

Theology and Race

AT NOON ON SATURDAY, MAY 6, 1939, a group of Protestant theologians, pastors, and churchgoers gathered at the historic Wartburg Castle, resonant with Lutheran and nationalist significance, to celebrate the official opening of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life (Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben). The Institute's goals were both political and theological. Seeking to create a dejudalized church for a Germany that was in the process of ridding Europe of all Jews, it developed new biblical interpretations and liturgical materials. In the six years of its existence, as the Nazi regime carried out its genocide of the Jews, the Institute redefined Christianity as a Germanic religion whose founder, Jesus, was no Jew but rather had fought valiantly to destroy Judaism, falling as victim to that struggle. Germans were now called upon to be the victors in Jesus's own struggle against the Jews, who were said to be seeking Germany's destruction.

On the theological level, the Institute achieved remarkable success, winning support for its radical agenda from a host of church officials and theology professors who welcomed the removal of Jewish elements from Christian scripture and liturgy and the redefinition of Christianity as a Germanic, Aryan religion. Members of the Institute worked devotedly, as did so many others in the Reich, to win the fight against the Jews. Their devotion took them to greater and greater extremes, abandoning traditional Christian doctrine in exchange for coalitions with neo-pagan leaders, and producing vituperative propaganda on behalf of the Reich's measures against the Jews. "Aryan," for them, meant not simply a physical or biological body type, but much more an inner spirit that was simultaneously of great power and also profoundly vulnerable and in need of protection from the degeneracy threatened by non-Aryans, particularly Jews. In Nazi Germany, racial hygiene was the field to learn how to protect the body housing the Aryan spirit; the Institute's theology attended directly to caring for that spirit.

Most members of the Institute, particularly its academic director, Walter Grundmann, professor of New Testament at the University of Jena, regarded their work as being in the theological avant-garde, addressing and resolving

a problem that had long plagued Christian theology: how to establish clear and distinct boundaries between earliest Christianity and Judaism and eliminate all traces of Jewish influence from contemporary Christian theology and religious practice. As a predominantly younger generation of scholars, trained by Germany's leading scholars of early Christianity—many members of the Institute were students of the distinguished Tübingen professor, Gerhard Kittel, himself a Nazi who produced antisemitic propaganda¹—they saw themselves able to recover the historically genuine, non-Jewish Jesus and a Christian message compatible with contemporary German identity. Theirs was a goal of purification, authenticity, and theological revolution, all in the name of historical-critical methods and commitment to Germanness, to be achieved by eradicating the Jewish from the Christian. A Christian message tainted by Jewishness could not serve Germans, nor could a Jewish message be the accurate teaching of Jesus.

The Institute's goals were stated forthrightly at its opening by Grundmann, who delivered the keynote lecture on "The Dejudaization of the Religious Life as the Task of German Theology and Church." The present era, he declared, was similar to the Reformation: Protestants had to overcome Judaism just as Luther had overcome Catholicism. "The elimination of Jewish influence on German life is the urgent and fundamental question of the present German religious situation." Yes, Grundmann noted, people in Luther's day could not imagine Christianity without the Pope, just as today they could not imagine salvation without the Old Testament, but the goal could be realized. Modern New Testament scholarship had made apparent the "deformation of New Testament ideas into Old Testament preconceptions, so that now angry recognition of the Jewishness in the Old Testament and in parts of the New Testament has arisen, obstructing access to the Bible for innumerable German people."²

The Bible would have to be purified, Grundmann continued, restored to its pristine condition, to proclaim the truth about Jesus: that he sought the destruction of Judaism. Grundmann outlined the scholarly tasks that the Institute would undertake. This included clarifying the role of Judaism in early Christianity and its influence on modern philosophy. Any opposition to National Socialism from within the church, claimed Grundmann, arose from nefarious Jewish influence, such as the arguments of Jewish scholars that Jesus was a Jew. The Jews had destroyed Germans' "völkisch" (racial) thinking, Grundmann continued, and, with help from Bolshevism, they were now striving for world conquest, the "Weltherrschaft des Judentums" (world domination of Jewry).

¹ On Kittel, see Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*.

² Grundmann, *Die Entjudung des religiösen Lebens*, 9, 10.

The Jewish threat to Germany was grave: “For these reasons,” Grundmann stated, echoing Nazi propaganda, “the struggle against the Jews has been irrevocably turned over to the German Volk.”³ The war against the Jews was not simply a military battle, but a spiritual battle: “Jewish influence on all areas of German life, including on religious-church life, must be exposed and broken,”⁴ a phrase Grundmann frequently used in defining the Institute’s purpose.

THE GERMAN CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

The Institute was a well-funded, thriving achievement of the German Christian movement, the pro-Nazi faction within the German Protestant church that claimed a membership of 600,000 pastors, bishops, professors of theology, religion teachers, and laity. The movement’s goal was to create a unified, national German church transcending Protestant and Catholic divisions that would exemplify the nazified Christianity it advocated. It began by trying to reshape the German Protestant (Lutheran) church. The movement was highly successful in gaining influence with many of the university theological faculties and regional churches, but most of all in developing an ideology disseminated through lectures, conferences, and numerous publications and that occasionally found common ground even among opponents within the Confessing Church, the Catholic Church, and the much smaller neo-pagan groups.⁵

The German Christian movement was a faction within the Protestant church of Germany, not a separate sect, and eventually attracted between a quarter and a third of Protestant church members. Enthusiastically pro-Nazi, the movement sought to demonstrate its support for Hitler by organizing itself after the model of the Nazi Party, placing a swastika on the altar next to the cross, giving the Nazi salute at its rallies, and celebrating Hitler as sent by God. It was ready and willing to alter fundamental Christian doctrine in order to bring the church into compliance with the Reich, and welcomed the April 1933 order of removing Jews from the civil service by demanding that the church do likewise and remove any non-Aryans, that is, baptized Jews, from positions within the church. That demand contravened the doctrine of

³Ibid., 9.

⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵The neo-pagan groups remained small; the German Faith Movement had about 40,000 members, and others, such as the Ludendorff Tannenberg League, were even smaller. The Roman Catholic Church had about 20 million German members, while the Protestant Church had the majority, 40 million Germans.

