

**The Raul Hilberg Memorial Lecture**  
The University of Vermont  
April 15, 2013

*German Churches and the Holocaust*  
*Assessing the Argument for Complicity*

Robert P. Ericksen  
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The Carolyn and Leonard Miller Center for Holocaust Studies





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I am pleased to deliver the Raul Hilberg Memorial Lecture, not only for the chance to join the impressive list of prior speakers, but because of Raul Hilberg himself. He was the man who essentially invented Holocaust Studies, completing his path-breaking work while teaching here at the University of Vermont. When Hilberg began his graduate program in political science at Columbia University, he was twenty-two years old. At that time, in 1948, he focused already on the idea and the research project that would make him known to all of us. Here is his description of that moment in his 1996 book, *Politics of Memory*: "I had become sure of myself, secure in my decision, certain that I would fill in the pieces of my jigsaw puzzle."<sup>1</sup> He soon approached one of his professors at Columbia, Franz Neumann, the author of *Behemoth* and an imposing scholar on Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> Hilberg asked Neumann if he would take on his proposal for a doctoral dissertation, "The Destruction of the European Jews." Neumann said yes, but he then added the comment, "It's your funeral."<sup>3</sup> This exchange took place just three years after the defeat of Hitler's Germany and long before Holocaust Studies had begun to make its mark in the world of ideas.

Christopher Browning tells a similar story about his entry into the study of the Holocaust. He is known as the author of the path-breaking book, *Ordinary Men*,<sup>4</sup> as well as *The Origins of the Final Solution*<sup>5</sup> and a number of other important books in the field. When Browning started

his PhD program at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s, he intended to study French diplomatic history. A severe case of mononucleosis put him in bed for six weeks. During those weeks, he picked up that large volume published by Raul Hilberg in 1961, *The Destruction of the European Jews*,<sup>6</sup> and he could not put it down. He then told his advisor at Wisconsin he had changed his mind, he wanted to work on the Holocaust. The response was simple and very similar to the response Hilberg received in 1948: Okay, but there will be no future in it.<sup>7</sup>

Both Hilberg and Browning were ahead of their time. However, because of Hilberg's single-minded determination in the 1950s, we have his massive documentation of the murder of European Jews. By the 1970s, the work of Browning and others built upon Hilberg's foundation, adding a broader, more comprehensive understanding. By the 1980s, Holocaust Studies began to develop into the very important, very widespread discipline it has become today, resulting in institutions like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and in exemplary programs, such as the one now in place here at the University of Vermont. We even have an endowed chair in Holocaust Studies at a small place like Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, where I had the pleasure of succeeding Chris Browning after he moved to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Without Raul Hilberg, much of this story of Holocaust scholarship would be unlikely. Because of his extraordinary role, I am truly honored to be here, giving a lecture bearing his name.

Now I will turn to some portion of my part in this study of the Holocaust. Here too I can begin with Raul Hilberg. His 1992 book, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*,<sup>8</sup> gives us three categories that are now quite common in Holocaust scholarship. My recent book, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany*,<sup>9</sup> might seem at first glance simply

to deal with one category: bystanders. Most pastors, bishops, and university professors were hardly victims. Neither were they literally perpetrators, since most of them committed no murder. However, Hilberg showed us that the category of "perpetrator" extended far beyond those who pulled the trigger or released the gas. Bureaucrats of many sorts made the Holocaust possible; many of those who had no blood literally on their hands most certainly had blood on their hands.

In the title to my recent book, I chose to focus on the word, "complicity." It refers to the stance taken and the responsibility borne by those individuals I would place on the soft edge of perpetrators. Most of the people I describe as complicit were hardly perpetrators in the full sense of the word. However, I think their stance placed them at least on the hard edge of bystanders, with some share of culpability for the violent outcome. Hilberg includes among perpetrators those individuals who killed and those bureaucrats who ordered and facilitated the killing. What do we do with pastors who preached hatred against Jews? What do we do with bishops who ordered church bells to be rung for an entire week after Germany's victory over Poland? I am not quite willing to label them perpetrators. I also argue, however, that these "bystanders" were complicit in the Holocaust. When they denigrated Jews and when they praised Hitler as if he were a gift from heaven, I believe they played an important part in helping to make the Holocaust possible.

When ordinary Germans were asked to kill Jews, did they ponder what they had learned in their churches? Did they think back on what they had been taught in their religious education courses, courses that were standard in German schools? If so, they might have remembered statements, teachings, and attitudes resembling what the Luther scholar, Paul Althaus, wrote in 1933: "Our Protestant churches have greeted the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle from

God."<sup>10</sup> Althaus was a well-known and very widely admired professor of theology at the University of Erlangen. He was probably the most significant Luther scholar in the world in the 1930s and 1940s, and he also served as President of the International Luther Society from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s.<sup>11</sup> Many of his books were translated into English and his work remained a significant foundation for theological study until long after the Nazi era, both in Germany and abroad. Yet Althaus was a prominent example among those many Protestant leaders of his day who greeted the rise of Hitler with unrestrained enthusiasm.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of Christian support for the rise of Hitler can be found in a statement issued by the Bavarian Protestant Church. Any Protestant in Bavaria who attended church in April of 1933 would have heard these words in praise of the Nazi takeover:

A state which begins once again to govern according to God's command may expect not just the applause but the joyous cooperation of the church. With thanks and joy the church perceives how the new state protects against blasphemy, represses immorality, upholds discipline and orderliness with a stronger hand. It calls for fear of God, holds marriage holy, wants to know that youth are spiritually educated, and it brings the role of the fathers once again into honor, while warm love for *Volk* and fatherland is no longer scorned (*verfremt*), but enkindled in thousands of hearts.<sup>13</sup>

The enthusiasm of this church statement is self-evident. However, it is worth noting two elements that do not appear. First of all, this statement says nothing about the threat of communism. Some who explain support for the rise of Hitler among Christians--or among Germans in general--emphasize the anxiety caused by the Russian Revolution of 1917, as well as the popularity of the German Communist Party among members of the working class at that time. Given the generally negative reputation of twentieth-century communism, this has the

attraction of seeming a somewhat respectable explanation for Hitler's popularity. Without doubt many Christians who supported Hitler would have appreciated his harsh opposition to communism. However, this church statement ignores the threat of communism while it evokes many other issues seen as relevant to the proper understanding of God's alleged tilt toward Hitler and Nazism. These include a shared opposition to both blasphemy and immorality, along with support for discipline, orderliness, marriage, spiritual education, and the dominant role of fathers within the family. This statement seems to take for granted that the democratic system of Weimar Germany had not protected Christian values, but that the Nazi Party could be trusted to mirror and support Christians on the values front. The second missing item in this statement is nationalism. There is a brief word of praise for the Nazis' "warm love for *Volk* and fatherland," but no mention of German grounds for resentment in terms of their loss in World War I and no complaint about the alleged injustice of the Versailles Treaty. In short, the primary message in this Bavarian Church statement of 1933 suggests that Christians were simply comfortable in their belief that they shared moral values with the Nazi Party as they faced the challenges of the modern world.

A similar message can be found in a national weekly, the *Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*. If Lutherans perused this publication in April 1933, they might have read this comment:

We get no further if we get stuck on little things that might displease us, failing to value the great things God has done for our *Volk* through them [the Nazis]. Or was it perhaps not God but "the old, evil enemy?" . . . The "evil enemy" does not want a clean *Volk*, he wants no religion, no church, no Christian schools; he wants to destroy all of that. But the

National Socialist movement wants to build all this up, they have written it into their program. Is that not God at work?<sup>14</sup>

This Lutheran editorial does acknowledge that some things about the Nazi Party and its more enthusiastic proponents might "displease" Christians. But it goes on to see the rise of Hitler as a welcome act of God, a "great thing . . . God has done for our *Volk*." The suggestion that Christians should not worry about the "little things" that they might think immoral or undesirable in Nazi politics seems a powerful portent of the "big mistakes" many Christians would make in the next twelve years. Their attempt to assess little problems and big advantages in the rise of Hitler now seems a balancing act that proved fatally flawed.

The above examples come from Protestant Christians. We know from analyses of voting patterns that the most thoroughly Protestant regions of Germany gave the Nazi Party its strongest support.<sup>15</sup> Catholics, by contrast, tended to stay loyal to the specifically Catholic political group, the Center Party, as Hitler's percentage of the German vote increased, so that Catholic regions did not trend Nazi in the early 1930s. In fact, Catholic bishops had warned against certain aspects of the Nazi ideology. They criticized, for example, the stress on materialistic racism in Nazi hostility toward Jews, rather than the "spiritual" critique of Jews that Catholics preferred.<sup>16</sup> However, the overt difference between Catholic and Protestant responses to Nazi Germany quickly diminished with Hitler's actual rise to power at the end of January in 1933. On March 23, 1933, the Catholic Center Party faced a crucial vote in the Reichstag. Hitler had requested passage of an "Enabling Act," enabling him for the next four years to act as a dictator, ignoring the normal requirement of a Reichstag majority for new legislation. Hitler desperately needed the Catholic Center Party vote. This modification of the Weimar Constitution required a two-thirds majority, and neither the communist nor the socialist delegates would give it their approval. At



that crucial moment, the Center Party gave Hitler the votes he needed and granted him dictatorial powers.<sup>17</sup>

Catholics quickly showed their approval of Hitler in other ways. Five days after Catholic members of the Reichstag handed Hitler his Enabling Act, Catholic bishops in Germany withdrew their criticism of the Nazi Party. Then, freed by their church, Catholics in Germany joined the Party in large numbers.<sup>18</sup> In the summer of 1933, the Vatican in Rome signed a Concordat with Germany, promising their cooperation with the new government and giving Hitler his first success in international diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> From this point on, Catholic citizens of Germany could read many church statements in praise of the new Germany under Hitler. If they paid attention, they would have known that Catholic bishops sent telegrams of congratulation to Hitler on his every birthday.<sup>20</sup> Carl Amery, a young Catholic at that time, later described how comfortably Hitler's emphasis on hard work, discipline, punctuality, orderliness, cleanliness, anti-communism, and German national pride fit within the Catholic "milieu."<sup>21</sup> In the early stages of World War II, Catholics in Germany attended masses in celebration of each German victory over Catholics in Poland or Catholics in France. Protestants, of course, celebrated similarly.<sup>22</sup>

