and which does not stop until such decisions are made to our whole *Volk*; now that the Germans are woken up and shaken by the German Revolution they should also rediscover the gospel in the same way that Luther, the most German of all Germans, has explained it to us.

In other words: Luther's heritage was completely merged with Nazi ideology; the Nazi movement was interpreted as the fulfillment of Luther's innermost wishes. Hitler appeared as Luther's congenial heir. Not explicitly in Berlin, but in some speeches in other places, Luther's radical antisemitism was also invoked as a special legacy that should be cherished.

In retrospect we know that resistance against the German Christians had begun several weeks before the celebrations held on 19 November. After the General Synod of the Old Prussian Church had adopted the "Aryan Laws" for their church in September, Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) and some of his friends had founded the Pastors' Emergency League. By mid-November of 1933, several hundred pastors had joined Niemöller's initiative. As far as I could find out, however, the Pastors' Emergency League did not influence the way that German Christians transformed the "German Luther Day" on 19 November into a propaganda show for themselves and for the Nazi party.

Interestingly enough, the event that energized the opponents of the German Christians within the German churches most had also taken place in Berlin, just six days prior to the "German Luther Day." On 13 November, pastor Reinhold Krause (1893–1980), the Berlin leader of the German Christians, had given a most radical antisemitic speech in the Sport's Palace Rally in Berlin. Christianity was a heroic and in fact an Aryan religion, he declared, and Jews, including baptized Jews, should be eliminated from all Christian congregations. In the weeks after the "German Luther Day" it became clear that Krause's scandalous speech was no less than a turning-point. Now, finally, the Protestants disagreeing with the German Christians began to organize – too late to have any influence on the way Luther's 450th birthday was remembered, but not too late to defend the autonomy and integrity of most of the Protestant territorial churches in the time that followed, best expressed in the Barmen Declaration in May of 1934.

Bonhoeffer Neither Rejoiced nor Celebrated Luther's 450th Birthday

Let me now turn my attention to a young theologian who had celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday on 4 February 1933, just a few days after Hitler had become *Reichskanzler*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Did he also believe that German Protestantism needed a strong state in order to counter the forces of secularization? What did he think of the slogan that German Protestantism, together with the German nation, was experiencing a great revival after the Nazis had

taken over? How did he react to the opinion of the German Christians that the Germans should proudly proclaim a special kind of Germanic Christianity, including their proposal to introduce an *Arierparagraph*, an Aryan paragraph, into the church statutes? In short: What was Bonhoeffer's view of the various developments within the Protestant church that led to the unequivocal, indeed fatal and catastrophic support of most Protestants for the Hitler regime that I have described above? In answering these questions I will concentrate on the remarks Bonhoeffer made in 1933, not earlier, and not later, even though he had much to say before as well as in later years.¹⁰ Through this, I want to describe how a critical contemporary was able to observe current events and how a responsible Christian was willing and able to speak out and to intervene at such an early stage as in 1933.

On 6 February 1933, two days after his birthday, and just a week after *Macht-ergreifung*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)¹¹ in New York:

It can scarcely be expected that nothing will substantially change here, whether economically, politically, or socially. But an even greater threat is a terrible barbarization of our culture, so that here, too, we will need to create a Civil Liberties Union in the coming period. You yourself can imagine that nationalistic magical incantations and exorcisms (military posturing, etc.) will not drive out the ghost of Communism. People are incredibly naive here in our country. The path ahead for the church has seldom looked so gloomy.¹²

There was no word of a revival or a rebirth of the German nation by Bonhoeffer at this early stage of Hitler's rule, no trust in the new government, no hope for a better future for Germany and the churches in Germany, but a deep-seated fear that things will get worse, and from his point of view in particular in the church.