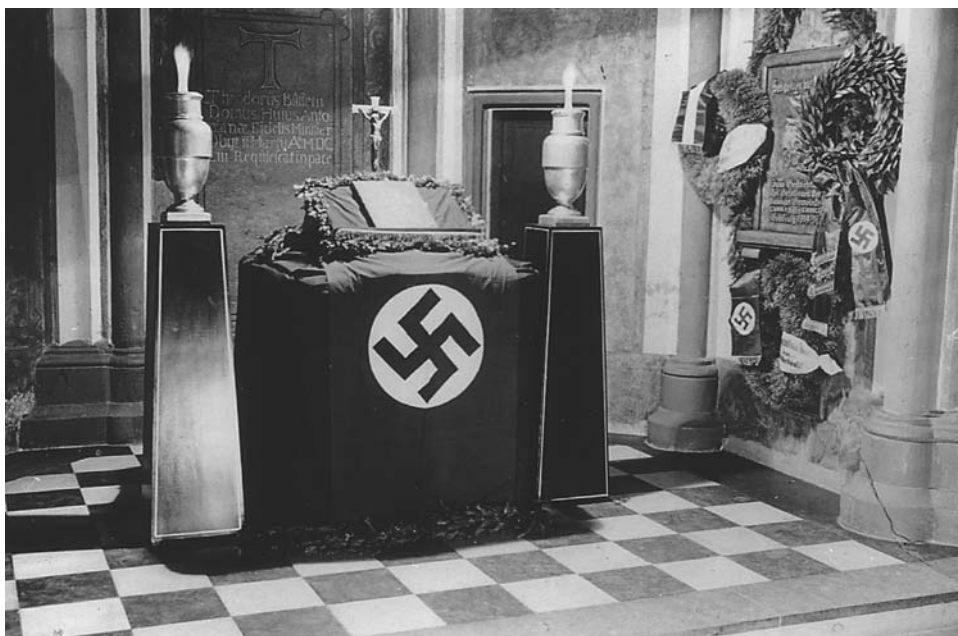


Figure I.1. Church altar, 1935.

baptism, according to which the sacrament transformed a Jew into a Christian, but the German Christian leaders insisted that the Nazi racial laws took precedence and that baptism could not erase race. Within a year, a group of disapproving Protestant theologians in Germany, including Karl Barth, one of the most distinguished theologians of his day, condemned the German Christian movement as heresy, issuing the now-famous Barmen Declaration in May 1934, which became the basis of a new movement within the German Protestant church that called itself the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church, which eventually attracted about twenty percent of Protestant pastors, remained a minority opposition group—not in opposition to Hitler or the Nazi Reich, but in opposition to the German Christian movement for its efforts to undermine Christian doctrine.⁶

Tensions between the two factions continued throughout the Third Reich, as the German Christians gained control of most of the regional Protestant

⁶Some members of the Confessing Church became notable opponents of Hitler, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed in the last weeks of the war at a concentration camp, and Karl Barth, who had to emigrate to Switzerland. See Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent*.

churches in Germany, using the church's institutional structures and finances to promote their positions. In one area, however, the two factions were not at swords: while the Confessing Church supported Jews who had become baptized Christians, most of them agreed with the German Christians that Germany needed to be rid of its Jews and that Judaism was a degenerate moral and spiritual influence on Christians. Catholics were in a position similar to the Confessing Church: too theologically conservative to alter their doctrines or their liturgy to bring it in accord with Nazism, yet in basic agreement with their Protestant colleagues that Jews were a degenerate influence on German Christians. Munich's Cardinal Faulhaber, for example, delivered a series of Advent sermons in 1933 attacking the German Christian movement, but his argument, almost identical to what the Confessing Church leaders came to argue, was that the Old Testament need not be eliminated as a Jewish book, as some German Christians advocated; it was, rather, an anti-Jewish book, Faulhaber insisted, since the prophets were constantly condemning Israel for its sinful ways.⁷ Faulhaber's objection, then, was not to the German Christians' antisemitism, but to their failure to realize that the Old Testament itself was on their side.⁸

The three ideological prongs of the German Christian movement within the Protestant church, as Doris Bergen has delineated, were its opposition to church doctrine, its antisemitism, and its effort to craft a "manly" church, all of which are reflected in the Institute's many publications.⁹ Some of Germany's most prominent theologians became Nazi sympathizers and outspoken antisemites, as Robert Ericksen has demonstrated in his study of three of them, Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch.¹⁰ Both the Institute and the German Christian movement from which it stemmed were influenced by the *völkisch* traditions and mood of cultural pessimism that George Mosse and Fritz Stern have shown were crucial in shaping Nazi ideology and that drew adherents across the political spectrum, from reactionaries to liberals.¹¹ The extent of the German Christian movement's influence, which was initially downplayed by historians, was reevaluated in a recent major study by Manfred Gailus. Examining 147 Protestant church parishes in Berlin, led by 565 pastors, he concluded that forty percent of the pastors were, at least for some time during the Third Reich, oriented toward the German Christian movement,

⁷ Faulhaber, *Judaism, Christianity and Germany*.

⁸ For a thorough and highly nuanced exploration of German Catholics during this period, including their reactions to the German Christian movement, see Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*.

⁹ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 61–81.

¹⁰ Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*.

¹¹ Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*; Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*.

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compared to slightly more than one-third who were sympathetic to the Confessing Church. Of 131 church congregations, he found that one-quarter were dominated by German Christians, and half were split between Confessing Church and German Christians. While no comparable detailed social historical studies of the churches in other regions have been carried out, Gailus's findings would undoubtedly find parallels elsewhere in Germany, and perhaps an even greater proportion of German Christian sympathizers. The movement seems to have been stronger in urban than in rural areas, and to have infiltrated both university theological faculties and village parishes. Few Germans withdrew from the Protestant church on account of the new theology promoted by the German Christians, and German Christian rallies drew large crowds. Many pastors were sympathetic to the German Christian movement's theology, and their theological views were disseminated within the institutional structures of the Protestant church; there was no schismatic withdrawal and creation of alternative churches, nor is there evidence of large-scale objections to pastors preaching a German Christian message.¹² Efforts by the Nazi regime after 1937 to encourage Germans to withdraw from the church found only minimal response; the anti-Christian neo-pagan movements were not successful in drawing large memberships.

The Institute, too, was larger in its membership and influence than had been assumed before I began my study. Lacking the documentation from the archives, some church historians had told me when I began my study that it was a marginal phenomenon with little importance beyond its backwater location in Thuringia. The mountain of evidence I uncovered, only a portion of which can be discussed in this book, paints a different picture, one of Reich-wide influence, a substantial membership, an active program of publishing, and numerous conferences. The Institute was a model of success, no doubt due to its focus on the one issue central to the Nazi regime: antisemitism.

ANTISEMITISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Hitler did not achieve most of his political and military goals, but on the Jewish question he succeeded remarkably. If his antisemitic propaganda found resonance, its success can be credited in large measure to the unrelenting

¹²Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus*. Note that an effort was made after 1937 by the regime to encourage Germans to withdraw from the church and yet declare themselves "Gottgläubige" (believers in God); only a small percentage did. The study by Gailus has been expanded: Manfred Gailus and Wolfgang Krogel, eds., *Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche*.

anti-Jewish Christian theological discourse that linked Nazi propaganda with the traditions and moral authority of the churches. That link was proclaimed with enthusiasm by Nazi Christians: “In the Nazi treatment of the Jews and its ideological stance, Luther’s intentions, after centuries, are being fulfilled.”¹³ Antisemitism was the lingua franca of the Nazi era and was employed by church leaders to gain credibility with their own adherents—but also out of sincere antisemitic conviction. Antisemitism was also a tactic in the rhetorical battles among the different Christian factions, with each accusing its opponents of being “Jewish” while positioning itself as the true Nazi believer.¹⁴

Already in 1971 the historian Uriel Tal challenged the entrenched view that racist antisemitism is a new phenomenon that repudiates Christianity by arguing that it was actually utterly dependent on Christian anti-Judaism for its success: “it was not the economic crises that brought about this new political, racial and antireligious antisemitism, but completely the reverse, it was precisely the anti-Christian and antireligious ideology of racial antisemitism which hampered the first antisemitic parties in their efforts to utilize the economic crisis for their political development . . . [because] what still attracted the masses was the classical, traditional Christian anti-Judaism, however adapted it may have become to the new economic conditions.”¹⁵ Tal demonstrated that Germany’s antisemitic, *völkisch* movements that arose in the nineteenth century had to abandon their initial anti-Christian stances in order to win supporters for whom Christian anti-Jewish arguments held profound political appeal.¹⁶ Even within the so-called “church struggle” between German Christians and the Confessing Church for control of the Protestant church, antisemitism became the glue that united the otherwise warring factions. Similarly, however much Hitler made use of images of messianism, redemption,

¹³Meyer-Erlach, *Juden, Mönche und Luther*, 60.

¹⁴Such tactics of disidentification can be found in other political conflicts within racist societies: for example, in the racism that prevailed among the Afrikaner and the English in the struggle over South Africa during the Boer Wars.

¹⁵Tal, *Religious and Anti-Religious Roots of Modern Antisemitism*, reprinted in Tal, ed., *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich*, 177.

¹⁶“In reality Nazism accomplished but few of its goals. But in one area, that of the Jewish question, political myth achieved its purpose to the full. Here the regime met the least opposition from those who in other matters were hardly in accord with Nazism—be it intellectuals, the churches or public opinion in the Reich or abroad. The Jew served as the focal point round which Nazism turned and on which the structural process of value-transformation and reversal of meanings took place. Among the values and meanings that were transformed, the symbol itself was turned into substance; consequently, the negation of Judaism had to be transformed into the annihilation of the Jew, this time not spiritually but rather physically, not symbolically but in substance.” (Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology*, 111)

and other Christian motifs, the most useful and consistent aspect of Christianity for the Nazi movement was its anti-Judaism, just as the single most consistent and persistent feature of Nazism was its antisemitism.

Hitler was well aware of arguments that were central to the Institute: that Jesus was an Aryan, and that Paul, as a Jew, had falsified Jesus's message, themes he repeatedly mentioned in private conversations, together with rants against the church as a Jewish subversion of the Aryan spirit (though the reliability of his reported private conversations is uncertain). In a diatribe alleged to have occurred in October of 1941, the month Hitler made the decision to murder the Jews,¹⁷ Hitler proclaimed that Jesus was not a Jew, but a fighter against Jewry whose message was falsified and exploited by Paul: "St. Paul transformed a local movement of Aryan opposition to Jewry into a super-temporal religion, which postulates the equality of all men . . . [causing] the death of the Roman Empire."¹⁸ His views demonstrate that the German Christian diagnosis of Christianity as tainted by Jewish influence resonated at the highest levels of the Reich, but that its prescribed solution of dejudaization was met with skepticism if not sheer mockery. Was Christianity thoroughly impregnated with Judaism, or could it be dejudaized, as the Institute claimed?

Like the antisemitic parties of the nineteenth century, the Nazi Party could not reject Christianity—not only because it would offend the moral and social sensibilities of Germans, but because the antisemitism of Christianity formed the basis on which the party could appeal to Germans with its racial and nationalist ideology. Nazism's relationship to Christianity was not one of rejection, nor was it an effort to displace Christianity and become a form of "political religion." Nazism did not present racial antisemitism as antithetical to Christian theological anti-Judaism; rather, Nazi ideology was a form of supersessionism, a usurpation and colonization of Christian theology, especially its antisemitism, for its own purposes. The theology of the Institute was a similar effort at supersessionism in reverse, taking over elements of Nazi racial ideology to bolster and redefine the Christian message. The result was an uneasy competition between two sides seeking popular support and institutional control, though access to power was, of course, highly asymmetrical.

Thus, while seeking to undermine the political power and moral authority of the churches, Nazism simultaneously appropriated key elements of Christian theology into its own ideology both for purposes of winning adherents used to Christian arguments and also to give its own message a coherence and resonance with the age-old Christian teachings that had shaped European

¹⁷Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution*, 309–34, 352–73.

¹⁸Monologue of October 21, 1941, Bormann, ed., *Hitler's Secret Conversations*, 64.

culture. Conversely, German Christians appropriated Nazi rhetoric and symbols into the church to give its Christianity a contemporary resonance. Both the Nazis and the German Christians identified Hitler as Christ's second coming. That gave Hitler the status of a supernatural being and gave Christ renewed glory as a contemporary figure of enormous political significance. Both were suspicious of the institutional church. Factions within the Nazi Reich and the party saw the church as competition and a potential threat to be ultimately eliminated after the war.¹⁹ The German Christians sought control and radical reform of the Protestant church, which they never fully achieved, leading them to bitter complaints and, in some cases, demands for its demolition. Meanwhile, Christianity was not to be banned nor the churches outlawed; rather, as the historian Ernst Piper writes, Nazi strategy was to control the churches and lead to "a steadily advancing process of delegitimization and disassociation, of undermining and repression" that would undercut the church's moral authority and position of respect.²⁰ In its own supersessionist theology, an amalgam of Nazism and Christianity, with a rejection of church authority and doctrine, an assertion of German supremacy and Jewish degeneracy, and absurd revisions of the Bible, the German Protestant church contributed substantially to the Nazi project of undermining Christianity.

The establishment of the Institute in 1939 and the proliferation of its projects during the war years demonstrates that the antisemitism of the German Christians was not simply rhetorical, but was intended to lend active support to Nazi policies against the Jews—or, at times, to push those policies in more radical directions. Indeed, certain Protestant theologians stood at the forefront in discussions of the so-called Jewish problem; Gerhard Kittel's notorious speech of May 1933, later published as a pamphlet, has been called the most antisemitic utterance of that year.²¹ In considering ways to rid Germany of Jews, Kittel proposed not only expulsion and guest status, but extermination ("Ausrottung"), a method he rejected only because it was too difficult to implement. On February 24–25, 1936, a few months after the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws, but long before Jews were being deported and murdered, a group of theologians, some of whom subsequently became leaders of the Institute, met in Dresden to discuss a merger of the German Christian

¹⁹ Kroll, *Utopie als Ideologie*. See also Rissmann, *Hitlers Gott*.