#### FORTY YEARS OF MYTHOLOGY ABOUT CHURCHES

The story described above did not emerge in 1945 as the standard narrative of Christian churches in Nazi Germany. Instead, for several decades it was widely assumed that churches had been special victims of the Nazi state and that Christians had been natural opponents of the Nazi regime. Forty years later, in 1985, I published my first book, *Theologians under Hitler*. It focused on three of the best known and most admired theologians in Germany in the 1930s and

1940s, each of whom enthusiastically and publicly endorsed Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. One of these men, Emanuel Hirsch, was the reigning expert in Germany on Soren Kierkegaard, translating many of his works and eventually producing a definitive study of this nineteenth-century Danish philosopher.<sup>23</sup> At least partly through Hirsch's influence, a Christian form of existentialism, based upon Kierkegaard, became the foundation for virtually all modern Protestant theology. In the face of unknowns, Christians today take a "leap of faith," as described by Kirkegaard.<sup>24</sup> Emanuel Hirsch was a friend to famous contemporaries, such as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Some of his students to this day think that he, not Barth or Tillich or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was the greatest theologian of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> His reputation has been damaged, however, because of his Nazi politics (something that has impacted the reputation and importance of Martin Heidegger to a much lesser extent, by the way)<sup>26</sup>.

Paul Althaus, another person I describe in my first book, was the most respected Luther scholar in Germany from the 1930s through the 1950s. He is the one who in 1933 publicly greeted the rise of Hitler as a "gift and miracle from God." My third figure, Gerhard Kittel, held the chair in New Testament in the renowned theological faculty at Tübingen University. He also founded and edited a massive reference work, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, still very widely used by Protestant pastors and theologians. Beginning in 1933, Kittel joined the Nazi Party and tried to use his knowledge of Hebrew and of the Talmud to secure his position as the Party's greatest expert on Jews. In fact, Alan Steinweis in his excellent book, *Studying the Jew*, has a section on Kittel's effort to "merge" Christian anti-Judaism with Nazi antisemitism.<sup>27</sup>

When I published this study of Hirsch, Althaus, and Kittel in 1985, a reviewer in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noted that my book was the first exposure of these major professors of Protestant theology as thoroughgoing Nazis.<sup>28</sup> He added with some dismay the

obvious point that it had taken an American to come from outside and tell this story. It is now clear that for a generation or more, church historians inside Germany were unwilling to tell the truth about figures like Hirsch, Althaus, and Kittel. Instead, they were able to distort and misrepresent the stance of both Christians and Christian churches in Nazi Germany. The basic strategy was to write the history as if one tiny part of the story of Christians in Nazi Germany somehow represented the norm.

On the Protestant side, this positive version of the story depended, for example, on describing individual pastors such as Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Martin Niemöller really was arrested by the Gestapo in 1937 and remained incarcerated until he was freed from Dachau in 1945. He was a Lutheran pastor who had angered the Nazi regime and he became well-known abroad as a victim of Nazi persecution. During his eight years in prison, his picture could be seen on billboards in the United States, with a caption that read, "Free Martin Niemöller."<sup>29</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story is even more dramatic. As a Lutheran pastor and a young professor of theology, he opposed the Nazi regime from the very beginning. By 1939 Bonhoeffer joined the plot against Hitler centered in the military intelligence organization, the *Abwehr*, led by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. Bonhoeffer became an *Abwehr* secret agent, using his international, ecumenical connections to bring messages to friends of the conspiracy outside Germany. This Canaris group planned several attempts on Hitler's life, culminating in the bomb detonated by Colonel Klaus von Stauffenberg on July 20th, 1944--a close call, though it left Hitler merely with ringing ears and minor wounds. Bonhoeffer himself had been in prison for more than a year by then, arrested as part of an unsuccessful Gestapo effort to uncover the *Abwehr's* treason before the July 20th bombing. In April 1945, Bonhoeffer was executed, having

been placed on a list of enemies that Nazi leaders wanted to make sure they killed, even though Allied liberation was less than one month away.<sup>30</sup>

In the postwar world, a world in which we quite rightly condemn the Nazi Party and all of its crimes, Bonhoeffer and Niemöller are genuine heroes. That is especially true for Bonhoeffer, who saw through Hitler from the very beginning. Other members of his family reached the same conclusion. In fact, two sons and two sons-in-law in the Bonhoeffer family participated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, and all four were executed. Interestingly, despite Bonhoeffer's own career as a pastor and theologian, his family was quite secular, producing primarily lawyers and scientists. The Bonhoeffer family did not attend church. When Dietrich decided as a boy to study theology, it came as quite a surprise to his family. Even then he did not start attending church, but waited until he was in his twenties. I have argued, not entirely in jest, that Bonhoeffer was inoculated against becoming a Nazi especially because he never went to church as a boy.<sup>31</sup> During the Weimar era, between World War I and the rise of Hitler, the German Protestant church was a place where hyper-nationalism, overt militarism, and hostility toward modern culture were in full flower. Just the sort of values to which Hitler would appeal.