“The path ahead for the church has seldom looked so gloomy.” Bonhoeffer picks up this theme again in mid-April 1933. In his Collected Works we find no comments on the Reichstag fire (*Reichstagsbrand*), the Enabling Act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), the Day of Potsdam (*Tag von Potsdam*), or the April boycott. Bonhoeffer is, however, alerted by the Nazi Law of 7 April for the Reconstitution of the Civil Service. This law contains the infamous Aryan paragraph (*Arierparagraph*) and explicitly excludes Jews from any position in the Civil Service. The twenty-seven-year-old theologian Bonhoeffer instinctively grasps

10. See Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, New York 2014.

11. During Bonhoeffer's stay at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930, he and Niebuhr had often discussed political events.

12. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12: *Berlin: 1932–1933*, English edition, ed. by Larry L. Rasmussen and translated by Isabel Best & David Higgins, Minneapolis, MN 2009, 94–95.

that in the German tradition pastors are also considered as civil servants and that the *Arierparagraph* may be applied also to the churches. Within just a few days, it seems, Bonhoeffer produces an essay on *The Church and the Jewish Question*.¹³ He begins by explaining that “the church has neither to praise nor to censure the laws of the state. Instead, it has to affirm the state as God’s order of preservation in this godless world. [...] The actions of the state remain free from interference by the church.” In his view, “this is not a schoolmaster-like or peevish objection on the part of the church. History is made not by the church but rather by the state.” Up to this point Bonhoeffer is in agreement with Luther’s teaching of the two regiments, or realms. In his time, he continues, “without doubt one of the historical problems that must be dealt with by our state is the Jewish question, and without doubt the state is entitled to strike new paths in doing so.” According to Bonhoeffer,

humanitarian associations and individual Christian men who see themselves called to do so [could] make the state aware of the moral aspect of the measures it takes in this regard, that is, should the occasion arise, to accuse the state of offenses against morality.

And so could “a church that is regarded essentially as a cultural function of the state,” even though

the true church of Christ, which lives by the gospel alone and knows the nature of state actions, will never interfere in the functioning of the state in this way, by criticizing its history-making actions from the standpoint of any sort of, say, humanitarian ideal.

Bonhoeffer further states:

The church cannot primarily take *direct* political action, since it does not presume to know how things should go historically. Even on the Jewish question today, the church cannot contradict the state *directly* and demand that it take any particular different course of action.¹⁴

All of this sounds rather careful. Bonhoeffer then, however, introduces an important reservation as he argues that what he has explained so far “does not mean that the church stands aside, indifferent to what political action is taken.” Rather, the church has to “keep asking the government whether its actions can be justified as *legitimate state* actions, that is, actions that create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.” According to Bonhoeffer, the church “will be

13. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 361–370.

14. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 362–364.

called upon to put this question as strongly as possible wherever the state seems endangered precisely in its character as the state, that is, in its functioning of creating law and order by force,” and it will “have to put this question with the utmost clarity today in the matter of the Jewish question.” He adds, “as long as the state acts in such a way as to create law and order – even if it means new laws and a new order – the church of the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer cannot oppose it through direct political action.” But he does not stop here. Rather, he introduces yet another reservation that leads far beyond Luther’s teaching of the two regiments.¹⁵ In his view, a “state that threatens the proclamation of the Christian message negates itself,” and he goes on to explain that “there are thus three possibilities for action that the church can take vis-à-vis the state”: First, “making the state responsible for what it does”; second, “service to the victims of the state’s actions”; and third, “not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself” (*dem Rad selbst in die Speichen zu fallen*). “Such an action would be direct political action on the part of the church.” For Bonhoeffer this would occur in “case of an attack, coming from the state, on the nature of the church and its proclamations, such as the obligatory exclusion of baptized Jews. In such a case,” he states, “the church would find itself in *statu confessionis*.”¹⁶ The necessity for immediate political action by the church must, however, as he explains, “be decided by an ‘evangelical council’ as and when the occasion arises and hence cannot be casuistically construed beforehand.”¹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s memorandum contains a second part in which he outlines the position of the church in more detail, and he does so in a categorical manner:

The church cannot allow the state to prescribe for it the way it treats its members. [...] A baptized Jew is a member of our church. For the church, the Jewish question is therefore different from what it is for the state. [...] From the point of view of Christ’s church, Judaism is never a racial concept but rather a religious one. Rather than the biologically dubious entity of the Jewish race, it means the “people of Israel.” It is God’s law that constitutes the “people of Israel.” [...] In the same way, being a Jewish Christian is a religious and not a racial concept. [...] From the point of view of Christ’s church, therefore, Jewish Christians are not people of the Jewish race who have been baptized Christians, but rather Jewish Christians in the church’s sense are those who see their belonging to the people of God, to the church of Christ, as determined by their observance of a

15. I refer here to the traditional interpretation of Luther’s teaching of the two realms, or regiments, as it was taught within conservative German Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Michael DeJonge has shown, Bonhoeffer finds his own approach to the political theology of Luther. Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Reception of Luther*, Oxford 2017.

16. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 364–366.

17. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 366–367.

divine law. [...] The question here is not at all about whether our church members of German descent can support fellowship in the church with Jews. In reality, it is the duty of Christian proclamation to say: here, where Jew and German together stand under God's Word, is church; here it will be proven whether or not the church is still church.¹⁸

With these sentences, with these clear-cut formulations, Bonhoeffer has found the theme that he repeats time and again in the next few months. In a sermon on 28 May, by using the example of Moses and Aaron, he explains the characteristic elements of the true Christian church,¹⁹ and those listening to him probably understood that he was, in fact, speaking about the false church of the German Christians. In a discussion at Friedrich-Wilhelm-University in Berlin on 22 June, he calls those who have "introduced a racial law" as "weak in faith" and repeats his proposal "that a council should be convened" to make decisions on "the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of creation." Through this, Bonhoeffer wants to make absolutely clear that, in relation to the Bible, race and ethnicity should not be considered as equal, or superior, sources of revelation. The decisions of this council "should be binding." Otherwise "schism" would be the last possibility open to Protestantism.²⁰ In July of 1933, Bonhoeffer repeated the main arguments of his April paper in yet another memorandum on *The Jewish Question as Status Confessionis*.²¹ In August 1933 he was actively involved in drafting the so-called Bethel Confession. He was able to include most of his views in the first draft. In the following months, however, this first draft was changed considerably by others. In the end, Bonhoeffer decided not to sign the document.²²

At the end of August 1933, Bonhoeffer drafts theses on *The Aryan Paragraph in the Church* once again, by comparing the opinions of the German Christians and his own views, in a crystal-clear manner. Here is just one sentence from this document: "The exclusion of Jewish Christians from the church community destroys the substance of Christ's church."²³ In a letter, dated 9 September, Bonhoeffer asks Karl Barth (1886–1968) whether he considers "it possible to stay in a church that has ceased to be a Christian church, that is, whether one may continue to exercise within it the office of pastor when that office has be-

18. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 368–370.

19. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 472–476.

20. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 126–127.

21. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 371–373. Bonhoeffer makes an interesting remark in this article. It is, as he writes, "an ecclesiastical impossibility to exclude, as a matter of principle, Jewish Christian members from any office of the Church. It is a different matter if, from case to case, consideration is shown for the weakness of others, so that, for instance, a preponderantly 'German Christian' parish will not have a Jewish Christian assigned to it as sole pastor. But even here the possibility remains open of doing just that – for ecclesiastical reasons, on principle" (pp. 372–373).

22. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 373–424.

23. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 425–432.

come a privilege for Aryans.” He and some friends had “issued a statement” in which they “wish to communicate to the church government that by adopting the Aryan paragraph, the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union has separated itself from the church of Christ.” They were “now awaiting an answer as to whether the pastors who have signed this statement are to be dismissed, or whether one need not worry about saying this sort of thing.” “Several of us,” Bonhoeffer tells Barth, “are now very drawn to the idea of a free church.”²⁴ On 27 September, he attended the National Synod of the Evangelical Church in Wittenberg and witnessed how the German Christians elected Ludwig Müller almost unanimously as *Reichsbischof* and how the assembled Protestant clergy raised their right arms and swore allegiance to the National Socialist state. Bonhoeffer had signed a statement of Berlin pastors “To the National Synod of the German Evangelical Church.” Among other matters, the signatories demanded that the National Synod should revoke the Aryan paragraph as it had been put into force by regional synods as contrary to the Holy Scriptures and the confession of the church.²⁵ Again, Bonhoeffer and the close circle of his friends had no success.

