

The Nazis were Christians too.
An interview with Richard Steigmann-Gall,
author of *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of*
Christianity,
1919-1945.

At a time when Right-wing Christians are exerting great influence over White House policy, it is perhaps time to ask if all Christian influence is good influence.

The current situation has some surprising parallels with Nazi Germany. **Richard Steigmann-Gall** of Kent State University has recently released a book which examines the influence of Christian beliefs on Nazi Germany. In the past historians have argued that Nazis publicly posed as Christians to score political points, but privately deplored the religion. However, Steigmann-Gall has reached a very different conclusion by looking at the diaries, private writings and communications of the most influential Nazis, including Hitler. Far from deploring Christianity, many important Nazis felt that their racist policies were inspired by Protestant Christianity.

How could Christianity be the inspiration for the Final Solution? And does this suggest ominous parallels with the current influence of right-wing Protestants in the United States? The Turning's Stephen Milton spoke to Dr Steigmann-Gall to find out.

The Turning: Did leading Nazis see a source of inspiration in Protestant theology?

Steigmann-Gall: Well, this is the main focus of my book, to explore what the Nazis had to say, and what their conceptions of Christianity were. One thing we have to keep in mind is that the Nazis, because they were a nationalist movement in a country with a long sectarian divide between Catholic and Protestant, the Nazis wanted to appear to be above the confessions, above the denominations. So they came out with an expression, 'Positive Christianity', which theological historians will know is an expression that was used in the 19th century. The Nazis' 'Positive Christianity' bears no relationship to that. When the Nazis said 'Positive Christianity', they never really defined it very clearly. In fact they kept it rather hazy.

And what I discovered was that when the Nazis talked about what they liked about Christianity, time and again they made references to Protestantism. So I can't tell you in a very explicit way that they said 'well, we like this about Luther, but we dislike that about dialectical

theology.' They spoke in broader terms. They were certainly very positive about Luther. They went through the history of religious wars in Germany, they were always very effusive about Luther as the first German and the first Protestant who broke the domination of Rome over Germany, as they saw it. But he also introduced a more personal understanding of God, so the Nazis saw Luther as the person who broke down the necessity of a mediator between the individual and God. So they didn't make explicit reference to which 19th century theologian they liked or disliked.

The leaders they did esteem were recognizably Protestant. And one of those actually is, as frightening as it sounds, a theology which recognized the Volk or the race or the people, as one of the orders ordained by God. Now, this sounds heretical today, the idea that race is one of God's creations, but one hundred years ago, even before the Nazis, you begin to see varieties of Protestant thought which suggested just that. It is called a Theology of the Orders of Creation. And it was quite current in Lutheran circles both before the Nazis and during the Nazis, too. So in these ways the Nazis made reference to how highly they esteemed Protestantism. Now, I should point out that these were nominally Protestant Nazis who made this connection. Nominally Catholic Nazis, on the other hand, were less inclined to say positive things about Martin Luther. Although there were cases within the Nazi party where even nominal Catholics could make such associations.

And perhaps most startling of all is Adolph Hitler himself. Hitler was saying much the same things as the Protestant Nazis were saying: that Luther was a great national hero. Keep in mind that in Germany if you were a good Catholic you weren't going to end up saying such a thing. So I make it clear in the book that I don't consider Hitler a good Catholic - he never went to Mass, he never went to confession. But what he had to say about Christianity behind closed doors was that he too esteemed Protestantism as the 'natural' religion of the Germans. Both a national religion and the natural religion of the Germans.

Hitler's Christianity

The Turning: How did Hitler see Christ?

Steigmann-Gall: Almost all of the Nazis I investigated esteemed Christ, with only one important exception. Now how did they square the circle by esteeming the king of the Jews? By determining that, all along, Jesus had really been an 'Aryan.' It sounds obscene of course, and it is obscene. But people, when they try to understand it, think that this is another idiosyncrasy of Hitler, or his sloppy way of trying to have everything both ways.

Here, too, however, we see that there is a lineage behind the idea that Jesus had in fact been an Aryan. And one of the places that you see this is

in 19th century German thought. Two men are most often seen as originating the idea of the Aryan Christ - one is an Englishman, Huston Stewart Chamberlain, famously the son-in-law of Richard Wagner, who lived long enough to see Hitler's rise and who sanctioned Hitler as God-given. And the other was a 19th century Frenchman, Ernest Renan, who came out with a theory that Jesus had not been a Jew at all. Antisemites in the 19th century looked at Jesus and said 'Well, he doesn't care about the law, he doesn't like the Old Testament, he throws the moneychangers and hagglers out of the temple.' In John 8:44 he says 'Jews, you are the children of the devil,' this kind of thing. And so there was a particular kind of intellect in the 19th century who began this idea of the Aryan Christ. And Hitler and almost all Nazis continue this lineage of thought.