Martin Niemöller's roots were much more completely within that German Protestant Church. As a result, his story is more complex, pointing toward the complicated back story within Christian responses to Hitler and Nazism. Niemöller regularly voted for the Nazi Party during the Weimar years and he greeted Hitler's rise to power almost as enthusiastically as Paul Althaus had done. His brother Wilhelm, also a Lutheran pastor, joined the Nazi Party already in 1923.<sup>32</sup> Both of the Niemöller brothers fought in the rightwing *Freikorps* in the early years of the Weimar Republic, part of the conservative and nationalistic, paramilitary response to democracy and to the threat of leftwing ideas after world War I. They typify the strongly Nazi voting

patterns found in Protestant regions of Germany leading up to Hitler's . It was only after Hitler came to power that Niemöller began to change his mind. He learned to resent not so much Hitler, but the extremely pro-Nazi faction within the Protestant church. That group, known as the *Deutsche Christen*, tried to politicize the church and its message. Niemöller became so outspoken against the pro-Nazi *Deutsche Christen* that Gestapo agents who listened to his sermons found cause to arrest him by 1937.<sup>33</sup>

After 1945, Niemöller, Bonhoeffer and a few of their colleagues were the darlings of Protestant church historians for a generation or two, and to a certain extent they still are. They were part of the Confessing Church (the *Bekennende Kirche*), a group that has received much attention and high praise in the postwar historiography. The German Protestant church really did experience a "Church Struggle" during the Nazi period, a *Kirchenkampf*. The Confessing Church rose up in opposition to the *Deutsche Christen*, that group so eager to attach their commitment to Christianity to a thoroughgoing enthusiasm for Hitler and the Nazi ideology. It seemed possible after 1945, even logical, to describe Confessing Church members as anti-Nazi, since they had opposed the pro-Nazi *Deutsche Christen*. However, the idea that the Confessing Church was anti-Nazi or even, in the more extreme version, a resistance movement has now been largely discredited.<sup>34</sup>

When the *Deutsche Christen* rose up as wildly enthusiastic supporters of Adolf Hitler, they suffered a loss in credibility among traditional Christians. That is because they were so eager to fit within the Nazi fold that they were willing to do some serious surgery on the Christian tradition. A first step came in the spring of 1933, when the Nazi regime introduced legislation to "cleanse" the German Civil Service. This included the "Aryan Paragraph," which removed tens of thousands of Jews from government jobs. Jewish school teachers lost their jobs.

Jewish professors lost their jobs. But "Jewish" pastors did not lose their jobs, even though all pastors and priests in Germany were civil servants. Within the German state church system, the state collected a church tax and it both hired and paid the salaries of church employees.

However, the Nazi state did not want to pick a fight with the Christian churches, so they simply ignored church employees when they imposed the Aryan Paragraph in 1933.<sup>35</sup>

When the Nazi government decided to avoid this fight, the enthusiastic *Deutsche Christen* stepped in, seeing a chance to demonstrate their ardor for the cause. They urged the Protestant church to self-enforce the Aryan Paragraph by defrocking "Jewish pastors." Any reference to "Jewish pastors" here might require a bit of explanation, though I suspect many readers understand. By Nazi standards, of course, Jewishness was not based upon religious belief, but on the Nazi belief in a distinctive and dangerous "Jewish blood." Among the approximately eighteen thousand Protestant pastors in Germany, there were about three dozen so-called "Jewish Christians," or Christians of Jewish descent. The *Deutsche Christen* wanted them removed, but traditionalists found that unacceptable. Martin Niemöller believed that use of the Aryan Paragraph in the church would violate both the sacrament of baptism, by which all Christians became "brothers in Christ," and the rite of ordination, by which these pastors had been granted their church office. In the fall of 1933, Martin Niemöller founded a "Pastors' Emergency League" in opposition to the implementation of the Aryan Paragraph within the church, and more than seven thousand pastors, that is, about 40% of all Protestant pastors, soon joined his group.<sup>36</sup>

During that same fall of 1933, the *Deutsche Christen* quickly multiplied their offenses against traditional Christianity. Their problem was very nearly unavoidable. It is, after all, very hard to understand the Christian tradition without acknowledging some pretty close connections

to Jews; but it was very difficult to be a thoroughgoing Nazi and acknowledge that anything worthwhile could be rooted in Jewishness. The Old Testament in the Christian Bible is, of course, the Jewish Bible. During a Reformation Day celebration in November 1933, *Deutsche Christen* caused a scandal by announcing that Christians in Germany should cut the Old Testament out of their Bible. Reinhold Krause, who addressed 20,000 people in the Sports Palace in Berlin that night, added an attack against the Apostle Paul, who had written such a large part of the New Testament. Paul's writings too must be removed, Krause said.<sup>37</sup> The *Deutsche Christen* eventually created in 1938 a so-called Dejudaization Institute, by which they tried to remove all traces of Jewishness from the Christian tradition. They produced a "cleansed" Christian Bible, removing all Jewish references from the New Testament, leaving a rather thin pamphlet. As Susannah Heschel has described in her book, *The Aryan Jesus*, this Dejudaization Institute even tried to prove that Jesus was really Aryan and not Jewish at all.<sup>38</sup>