²⁰ Piper, "Steigmann-Gall, the Holy Reich," 53.

²¹ Kittel, *Die Judenfrage*; the evaluation comes from Horst Junginger, "Das Bild des Juden," 175. Along with Kittel's pamphlet as the worst antisemitic publication of 1933, Junginger includes an article by the Catholic theologian Karl Adam, "Deutsches Volkstum und katholisches Christentum," 40–63, in which Adam declares that the goals of Christianity are in agreement with the political antisemitism of Nazism. On Adam, see Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 172–78.

factions of the state churches of Thuringia and Saxony. During the course of the meeting, Siegfried Leffler, a German Christian leader, official in the Thuringian Ministry of Education, and, by 1939, figurehead of the Institute, stated:

In a Christian life, the heart always has to be disposed toward the Jew, and that's how it has to be. As a Christian, I can, I must, and I ought always to have or to find a bridge to the Jew in my heart. But as a Christian, I also have to follow the laws of my nation [Volk], which are often presented in a very cruel way, so that again I am brought into the harshest of conflicts with the Jew. Even if I know "thou shalt not kill" is a commandment of God or "thou shalt love the Jew" because he too is a child of the eternal Father, I am able to know as well that I have to kill him, I have to shoot him, and I can only do that if I am permitted to say: Christ.²²

What is striking is not only that Leffler spoke of killing Jews as early as February 1936, long before mass murder of the Jews became Nazi policy, but that there was no response to his comments from those attending, neither immediately nor later in the session; the discussion simply continued as if murder of Jews in the name of Christ was a customary topic.²³ The aryanization of Jesus into a manly, heroic, fighting spirit reflected among the theologians the "heroic realism" that prevailed in the 1930s within right-wing political thought. That "heroism" meant killing one's opponent without emotion but in accord with principles of natural law, in defense of one's own race and at the cost of personal sacrifice.²⁴ Paul Althaus, professor of theology at the University of Erlangen and a noted ethicist, was present at the meeting, but expressed nothing to indicate that he was appalled or disturbed by Leffler's remarks. The lack of outrage is evidence that ridding Germany of Jews had become an acceptable point of discussion among theologians, even when murder was proposed as a technique of achieving it. The Nuremberg Laws, while perceived by many German Jews as protection from far worse legislation, were viewed as an

²²ThHStA A 1400, 293. The meeting was held February 24–25, 1936. Present: Paul Althaus, Martin Doerne, Erich Fascher, Wolf Meyer-Erlach, Dedo Müller, pastors, and senior ministers; Leffler, Leutheuser, Hugo Hahn (a church superintendent in Saxony who led the Confessing Church movement there); and Grundmann. It is striking that Anja Rinnen, in her biography of Siegfried Leffler, does not cite this document, and that Hahn does not describe the meeting in his detailed memoir of the period nor mention Leffler's comments. See Rinnen, *Kirchenmann und Nationalsozialist*. See also Hahn and Prater, *Kämpfer wider Willen*.

²³Indeed, two historians mention the meeting but do not comment on Leffler's statement. Arnhold, "Dem Neuen Testament," 151–83; Meier, *Der evangelische Kirchenkampf*, 2:136.

²⁴Herbert, "Ideological Legitimization," 103.

encouragement by the German Christian movement to take even more radical positions. Legal cases in German courts, brought in the wake of the Nuremberg Laws' criminalization of sexual relations and marriage between Jews and Aryans, and widely reported in the German press, implicated Jews as sexual predators of Aryans, further encouraging Christian theologians to insist on protecting Christian purity by eradicating Jewishness with even more radical measures.²⁵ The penetration of Christian bodies by Jewish sex reiterated a typical motif of racist rhetoric, the dangers of miscegenation, and reinforced fears that Aryanism was not immutable, but subject to destruction by Jews.²⁶ Antisemites had long insisted that German Aryan women were vulnerable to Jewish predation, and Jesus, whose gentleness and suffering was viewed as effeminate by German Christians, was depicted in one caricature as an Aryan woman on a cross with a lecherous Jewish man in the foreground: the crucifixion as the Jewish rape of Germany.

The use of laws and court procedures to control sexual relations within Germany and thereby create the Aryan racial nation was not in contradiction to Christian teachings; after all, as Jennifer Knust points out, the apostle Paul, Justin Martyr, and other early Christian writers asserted that those who reject Christ are by definition sexually repulsive, licentious, and "unnatural" in their sexual behavior.²⁷ Among the post-apostolic writers, the physical, and especially sexual, purity of Christians was the safeguard of moral and religious purity. Thus the Nuremberg Laws could easily be read as upholding classical Christian values and calling forth the sort of theological action that Leffler proposed just months after they were announced.

INSTITUTE ACTIVITIES

By the time the Institute was opened three years after the meeting in Dresden, the deJudaization of Germany was already in progress. Indeed, it was in the days following the Reich Kristallnacht pogrom on November 9–10, 1938, that a formal proposal to establish an institute that would deJudaize the church was circulated among church officials, linking the theological goals with the Nazis' actions. Theologically, the Institute was meant to signify a new Reformation, completing what Luther had begun. The date of the Institute's opening had been chosen deliberately to concretize that link. On May 4 in

²⁵ Szobar, "Telling Sexual Stories in the Nazi Courts of Law," 131–63.

²⁶ On the centrality of fear of miscegenation in the racist discourse of colonialism, see Stoler, "Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth," 183–206.

²⁷ Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*.