The Turning: I guess the riddle now is if the Nazis were reading the New Testament and finding such racist ideas in it, were they just radically misreading and misinterpreting what an average German might have heard in a church at the time? Or, were they in step with their times? If you had gone to a sermon in a Protestant church in 1930, would you have heard things that were consistent with aspects of Nazi ideology?

Steigmann-Gall: Well, a thorough answer would have to stress the multiplicity of Christianity in Nazi Germany. Here too the answer is a

yes and a no, since it would depend on the denomination, or as the Germans call it, the confession. However, the record of the Catholics, who were before 1933 squarely anti-Nazi, they too could be anti-Semitic. Most varieties of Protestantism in Germany gave expression to their anti-Semitism. You could find anti-Semitism within all of these confessions.

The opposite - that all clergymen were anti-Semitic - that I would never claim. It would not be fair to say that at all. The idea that Jesus was not a Jew but an Aryan could not be found in the sermons of Lutheran churches. That idea did not find much support at all in mainline Christian churches. But it was an idea that was gaining currency and interest and being openly speculated about among a certain type of Protestant whom I discuss in the book, known in German as 'Kulturprotestant', which literally translated means 'culture Protestants,' who were theologically liberal Protestants, not politically liberal Protestants. They allowed themselves to say, 'well, in the 19th century here (which was when this movement started), we have to be open to the discoveries of science, we have to allow ourselves to change our views to accommodate discoveries of the modern world, and what we have 'discovered' is that Jesus could not have been a Jew,' for all sorts of pseudo anthropological reasons.

So, to get back to your question, an average Christian German in 1930

would have heard a sermon that would have embraced German nationalism, although not to the Nazi extent of nationalism, would have been antagonistic to Jews to some degree, unfortunately, and would have certainly been stridently anti-communist, which the Nazis obviously used as their major political platform on their way to power.

The Turning: You mention in your book that anti-communism was a club that they used against the Jews. The Nazis were sort of complicated in a sense. We see them as anti-Jewish, but at the time they saw themselves as upholding the idea that we should share with our neighbors, and capitalism was getting in the way of that and so were the Jews.

Steigmann-Gall: Yes, the Nazis said they believed in an ethical socialism. That's when you explore the heart of the beast as they say, and you have to hold on tight and buckle in because it's going to be a pretty scary ride. Because it makes it all sound human and so recognizable, and this is what is so horrifying when you look at them because they are not one-issue politicians.

They had this idea of a qualified anti-capitalism. The Nazis distinguished between an exploitative capitalism and a productive capitalism. What the Nazis hated in capitalism was high finance capitalism, which they associated with Jews. They hung

onto the anti-Semitic canard that banks and other institutions of high finance were run by Jews. What they admired in capitalism was its productive capacity, so it's productive estates they value. They upheld the artisan in their rhetoric as someone who produced something at the end of the day that was tangible, which could be useful for the nation and for the people. They hated high finance and the stock market, but they loved the captain of industry. So their very famous relationship with Henry Ford, an icon of American capitalism. There they liked capitalism as long as they saw it as being useful and productive.

The Turning: I guess this is all about this idea of the 'Volk' which is so hard to get our heads around now. They felt that the nation was more important than the individual and they felt that the nation should be protected at all costs from any sort of threat or pollution. In that sense, were the Jews considered a threat to national security to use a modern term?

Steigmann-Gall: Well, not in the sense of how we mean 'national security' today. The Nazis' problem with the Jews was much more deeply rooted, it was a cultural antithesis. You're quite right that their conception of the nation was of an organic whole, they had an 'integralist' understanding of the nation. And then of course the question is who gets to be included in the nation and who's not? ... There were other nationalisms in Europe

that were not so anti-Semitic. In the case of Nazi anti-Semitism, one of the things that anti-Semites like the Nazis feared was assimilation. Because what assimilation does of course is that it elides the difference between you and the other. It's tantamount to what happens in the United States - the history of racism in this country where as much as the white racists hate the visible black, they fear even more the invisible black, the 'passing-for-white' African American, who is more insidious and therefore a greater threat to the integrity of the race.

So when you ask about the reason for the Nazis' fanatical hatred of the Jews - and there is a religious element to it - a hatred that goes beyond any remote resemblance to reality, it is to some degree the bigot's reaction to assimilation. "Oh my God, we can't see them, we have to root them out, they are a cancer in the body, and like a cancer, you can't see it on your body. You have to root it out." So I think it is the invisibility factor that helps explain a lot of the virulent hatred of the Jews.