When the Confessing Church rose up against the *Deutsche Christen* in the *Kirchenkampf*, it was an inner-church, theological and ecclesiastical struggle, not a political struggle. It was a protest against heresy. The Barmen Declaration, written in May 1934, became the foundational document of the Confessing Church. It contains six major points of Christian doctrine. A close reading of the Barmen Declaration shows that it was not at all an attack on the Nazi state. It literally includes these words in its preamble, "Be not deceived by loose talk, as if we meant to oppose the unity of the German nation!"<sup>39</sup> That phrase used in May 1934, "the unity of the German nation," can only be understood to mean the enthusiastic unity of Germans within the Nazi state. Barmen did not oppose that. Furthermore, despite the widespread persecution of Jews in Germany by May 1934, a brutal politics that most of us today think should have been opposed, the Barmen Declaration made absolutely no mention of Jews or the injustice they were

suffering. The founders of the Confessing Church wanted to make sure that loyal Nazis could sign the Barmen Declaration, and many loyal Nazis were able to do so. Now the most authoritative study of the Confessing Church on the so-called "Jewish question," a book by Wolfgang Gerlach, establishes that antisemitism within the Confessing Church rivaled that among the *Deutsche Christen*.<sup>40</sup> The major difference was that members of the Confessing Church were too traditional in their beliefs to be willing to deny the obviously Jewish origins and the Jewish founding documents of the Christian faith.

This story of widespread Protestant enthusiasm for Hitler, including a Confessing Church encompassing many Nazis, was not the story that was told after 1945. Wilhelm Niemöller, the brother of Martin Niemöller, set up an archive on the Confessing Church at his parish in Bielefeld. He also became the single most prolific historian of the Confessing Church in that first generation after the war. By then, the Nazi ideology and the Nazi regime had been condemned throughout the world. The full scale of Nazi crimes against Jews and others had been exposed at the Nuremberg Trials, and almost no Germans could be found defending Nazi points of view. In fact, almost no Germans could be found admitting that they had ever been Nazis or that they had ever found Adolf Hitler an attractive leader.<sup>41</sup> As Wilhelm Niemöller wrote the history of the Confessing Church, his own early membership in the Nazi Party dropped completely out of sight. The most radical elements in the Confessing Church, the group that had been known as the "radical Niemöller wing" of the Confessing Church, became the central part of the story. It soon seemed that the "Church Struggle" or *Kirchenkampf* was a struggle against the Nazi state, rather than a struggle against the *Deutsche Christen*. Most of the scholarship sought out individual heroes, including the sort of people who helped hide Jews, for example. During that period, the stances of people like Emanuel Hirsch, Paul Althaus, and Gerhard Kittel disappeared. The fact



that the vast majority of Protestants in Germany thought that the Nazi state represented a "rebirth," a "gift and miracle from God," also disappeared.<sup>42</sup>

I do not have time or space to tell the postwar story of the Catholic Church in Germany in any sort of detail. However, we can identify a somewhat similar trajectory. In the immediate aftermath of 1945, Bishop Johannes Neuhäusler wrote a book called, *The Cross and the Swastika: The Struggle of National Socialism Against the Catholic Church and the Church's Resistance*.<sup>43</sup> In this book, the Catholic Church is seen as a natural enemy of Nazism, suffering under the regime and resisting it. It was just as important to Catholics as it was to Protestants to distance themselves from the Nazi regime that had now been so thoroughly discredited. By the 1960s, the first alternative views began to appear. This included a critical view of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican, as found in Rolf Hochhuth's play of 1963, *The Deputy*.<sup>44</sup> In 1966 Saul Friedlander published *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation*.<sup>45</sup> Since that time the controversy over Pope Pius XII has only grown in intensity, filling entire libraries with points of view pro and con. Without doubt, Pius XII chose not to announce the Nazi murder of Jews to the world, even though he was provided with ample details by 1942 and he was being pushed by various groups to do so. He refused to take sides and criticize the behavior of Nazi Germany. The controversy over Pius XII involves various explanations of why he chose this cautious approach and various claims about what secret measures he might have undertaken on behalf of Nazi victims. In the midst of these controversies, some Vatican documents have been made available, but open access to Vatican documents for this period continues to be denied.

Scholars also began looking at the German Catholic Church, at German bishops, German priests, and the very mixed response of Catholics in Germany to the Nazi state. Kevin Spicer, a Catholic priest himself, published a book in 2008, *Hitler's Priests*, in which he describes a small

number of German clergy whose enthusiasm for Hitler and whose commitment to antisemitism seemed unbounded.<sup>46</sup> Beth Griech-Polelle published in 2002 her study, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism*. Von Galen is famous for a series of sermons he gave in the summer of 1941, openly criticizing the Nazi policy of euthanasia. This is a dramatic story. Von Galen made a bold attack based upon moral conviction. Furthermore, he was not punished for this act of resistance, nor were those who marched in the streets in his support. Griech-Polelle makes it clear, however, that von Galen was otherwise a German nationalist, an antisemite, and a strong supporter of the Nazi state.<sup>47</sup>