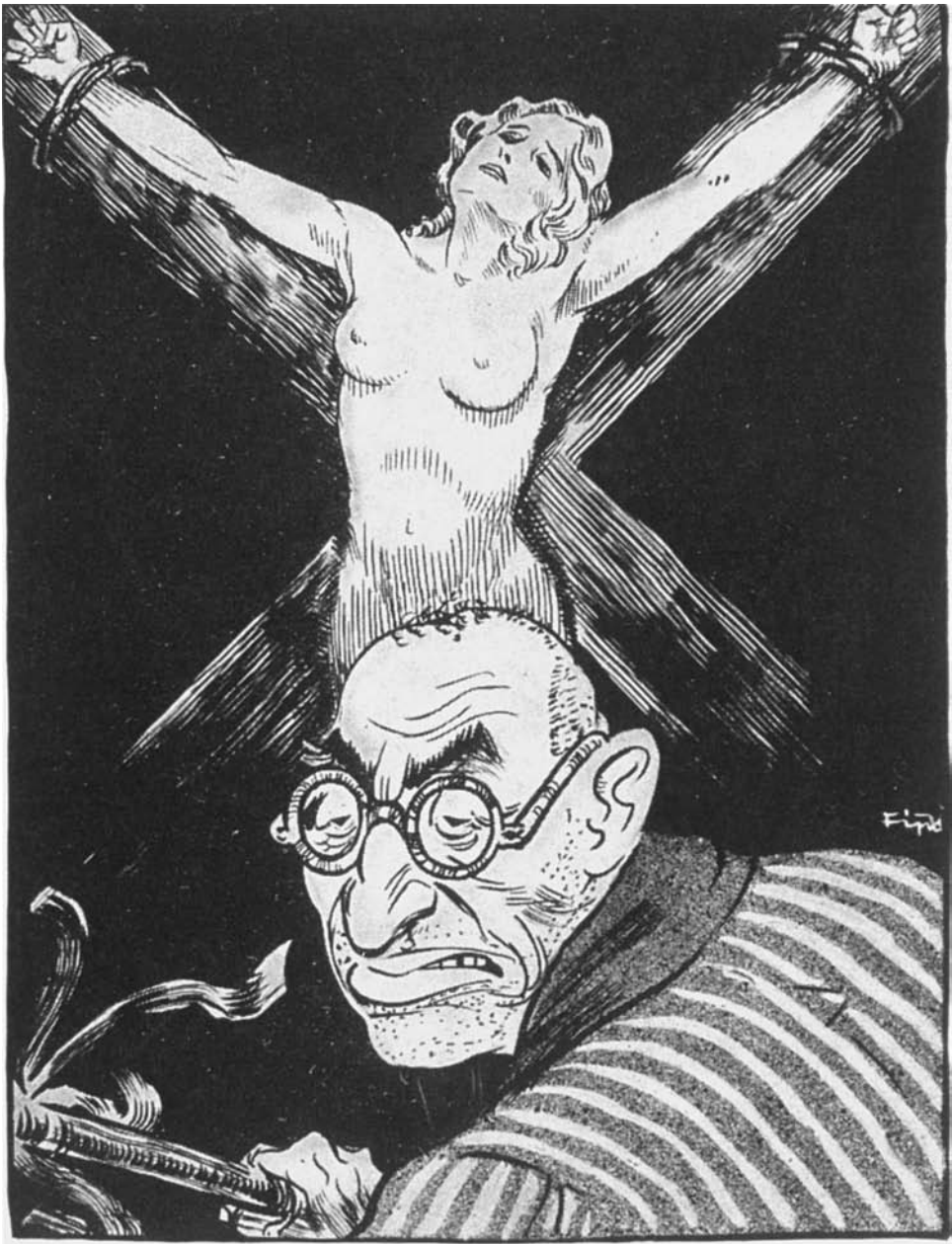


Figure I.2. Antisemitic cartoon, 1934.

1521, Martin Luther had fled his enemies and arrived shortly after at the Wartburg Castle, where he spent the next ten months translating the New Testament into German. Within a year of its opening on May 6, 1939, at the same Wartburg Castle, the Institute's own revised New Testament was published, purged of Jewish references and ready for the Nazi Reich.

From 1939 to 1945 the Institute functioned as a broad umbrella under which a range of anti-Jewish theological positions could be articulated by both scholars and pastors. Some, like Grundmann, called for the removal of the Old Testament from the Christian Bible on the grounds that the Old Testament was a Jewish book, while others, such as Johannes Hempel, professor of Old Testament at the University of Berlin, tried to retain the Old Testament for Christians, on the grounds that its core was a message about the Volk Israel (not the Jews) that was important for the German Volk to hear. Active members of the Institute included internationally renowned scholars of Jewish texts, such as Hugo Odeberg, but also theology students and demagogues, such as Hans-Joachim Thilo and Wolf Meyer-Erlach. By 1942, the year the greatest number of European Jews were murdered, the Institute had broadened its membership and its themes, inviting völkisch writers to lecture on Germany's Teutonic heritage and its compatibility with Christianity.

What united Institute members was a commitment to eradicating Jewishness as a means of purifying both Christianity and Germany. Known popularly as a deJudaization institute ("Entjudungsinstitut"), it was the Protestant church's instrument of antisemitic propaganda. Theological conclusions regarding Jesus's teachings and his interactions with the Jews of his day were shaped into a rhetoric that endorsed Nazi ideology, making Nazism appear to be realizing in the political sphere what Christians taught in the religious sphere. Institute conferences and publications were notable not for scholarly originality, but for developing biblical exegesis and religious history using racial methods. With members who were leading scholars of theology, professors or instructors at universities throughout the Reich, the Institute provided a scholarly and religious mantle for a politicized antisemitism that mirrored the Propaganda Ministry's rhetoric in describing the war as a defense against an alleged Jewish war on Germany. In offering proof that Jesus was not a Jew but an opponent of the Jews, Grundmann allied the Institute's work with the Nazi war effort.

The extent of the Institute's appeal was remarkable: the academics and students of Protestant theology who became Institute members represented a cross-section of disciplines, geographic location within the Reich, age, and level of scholarly accomplishment. In addition, some members were among

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the noted völkisch writers of the era, unaffiliated with a church. The popular appeal of the Institute among German theologians was paralleled by the broad appeal of the German Christian movement that spawned it, but also by the appeal of “dejudaization” among academics and intellectuals. Virtually all scholarly fields were compromised by efforts to synthesize their methods and topics of investigation with Nazi concerns, thereby offering an academic legitimation for National Socialist ideology. Nazi theologians drew easily from the work of their colleagues in fields as diverse as linguistics, archeology, anthropology, and so-called racial hygiene.

THE INSTITUTE’S SIGNIFICANCE

Institute statements regarding Jews and Judaism were mirrors, in Christianized language, of the official propaganda issued by the Reich during the course of the Holocaust: Jews were the aggressive enemies of Germans and Germany was fighting a defensive war against them.²⁸ Even as the Nazis carried out the extermination of the European Jews, their propaganda argued that it was Jews who were plotting the murder of Germans. In similar language, Institute members such as Grundmann argued that Jews were the mortal enemies of Jesus and all who followed him. Antisemitic propaganda was not incidental to the murder process, but formed, as Saul Friedländer has written, the “mobilizing myth of the regime.”²⁹ Church leaders and theologians channeled Nazi propaganda into visual symbols, placing a swastika on the altar or on a banner hanging from the church ceiling until its use in churches was banned by the Nazi Party in 1936, and also into Christian language for the ninety-five percent of Germans who remained registered, tax-paying members of the Protestant and Catholic churches.³⁰ Members of other professional groups collaborated in similar ways, but, of course, an antisemitic message conveyed by clergy carried a unique moral weight.

That the theologians who ran the Institute were in any way responsible for the Holocaust was, of course, denied once the war came to an end. Indeed, it is precisely the closure of the Institute after the war by Thuringian church officials—on the grounds that funding was not available—that reinforced the disclaimer of responsibility. Since the postwar closure did not occur because

²⁸ Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*.