A few weeks later, Bonhoeffer assumed his position as pastor of two German churches in London. Since July he had known that two London parishes had interest in his service, and he had visited London during the end of July. Once in London, in mid-October, Bonhoeffer remained in close contact with his German friends.²⁶ Right from the start he attempted to make sure that the German pastors working in London sided with the Pastors’ Emergency League. It is interesting to note, however, that Bonhoeffer did not take notice of the festivities for the 450th birthday of Martin Luther on 19 November 1933. On that day he preached to his congregation on “Repentance,”²⁷ and informed bishop George Bell (1883–1958) in Chichester that he would soon come and visit.²⁸

For several reasons, the year 1933 forms an important part of Bonhoeffer’s life and legacy. As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer was not taken in by any of the slogans that made most of his fellow Protestants rejoice. Bonhoeffer observed no revival of the church, nor a rebirth of the German nation. Quite to the con-

24. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 165. Barth answers two days later, 11 September 1933. Barth agrees with Bonhoeffer in principle, but thinks that he is “indeed in favor of waiting to see what comes,” that is not to make premature steps. “We must be among the last actually to leave the sinking ship” (pp. 166–169).

25. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, 181–183. The National Synod did in fact not endorse the Aryan paragraph officially. But at that point in time there could be no doubt that a majority of Protestant pastors favoured such a clause.

26. See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 13: *London 1933–1935*, English edition, ed. by Keith W. Clements and translated by Isabel Best, Minneapolis, MN 2007, 44–57.

27. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 13, 326–331. London, Repentance Day. Sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:10: “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (New Revised Standard Version).

28. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 13, 38.

trary. He was deeply suspicious of state actions, and he feared the worst for the church. Intuitively and instinctively he understood that the Nazi persecution of the Jews also endangered the very core of the Protestant church. Certainly, one can argue that Bonhoeffer was very cautious in articulating political protest during the spring and summer of 1933; one can also ask why he did not notice that the German Christians had used and instrumentalized Luther's infamous antisemitic treatises in the tradition of German racial antisemitism since the 1880s and why he did not study Luther's antisemitic diatribes. But one should not overstate these points. In retrospect we know only too well that the Nazi persecution of Jews, and the attempt to exterminate all Jews, was no less than a caesura in the history of human civilization. And this is where the twenty-seven-year-old Bonhoeffer comes into the picture. Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he understood that the Aryan paragraph was the ultimate test for the validity of Christian faith in his time, and more than anyone else he was aware that the future of the church depended on the way in which the church met this challenge. But we should not stop there. As we reconsider Bonhoeffer's insights and courage, we are challenged to identify the forces that threaten the validity of Christian faith in our time, and we are challenged not to remain silent.²⁹ ▲

SUMMARY

Three matters are discussed in this essay: First, the question why the vast majority of German Protestants were so enthusiastic when Hitler came to power; second, how the German Christians who were closely associated with the Nazi party celebrated Martin Luther's 450th birthday in November 1933; third, the religious and political position of a young dissident, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during this turbulent year. While the Nazi party and the German Christians supported the creation of a "Germanic Christianity," Bonhoeffer rejected the introduction of an "Aryan paragraph" that excluded all those who had Jewish persons among their ancestors from Christian congregations; and while the German Christians celebrated Martin Luther as a Germanic hero and as the true forerunner of Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer, in the fall of 1933, decided to serve in a German congregation in London in order to be able to assist the resistance against Hitler and the Nazis from abroad. During 1933, therefore, the lines between both sides, between those blindly following Hitler and those, like Bonhoeffer, demanding Christian solidarity, were clearly drawn.

29. I have attempted to explain my view in Hartmut Lehmann, *Das Christentum im 20. Jahrhundert: Fragen, Probleme, Perspektiven*, Leipzig 2012.