This story of an allegedly heroic Bishop von Galen represents a complicated reality: the willingness of some Christian leaders to oppose certain Nazi policies, while supporting the Nazi state and Nazi ideology as a whole. A parallel story in the Protestant world involves Bishop Theophil Wurm of Württemberg and Bishop Hans Meiser of Bavaria. In the fall of 1934 each was removed from office and placed under house arrest by the *Reichbishop* of the German Protestant Church, Ludwig Müller. Müller's goal was to replace them with bishops drawn from the ranks of the *Deutsche Christen*. Wurm and Meiser fought back, however, and their parishioners rebelled. Lay people held demonstrations, they marched in the streets, they sang "A Mighty Fortress is our God" in front of government buildings, and they sent telegrams to Adolf Hitler. None of these protesters were punished. Wurm and Meiser themselves were enthusiastic supporters of the German "rebirth" under Hitler, and many of their strongest supporters were important Nazis in the region. Facing vigorous complaints from these local Nazis, Hitler intervened and reinstated Wurm and Meiser in their bishoprics.<sup>48</sup> In the case of these two Protestant bishops in 1934, as well as the Catholic Bishop von Galen in 1941, we learn two important things. First of all, when Christians marched in the streets on these two occasions, the

Nazi state was willing to back down and no one was punished for their temerity. Secondly, Christians in Nazi Germany never marched or otherwise stood in public protest against the Nazi mistreatment of Jews. It is impossible to know whether public protest against the unjust treatment of Jews would have had any impact on Nazi policy. The Nazi war against Jews was more central to Nazi ideas and policies than the question of who would serve as bishop in two south German bishoprics. It was also more central than the policy of euthanasia against which Bishop von Galen protested. The one thing we do know is that no official stance taken by either the Catholic or Protestant Church in Germany protested the Nazi mistreatment, removal, and ultimate murder of Jews. Neither church ever decided that the persecution of Jews was worthy of public protest. There were small exceptions, of course, when individuals spoke up or acted out in protest against Nazi mistreatment of Jews. Some Christians hid Jews or otherwise provided succor. But no significant body within either church chose to speak up or show disapproval.

#### ASSESSING THE ARGUMENT FOR COMPLICITY

I subtitled this talk, "Assessing the Argument for Complicity." It is my claim in my recent book on churches and universities that leaders within these two normally admired institutions helped make the Holocaust possible. This claim is difficult to measure in concrete terms or with numbers and percentages. We even struggle to understand the level of responsibility and forms of motivation when we are dealing with obvious perpetrators, those who made the decisions to kill and those who did the killing. Can we really look solely at words uttered in churches and published in church newspapers and tie their wordsmiths to the Holocaust? I focus in my book on the clear and public evidence that pastors, bishops and other church leaders gave Hitler unabashed praise. This level of approval of the Nazi state expressed

by church bodies and church leaders must have been clear to Germans at the time. It must have convinced many or most Germans that Christian churches and the Nazi regime were basically on the same page.

Church support for Hitler's Germany tended to get buried in the postwar historiography, replaced by examples of quarrels between church and state and discontent among Christians. But we can notice a powerful context in the postwar period: the military defeat of Germany and the worldwide condemnation of Nazi crimes. It became very convenient to emphasize quarrels, discontent and opposition after 1945. Conversely, it would have been very awkward to acknowledge the abundant evidence of enthusiastic praise among Christian leaders. It is possible that some of that praise for Hitler and Nazism during the Third Reich was opportunistic and insincere. That was a very widespread posture taken after 1945. Virtually all individuals accused of being Nazis or Nazi supporters in denazification proceedings, for example, argued that their Nazi memberships and their pro-Nazi words had simply been a necessary camouflage for their actual feelings of opposition.<sup>49</sup> But that always convenient and almost entirely unprovable claim of secret opposition, even if true in some cases, does not lessen the impact of those many public statements of praise.

When I reflected on this evidence of enthusiasm for Hitler in relation to the concept of complicity, I asked myself a question. What would an educated German or a committed Christian have thought when recruited into the *Wehrmacht* or drafted into a reserve police battalion? What would that person have thought when given the order to round up Jews, deport Jews, force Jews into ghettos, or murder Jews? If that person harked back to sermons or Sunday School lessons, to church newspapers or university lectures, that person would have had every reason to obey orders. That person would have heard about the danger of Jews to Germany. That

person would have been told that Adolf Hitler had saved Germany, that he had given Germany a rebirth. These messages were in the air that Germans breathed, as was the duty of patriotism and obedience to authority, and these messages were delivered by--among others--pastors, priests and bishops. I think that air and that message helped make the Holocaust happen. Other messages--"thou shalt not kill," a message borrowed from Jews, and "love your neighbor as yourself," deemed part of the "greatest commandment" by Jesus himself--had been diluted or washed away by decades or, in some cases, by centuries of rationalizations. Do not kill, for example, except when necessary to defend your own nation. Love your neighbor as yourself, but remember that your true neighbors are your fellow members of the German *Volk*, the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

I will now close with three questions that have been raised about my book, or which, in some cases, I have raised within the book:

1) Have I really established a connection between Christian churches and the Holocaust? Is that an over-statement?

It is true that almost all my evidence connects Christians to enthusiastic support for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology, not the Holocaust itself. None of my pastors or bishops said, "We are killing Jews and that is a good thing." However, unstinting praise of Hitler from church leaders came within the context of Hitler's brutal policies, his widely-known violation of civil and human rights, and his unrestrained rhetorical attacks on Jews as Germany's enemy. Furthermore, church leaders were quite willing to add their own criticism of Jews, very often while blending their traditional religious prejudice with the more "modern" and supposedly

scientific tropes of the Nazi worldview. That is not quite the same as an endorsement of the Holocaust, which was meant to be a secret policy in any case; but churches provided a justification for ill treatment of Jews and a strong message in favor of the Nazi state.