²⁹ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, xix.

³⁰ Heschel, “Church Protests during the Third Reich.”



Figure I.3. Catholic Cathedral of Cologne, 1937.

the Institute was pro-Nazi or antisemitic, Institute members claimed that their work had been purely theological and scholarly. They hid their Nazi antisemitism beneath the cloak of traditional Christian theological anti-Judaism. Closing the Institute did not halt the spread and influence of its ideas, but allowed negations of Judaism to be presented as if they were Christian theological positions without any political implications.

What makes the Institute worthy of particular attention is its context: it carried out its program of eradicating the Jewish within Christianity precisely while the Jews of Europe were being deported and murdered. Theologians may have been far from the policy makers who set the agenda for the Nazi regime's domestic and foreign affairs, but they were part of a larger German apparatus of intellectuals who translated the often inchoate meaning of Nazism into a substantive discourse of Christian ritual and theology, giving Nazism religious and moral authority. As Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach have argued, there was no single definition of National Socialism; it was less an ideology than an ethos, an indeterminate cultural outlook that could be defined in a host of ways.³¹ In the writings of the Institute's theologians, Nazism became a symbol for Christianity, specifically for the pure and pristine original Christianity that they claimed they were recovering from the distortions of history. In that way, too, they argued that the racial theory of National Socialism provided the opportunity for the figure of Jesus to emerge in his original form and intention: as an Aryan fighting against Judaism. As part of a broader coalition of intellectuals and scholars who supported the regime, the theologians of the Institute provided an important religious legitimacy to the Nazis' "all-devouring manic obsession with the Jews"³² and the "blend of hatred, self-righteous indignation, and paranoia [that] was at the core of the Nazi justification of genocide."³³

Propagandists can be likened to desk murderers: they do not commit the murder, but give their written approval to the principle of the mission, and sometimes suggest the mission in the first place. Working at a safe distance from the machinery of murder, Nazi propagandists urged eradication of all expressions of Jewishness. Removing all positive Jewish references from Christian texts, denouncing Jews as enemies of Jesus's followers, and describing Judaism as a degenerate religion is not the same act as dropping Zyklon B into a sealed chamber filled with Jews. One cannot prove that the Institute's propaganda helped cause the Holocaust. However, the effort to deJudaize Christianity was

³¹ Bialas and Rabinbach, *The Humanities in Nazi Germany*, xxxvi–xlii.

³² Kershaw, *Hitler*, 151; cited by Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 3.

³³ Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 1.

also an attempt to erase moral objections to Nazi antisemitism. Institute-sponsored research, by describing Jesus's goal as the eradication of Judaism, effectively reframed Nazism as the very fulfillment of Christianity. Whether the Nazi killers of Jews were motivated by Institute propaganda cannot be proven, but some did express gratitude for Institute publications, apparently for alleviating a troubled conscience. Institute publications were not as widely disseminated as the propaganda issued by the Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, or the publications of Julius Streicher, who was hanged at Nuremberg for editing *Der Stürmer*, a weekly antisemitic propaganda rag. Yet the moral and societal location of clergy and theologians lends greater weight to the propaganda of the Institute; propaganda coming from the pulpit calls forth far deeper resonance than that spoken by a politician or journalist.

HISTORY OF INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE INSTITUTE

The existence of an antisemitic propaganda institute financed by the church first came to light with the publication of Max Weinreich's book, *Hitler's Professors*, in 1946.³⁴ Drawing on archives of the Ministry of Propaganda that had been confiscated by United States troops at the end of the war and deposited in the YIVO archives in New York City, Weinreich was able to outline much of the work of Grundmann and the Institute. Weinreich compared the theologians with other groups of scholars who put their academic training to work on behalf of the Nazi genocide. Yet Weinreich's study was largely ignored and did not influence the enormous number of studies of the churches during the Third Reich that were published during the first forty years after the war.

Indeed, for many years after the end of World War II, the very existence of the Institute was only vaguely acknowledged by historians of the church. Kurt Meier, professor of church history at the University of Leipzig, mentioned the Institute in his 1964 study of the German Christian movement, but did not explore its antisemitic dimensions, nor did he make use of the Institute's archives in Thuringia.³⁵ Both in 1964 and in a 1992 publication, Meier described the "apologetic" motivation of the Institute, defending Christianity against Alfred Rosenberg's charges that it was a Jewish religion. Grundmann, he wrote, attempted to counter the "defamatory propaganda that Christianity was Judaism for non-Jews";³⁶ again, Meier did not speak of the Institute's

³⁴Weinreich, *Hitler's Professors*.

³⁵Meier, *Die Deutschen Christen*.

³⁶Meier, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz*, 166.

antisemitism. More direct and critical were the publications of church historian Hans Prolingheuer, who, in a variety of semi-popular publications since the early 1980s, has continually exposed the antisemitism of the Nazi-era church, its persecution of Jews and non-Aryan Christians, and the nazified Christian teachings of that era.³⁷ Doris Bergen, in her 1996 book delineating the ideology of the German Christian movement, pointed clearly to the Institute's antisemitism and drew on a rich supply of archival sources from Berlin and Minden to delineate its activities.³⁸ By contrast, some historians, while acknowledging the virulence of the Institute's antisemitism, have minimized its significance within the Reich and within the history of Christian theology; an example is the recent book by Peter von der Osten-Sacken that presents the Institute as a "misuse of the Gospel." By describing the Institute as the creation of the German Christians of Thuringia, Osten-Sacken narrows its influence and its genealogy within Christian theology.³⁹ Nor does he place Institute arguments within the context of racist rhetoric, but limits its significance to a theological problem.

Most recently, Roland Deines has attempted to disconnect Grundmann from Nazi antisemitism on the grounds that "the Jew" in Grundmann's writings was never a concrete person, but an abstract, metaphysical "evil." Apparently unaware that racism always defines its target in such terms, Deines fails to recognize that for Nazi antisemites, combating the abstract danger of Jewishness inevitably demanded eradication of its concretized source, the Jewish people, as carriers of that danger. Even more striking, Deines criticizes Grundmann for his "literalistic pedantry," a euphemism for "Pharisaism" in traditional Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric, thus reiterating an image frequently invoked by Grundmann's own opponents during the Third Reich who mocked his de Judaization efforts as "Pharisaic" in order to tar him with the label of the despised Jew.⁴⁰

THEOLOGY AND RACE

Why was it so easy to racialize Christianity? What made antisemitic ideas so appealing to Protestant theologians in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century? What are the affinities between theology and racism?

³⁷ Prolingheuer, *Wir sind in Die Irre gegangen*.

³⁸ Bergen, "One Reich, One People, One Church," 397–514, and Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 148–54.

³⁹ Osten-Sacken, ed., *Das mißbrauchte Evangelium*.

⁴⁰ Deines, "Jesus der Galiläer," 129.