Germany and America as God's Chosen People

The Turning: In various places in the book you point out that in a weird way the Germans considered themselves - at least within Protestant circles - as God's chosen race. It wasn't the Jews anymore, it was the Germans. How did the Nazis

use religion to get this idea that the German *Volk* -the nation- was God's chosen nation and had a duty to keep itself pure?

Steigmann-Gall: Here we have to get back to the theology of the orders of creation which I mentioned earlier. Lutheran scholars began to argue that along with the family and the state, God had made the race, the Volk, one of His orders. And of course they didn't just say the German Volk, they said the Volk as a category.

That idea spread to a lot of countries in the 19th century - Britain, the United States, scholars have seen this in South Africa as well.

Protestant societies that begin to imagine that they are God's chosen people. In South Africa it was the Afrikaners, the Boers, who began to imagine that they were a white elite among an African majority, they had already received enough evidence from God that they were the elect. In the United States, there is a history, tied to Nativism but not exclusively, that suggests that God favors the Anglo-Saxon nations. In Germany you see this developing too. It's a very elaborate intellectual history which I don't really get into in my book. I explore it enough to show that the Nazis weren't inventing all of this as a hodge podge to justify their policies from one week to the next. They had a certain ideological consistency about them.

The Nazis were able to use this because they entered into this discourse. They didn't sit down

behind closed doors and say ‘Okay, how do we sound Protestant this week? Or how do we appropriate or misappropriate Protestant theology for the next election?’ They were part of this discourse as well – they talked this talk – not just in front of an audience, as any politician would do, but behind closed doors as well. So this idea of ‘my people as the chosen people’ you actually see in other Protestant countries in the modern period.

War-time Sermons

The Turning: Let’s skip ahead a bit in time. It’s 1943, the war is on, the concentration camps are being used and Jews are being sent to them. If a German were to go to a Protestant church to hear a sermon on one of those weekends, what kind of Christianity would they be serving up?

Steigmann-Gall: A pretty selective variety. The kind that the ‘German Christians’ - a pro-Nazi Protestant group- would have been about all along. Very much referring to Germans as God’s people. When the Soviet Union was invaded, clergymen, Protestant or Catholic, would have sermonized about the crusade against Bolshevism. They probably would have toned down an explicit anti-Semitism because a lot of churchmen, after the Nazis began to systematically murder the Jews, learned about it and did nothing about it. This is one of the great tragedies of church history in

the Third Reich – that to a man or a woman, there was no Christian clergy person who got up on the pulpit and said ‘Guess what I found out last week? The Jews are being exterminated. This is a sin and must stop.’ That never happened. It did happen with the euthanasia campaign. There was a very famous case with Bishop von Galen, and the Nazis had to back down. This was how attentive to public opinion the Nazis were. It’s rather peculiar that a dictatorship, and Hitler, was concerned about public opinion, but he was. Not one clergy person of either denomination made a similar public declaration vis-à-vis the genocide of the Jews.

So, this gets me to your ultimate question about what might have been said in sermons about the Jews – it would have been an embarrassed silence. In their activity in the face of this knowledge, they became complicit for not speaking out. So rather than making any reference to them, they would have ironically said less about the Jews during the war than before the war when the genocide had yet to occur.

Is it happening again?

The Turning: It’s fifty years later – do you see any parallels in modern society now? Christians are being given credit for the swing vote in the recent re-election of President Bush.

Steigmann-Gall: The parallels are more diffuse. In these days the intersection of religion and politics can only be a source of concern when politicians suppose that God is on their side. They represent God's will on Earth. Or, when their followers make suggestions that their favorite politician is sent to them by Providence. This can only be seen as a concerning development. When you see that, you have to ask, okay when does the other shoe drop? And I don't think we have seen that yet. We may have, you see as a historian I am not in the prediction business. But it is a concern when you hear politicians saying that they represent the truer interests of Christianity than their opponent does. Their followers can say it for them, that God sent them. That they were providentially sent by the Creator to help the nation in its dire hour.

One thing that Nazis always talked about, and I don't suppose it is just fascists that try to score political points by saying this, is 'you know, the country is on a precipice'. Before 1933 the Nazis always said we're on

the brink of despair – we've got communists, we've got Jews, we've got liberalism, we've got the Versailles Treaty – all these things are conjoined to defeat Germany. We're almost defeated, but we can get our act together if we recognize the will of the Creator and vote for this guy.

One of my students asked me is the Bush government a fascist one? And I'm always loath to answer that because fascism is a very complicated phenomenon. And certainly Hitler would have been very distressed by the idea that his cabinet should be filled with representatives of minorities from the country as certain presidents are known to do, so Hitler would have found that completely unacceptable even if it was done for cynical political calculations. But there are rhetorical patterns, let's talk put it that way. Talk about God and God's intentions, bringing God's will to earth is a very slippery slope. And more than that it would be foolish for me to predict.