2) Is my critique unfair to Germans?

It is true that I mostly reject the tradition of attributing the crimes of the Holocaust to "Nazis," while referring to everyone else as "Germans." That was very widely practiced after 1945 and continues to be true for some today.<sup>50</sup> I think that Germans committed the Holocaust. Germans made a series of choices in the early twentieth century, many of which were bad choices. By the beginning of 1933, they were hardly strong supporters of Nazism. The Nazi Party never achieved more than 37% of the vote in an open election. However, convincing evidence suggests that a strong majority of Germans soon gave Hitler and the Nazi regime quite genuine support after his rise to power. I am fully willing to emphasize the very difficult circumstances Germans faced in the aftermath of their loss in World War I. I think, for example, that we Americans have never faced a crisis nearly as unsettling as the series of military, political, economic, and cultural crises that converged on Germany in the Weimar period. I am not at all sure we would retain our democratic values in the face of such adversity. But Germans should be held accountable for their choices and not live with the lie that they all opposed Hitler. I would add that this is now a widespread view among German scholars, and not just among scholars on this side of the Atlantic.

3) Do I gain anything by making moral judgments?

I was trained in history before the post-modernist turn. My training included the ideal of objectivity, the ideal, advocated by the German father of historical research, Leopold von Ranke, that we should tell it as it really was, not insert our own prejudices or moral values. I have always found it difficult, however, to deal with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust as if no moral judgment could or should be made. If we think Nazi behavior was both criminal and morally unacceptable, then I think it fair to measure individuals on whether and to what extent they gave Hitler their blessing. This does not mean I am sure I would do better. Almost all of my students think they would never have been Nazis. They assume they would have been in the resistance. I try to show them that this might be a little naive on their part. For years, as I have looked through archives and pored over documents left behind by people who considered themselves "good Germans," I have wondered whether we could come under similar scrutiny in fifty years. In fact, I think that ongoing, intense, honest scrutiny of the Holocaust in all its human complexity might be our best protection against thinking we could never have been a Nazi. Hopefully, this sort of scrutiny might also help protect us against ever becoming one.

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<sup>1</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Politics of Memory* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009; first published in London, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 - March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003; first published in 1961).

<sup>7</sup> Browning described this experience in his talk, "The Personal Contexts of a Holocaust Historian: War, Politics, Trials, and Professional Rivalries," at a conference, "Holocaust Scholarship: Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations," at the University of Cape Town, August 20-22, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Althaus, *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), 5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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<sup>11</sup> See my treatment of Althaus in Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Note that Althaus was not noticeably drawn to Luther because of Luther's 1543 rant, *On the Jews and their Lies*, nor was Althaus particularly drawn to Nazism because of its hostility toward Jews. He did, however, accept hostility toward Jews as part of the package.

<sup>12</sup> For a treatment of Althaus which retains the residual impulse to emphasize his role as a Christian theologian, while downplaying his pro-Nazi politics, see Gotthard Jasper, *Paul Althaus (1888-1966): Professor, Prediger und Patriot in seiner Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). Reference to "Patriot" in this title certainly reflects Althaus's political stance and his self-identity. It also highlights, however, one of the several reasons for his enthusiasm in his response to the rise of Hitler.

<sup>13</sup> "Kirchliche Nachrichten," *Allgemeine-Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* (hereafter, AELKZ) 66/16 (April 21, 1933), 379.

<sup>14</sup> "Kirche und Nationalsozialismus," AELKZ 66/14 (April 7, 1933), 328.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Hartmut Lehmann, *Protestantische Weltsichten. Transformationen seit dem 17. Jahrhundert* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), especially Chapter VII, "Hitlers evangelische Wähler," 130-52.

<sup>16</sup> See Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 47-51. See also, for example, Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), especially Chapter I, "Catholic Attitudes toward Jews before the Holocaust," 1-19.

<sup>17</sup> See Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 52-54. A discussion of the stance of the Catholic Center Party is found in Rudolf Morsey, "Die deutsche Zentrumspartei," in E. Matthias and R. Morsey, eds., *Das Ende der Parteien 1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1960), 358 ff. See also, Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirche und das Dritte Reich. Band I: Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusionen, 1918-1934* (Frankfurt/M: Propyläen, 1977), 303-21.

<sup>18</sup> For an example of the mutual enthusiasm, note that the Catholic Bishop von Galen's consecration as Bishop of Münster took place in 1933 with "columns of SA and SS men marching in procession with the swastika flags flying. The SA lined the roads leading to the cathedral, and in the evening they participated in a torch-lit procession in front of the bishop's palace." See Beth A. Griech-Polelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 45.

<sup>19</sup> See Scholder, 482-524.