Numerous historians have traced the origins of racist thought to the period of the Enlightenment and blamed its emergence on the decline of religious belief. Colin Kidd, however, has argued not that race emerges as a consequence of the undermining of religion, but that race is implicated as a major factor in bringing about the “unraveling of Christian certainties.”⁴¹ Starting in the eighteenth century, race, according to Kidd, helped undermine the foundations of Christian belief: the universalism of its message, the uniqueness and historicity of its teachings, and the reliability and coherence of its scriptures. By the Nazi era, however, this book will argue, race was playing the opposite function: in its specific iteration as antisemitism, race was used by some theologians as a restorative force of coherence for Christian theology. Racism was viewed by many theologians not only as a political tool, but as an avant-garde method for understanding society and human nature.

By making use of racial arguments in their presentations of Christianity, Institute members thought they could bolster the appeal of Christianity to its Nazi despisers. Racism’s argument that distinct and immutable orders exist in society lent support to a “theology of creation.” One Institute member, Wilhelm Stapel, attempted to demonstrate that racism supported Christian claims to divine creation: just as God had created societal orders—marriage, family, Volk, profession, hierarchy, property, and so forth—God had given each Volk a task and place on earth.⁴² Believers in racial hierarchy could see it as an extension of the biblical account of God’s creation of hierarchical orders within nature, and social orders such as marriage, and Christians were told that racial hierarchies were an extension of the divine order.

Racism was also embraced as a tool to restore the uniqueness, historicity, and significance of Jesus and his teachings that had been undermined by historicism. Even if Jesus’s teachings did not seem different from those of other Jews of his day, he was distinct in his race, as an Aryan and not a Jew. His racial identity was then used to read his teachings not as reflections of Judaism, but as repudiations of it. Institute publications argued that the Jews were violent people who sought the destruction of Jesus and continue to strive for world domination and the subjugation of all Gentiles. The Institute presented the war as a defensive life-and-death struggle against the Jews, and also as a Christian war in the name of the authentic non-Jewish Jesus, the Christianity he sought to bring into being, and the battle to destroy Judaism that he failed

⁴¹ Kidd, *The Forging of Races*, 122.

⁴² Stapel, who lectured at Institute conferences, was widely read and was one of the more sophisticated exponents of völkisch theology. Some of his publications are listed in the bibliography.

to win. Like the German military, the Institute presented its cause as a total eradication of the enemy, Judaism, and not simply its segregation or expulsion from the Reich.

The question of the dejudaization effort of the Institute has to be examined not only in terms of Third Reich politics, but as a Christian theological phenomenon that engaged a vast number of pastors, bishops, and academic theologians. Christianity came into being by resting on the theological foundations of Judaism; it is often said that Judaism and Christianity stand in mother-daughter relationship. Nearly every central theological concept of Christianity rests on a Jewish foundation, from messiah to divine election. Affirming what is central to Christian teaching usual entails an affirmation of a Jewish idea or a text from the Old Testament, so that attempting to eradicate the Jewish was a kind of “theological bulimia.”⁴³

Ridding Christianity of everything Jewish brought racism to the theological level. The appeal of racism to theologians remains a widespread problem not only in Germany and not only in the modern period. Theologians have long placed themselves at the service of racism, even as many have mustered religious arguments to combat it. The specific question raised by this study is how German Protestantism benefited from Nazi racism. Why were a sizable number of German Protestant theologians and pastors so drawn to racial theory that they created a form of racial theology? What theological benefit did they derive from racism?

The relationship between Christian theological anti-Judaism and secular, racist antisemitism has long been debated by historians and theologians. Despite the important research findings of Uriel Tal, a widespread consensus of historians, church leaders, and academic theologians is that Christian theological anti-Judaism is a phenomenon distinct from modern antisemitism, which is rooted in economic and racial thought, so that Christian teachings should not be held responsible for antisemitism.⁴⁴ That assumption is expressed, for example, in the 1998 statement by Pope John Paul II, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” that distinguishes between modern antisemitism and negative Christian teachings on Judaism, and also a Jewish-authored ad hoc statement on Christianity, *Dabru Emet*, issued in 2000. In part, the exculpation of Christianity for modern racism reflects a widely held assumption that Christianity is a universal religion open to all people, in contrast to Judaism, which links religion and ethnicity. Thus, Christianity, at

⁴³I have developed that theme more extensively elsewhere; see Heschel, “Theology as a Vision for Colonialism,” and “Theological Bulimia: Christianity and Its Dejudaization.”

⁴⁴See the discussion in Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*, 10.

the heart of its theology, is said to repudiate the exclusivity of racism. Recently the historian Denise Buell has challenged that assumption, arguing that the universality of Christianity is a modern construct, whereas in antiquity Christianity defined itself as a race.⁴⁵ The racialization of Christianity that came to the fore with the rise of German nationalism and Nazism can thus be seen as appealing to preexisting, early Christian currents as theologians, especially those linked to the *völkisch* movement, sought a Germanic Christianity. Eliminating the Jewish from Christianity constituted a renewed racialization, Christianity's reassertion of itself as a racial religion.

The affinities between German Protestantism and racial rhetoric lie still deeper than similarities in particular teachings regarding Jews, because race is ultimately concerned not with biology but rather with the human spirit. That was recognized by the racists themselves, who were concerned to define the spiritual natures of those they studied. Walter Wüst, professor of linguistics at the University of Munich and rector of that university from 1941 to 1945, became head of the *Ahnenerbe*, a research center established by SS chief Heinrich Himmler to study Indo-Germanic origins, made the link between race and religion clear: "Today we know that religion is basically a spiritual-physical human activity and that it is thereby also racial."⁴⁶ Indeed, within the SS religion could survive only by being redefined as a racial phenomenon.

Long before the Nazi era, the concern of racists was not so much the inferiority of certain peoples' bodies—the shape of the nose or the cranium—as the degeneracy of their morality and spirituality and the alleged threat posed by such degeneracy to superior races. The body was presented as the physical representation of moral and spiritual qualities. Physiognomy was interpreted by philologists as signifying linguistic ability, language differences were taken as indicators of cultural levels, and "culture" was often used interchangeably with "race."

Indeed, scientific measurements of the body were rejected by leading race theorists, such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain. For Chamberlain, measurements were irrelevant because for Aryans, knowledge was intuitive, an argument revived by Grundmann in his claim that Jesus knew God's wishes intuitively, through his heart, in contrast to Jews, who only know God through reason and laws.⁴⁷ Even for those who measured skulls, such as the French

⁴⁵ Buell, *Why This New Race*.

⁴⁶ Wüst, *Indogermanisches Bekenntnis*, 68; cited by Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, 187. Examples of collaboration between theologians and Nazi race theorists deserve further exploration; see, for example, Fischer and Kittel, *Das antike Weltjudentum*.