<sup>20</sup> See Klaus Scholder's essay, "A Requiem for Hitler," in his book of essays, *A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle* (London: SCM Press, 1989). This essay describes Cardinal Bertram sending messages of congratulation on Hitler's every birthday (161). Furthermore, at the age of eighty-six he tried to arrange a "Requiem for Hitler" after the latter's death on April 30, 1945 (166). Certainly Bertram did not then know that Hitler had committed suicide, a mortal sin in Catholic belief. However, his earlier willingness to send annual birthday telegrams to Hitler, despite accumulating evidence of Nazi brutalities, suggests a similar blindness with regard to Christian ethics and an extraordinary weight of nationalistic loyalty.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Amery, *Die Kapitulation, oder, Der real existierende Katholizismus* (Munich: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1963, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001; reprinted from the original Weidenfeld and Nicolson edition of 1968), 228-35.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Emanuel Hirsch, *Kierkegaard Studien* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1933). See also Hirsch's translation, *Soren Kierkegaard. Gesammelte Werke* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, 1956-66).

<sup>24</sup> See my treatment of this phenomenon in Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 121-24 and 177-91. For a broader background, see pp. 5-27 in that book.

<sup>25</sup> There exists a "Hirsch Circle," former students of theology at Göttingen University who attended an unofficial seminar in Hirsch's home in the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when his right to offer official seminars had been denied. Many of these individuals took up positions in theology at universities throughout Germany. In 1988, on the 100th anniversary of Hirsch's birth, I was invited to a Göttingen conference of the Hirsch Circle and observed firsthand their defense of Hirsch as a theologian. I also heard their claim that his politics should be ignored, as had largely been the case with Heidegger. See my treatment of Hirsch's last years in *Theologians under Hitler*, 191-97.

<sup>26</sup> For a critical treatment of Heidegger, see, for example, Emanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).



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- <sup>27</sup> See Alan Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- <sup>28</sup> See Klaus Goebel, "Theologen, die Hitler unterstützten: Über Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Nr. 127 (June 5, 1986), 11.
- <sup>29</sup> Biographies of Martin Niemöller include James Bentley, *Martin Niemöller 1892-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Jürgen Schmidt, *Martin Niemöller im Kirchenkampf* (Hamburg: Leibniz Verlag, 1971).
- <sup>30</sup> See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). This is a new version, edited and partially re-translated by Victoria Barnett, of Bethge's biography of 1970.
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example my article, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer in History: Does our Bonhoeffer Still Offend?," in Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, eds., *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 127-34.
- <sup>32</sup> For the story of Wilhelm Niemöller's Nazi Party membership, see Robert P. Ericksen, "Wilhelm Niemöller and the Historiography of the Kirchenkampf," in Manfred Gailus and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten in Deutschland, 1870-1970* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 433-37.
- <sup>33</sup> See the Niemöller biographies by Bentley and Schmidt.
- <sup>34</sup> See, for example, Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, "The Churches and the Holocaust," in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 296-318.
- <sup>35</sup> On the Aryan Paragraph of 1933 in relation to churches, see Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 26-31. See also Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 88-93.
- <sup>36</sup> For statistics about the Pastors' Emergency League and the subsequent Confessing Church, see Wilhelm Niemöller, "The Niemöller Archives," in Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds, *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974). On the founding of the Pastors' Emergency League, see, for example, Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich*, 612-15.
- <sup>37</sup> See Bergen, 17-18.
- <sup>38</sup> See Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- <sup>39</sup> This translation of the Barmen Declaration can be found in Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 237-47.
- <sup>40</sup> See Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, tr. and ed. by Victoria J. Barnett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).
- <sup>41</sup> See my treatment of this issue in *Complicity*, especially Chapter 6, "Repressing and Reprocessing the Past: Denazification and its Legacy of Dissimulation," and Chapter 7, "A Closer Look: Denazification at Göttingen University."
- <sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Johannes Neuhäusler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Der Kampf der Nationalsozialismus gegen die katholische Kirche und der Kirchliche Widerstand* (Munich: Verlag der Katholische Kirche Bayerns, 1946).
- <sup>44</sup> Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).
- <sup>45</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation* (New York: Knopf, 1966). Additional critical views of the Catholic Church from that era include, for example, Hans Müller, *Katholische Kirche und Nationalsozialismus. Dokumente 1930-1935* (Munich, Nymphenburger, 1963).
- <sup>46</sup> Kevin R. Spicer, *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).
- <sup>47</sup> Griech-Polelle describes von Galen's affinity for many Nazi ideals throughout her book (cited in n. 18). Her treatment of his response to euthanasia is found in her Chapter Four, "Von Galen, Eugenics, and the Nazis."
- <sup>48</sup> This story of Bishops Wurm and Meiser is described in Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich, Volume Two: The Year of Disillusionment: 1934 Barmen and Rome* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 244-82.
- <sup>49</sup> See *Complicity*, chapter 7, for numerous examples of this phenomenon.
- <sup>50</sup> See Peter Fritzsche's reflections on this issue in *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).







**Robert P. Ericksen**, Kurt Mayer Chair in Holocaust Studies at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, WA, studied with James Joll at the London School of Economics, where he earned his Ph.D. in history in 1980. He is the author of *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). His first book, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (Yale, 1985), appeared in German, Dutch and Japanese translation. In 2005 it became the subject of a documentary film, *Theologians under Hitler*, by Steven Martin of Vitalvisuals.com. Ericksen is the author of more than three dozen scholarly articles or chapters on German churches and universities, and has edited three books, including *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, co-edited with Susannah Heschel (Fortress Press, 1999). He is a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, serves as chair of the Church Relations Committee of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and is a founding member of the board of editors of *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*.

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