⁴⁷ Chamberlain, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*; Grundmann, *Die Gotteskindschaft in der Geschichte Jesu*.

racial theorist Vacher de Lapouge, the results of the physical measurements pointed to moral conclusions: that Jews were dolichocephalic meant they were dangerous. But Chamberlain, who repudiated Lapouge's "scientific" approach, made that claim just as strongly.⁴⁸ Similarly, blood was also not a necessary determinant of racial identity. Hans F. K. Günther, a leading race theorist in the 1920s and '30s, argued that the British and Scandinavians had more Nordic blood than Germans, but Germans remained, for him, the superior race.⁴⁹ Thus, the distinction between Volk, a cultural and political grouping, and Rasse, race, a biological designation, was elided by the circular arguments of these theorists, who almost invariably made each the determinant of the other: culture indicated race, and race produced culture. What became key to racialist thinking was developing the proper hermeneutics: knowing how to "read" the body to learn what sort of moral and spiritual qualities are incarnate in it. The Jewish nose and hair, for example, are not dangerous by themselves, but to antisemites the Jewish body is the carrier of a degenerate Jewish morality. Training readers in the proper hermeneutics for interpreting the Jewish body and knowing its inherent danger was the goal of antisemitic texts.

Thus, if physiognomy was described at length as signaling racial difference, it never stood alone. Rather, modern race theorists saw the body as a carrier of the soul, of moral and spiritual potencies, making race theory a kind of theology. As Richard Dyer writes in his study of whiteness, "For all the emphasis on the body in Christianity, the point is the spirit that is 'in' the body. What has made Christianity compelling and fascinating is precisely the mystery that it posits, that somehow there is in the body something that is not of the body which may be variously termed spirit, mind, soul or God."⁵⁰ For racists, it is the moral and spiritual threat of lesser races—such as Jews—that racists worried about; the inferior bodies of those races are carriers of their corrupt spirits, not causes of the corruption.

The tired argument that racism is about biology fails to recognize that racism emphasizes the dangers posed by the body to the spirit. Flesh is crucial to racialist thinking because the body is not simply a symbol of the degenerate spirit; rather, moral degeneracy is incarnate within the body and the two cannot be separated. The fundamental relationship between body and soul characterizing modern racist discourse is a mirror of the body-soul dilemma at the heart of Christian metaphysics, and is precisely the stamp that Christianity has

⁴⁸ Hecht, "Vacher de Lapouge," 292–97.

⁴⁹ Field, "Nordic Racism," 525.

⁵⁰ Dyer, *White*, 16.

placed on Western philosophy.⁵¹ Race additionally reinscribes the classical Christian distinction between the carnality of Judaism and the spirituality of Christianity.

Blood became central to racist discourse, as it is to most religions, because it links spirit and body, human and divine, metaphor and physical reality. In Christian theology spirit and body are linked by blood, in the nuances of transubstantiation as the actual or symbolic presence of the divine in matter. Racism similarly posits the presence of moral and spiritual qualities in the blood, nose, skin color, hair, and so forth, creating race through theological discursivity. It is therefore not surprising that National Socialism in its early years professed support of Christianity, with Hitler portraying himself as a religious man defending Christian faith against the enemies of the church—leftists and Jews. Hitler's use of Christianity was encouraged by the emergence of racial theology; for some Nazi propagandists, Christianity was a wonderful wellspring of antisemitism in creating what Richard Steigmann-Gall has called "The Holy Reich."⁵² In this sense, too, the Institute's theology might be seen as treating Christianity as the body, National Socialism as the spirit—that is, making the church the bodily carrier of a Nazi soul, thus attempting to make Nazism incarnate in Christianity. At the same time, Nazism itself sought a supersessionist position in relation to Christianity, incorporating its key teachings into its own, more elevated political ideology, exploiting its language and ideational framework rather than trying to destroy it.

CONCLUSION

This book presents the history of the Institute: how it came into being and won approval and financing from church leaders; the nature of the dejudalized New Testament and hymnal that it published; the many conferences and lectures that it organized; who joined and became an active member, especially from the academic world of theology, and, in particular, the figure of its academic director, Walter Grundmann (1906–74). Grundmann's career as a scholar of New Testament spanned his student years during the Weimar Republic, his glory days in the Third Reich as professor at the University of Jena, and his lively postwar career within the Protestant church in the German Democratic Republic. For Grundmann and the other members, the Institute provided prestige and career advancement despite the Reich's contempt for

⁵¹ Hodge, "Domination and the Will in Western Thought and Culture."

⁵² Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*.

theology and notwithstanding the difficulties of the war years; the Institute helped its members solidify their academic reputations. Looking at their postwar successes, there is no doubt that the connections they formed through the Institute helped advance their careers within the field of theology after the Third Reich ended.

Further, this book situates the history of the Institute in the larger context of calls within Germany for deJudaizing Christianity, starting in the nineteenth century. The actual implementation of such efforts within the Third Reich, however, reveals the impact of Nazi antisemitism on the church, Christian involvement in the Nazi projects against the Jews, and the absence of significant Christian opposition to the Holocaust. The nature of Christian antisemitic propaganda might provide an added clue to understanding the social and cultural history of Germany during the Third Reich, and perhaps a reassessment of Hitler's relationship to the churches. The nazification of theological scholarship, as offered in the example of the University of Jena, also helps us understand the postwar career of antisemitic theologies within Germany; those theologies were transmitted from teachers to students in an intellectual environment that lacked the critical tools to challenge them.

The Institute was disbanded after the war, and its major achievements—removing the Old Testament from church liturgies, declaring Jesus an Aryan, deJudaizing the New Testament and hymnal—were discarded by the postwar Protestant church. Hitler was defeated and the Nazi Reich was deplored in postwar church declarations. Yet the significance of the Institute rests not solely on its ability to have influenced the politics of the twelve-year Third Reich, which certainly would have carried out its genocide of the Jews without the Institute's existence, but on its success in promoting antisemitic interpretations within the community of Christian theology.

The Institute's basic theological teachings were not systematically scrutinized and repudiated after the war, leaving behind a troubling legacy of negative teachings about Judaism that, in some cases, continued to be promulgated in Germany. The theologians who were active in the Institute were not investigated or censured for their antisemitism by the church, but continued to have active and often notable careers in the decades after the war, and, in some cases, were granted distinguished honors both by the church and the governments of East and West Germany.

The vocation of a theologian, as defined by the German Protestants examined in this book, was to determine with the greatest possible accuracy the historical origins of Christianity and the message of Jesus. That determination was to be conveyed to contemporary Christians in a manner that was both relevant and inspiring, profound and ethically rigorous. These were theologians

who had been well trained in the most sophisticated methods and insights of their field, yet, like so many other professionals, academics, and intellectuals, their embrace of National Socialism leaves behind a troubling political legacy.