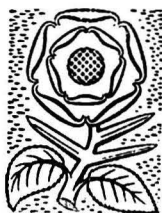


THE CROOKED CROSS

By

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Dean of Chichester



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THIS IS THE STORY of the Confessional Church, of a group of Protestant pastors who opposed Hitler, because they believed—in the phrase of Martin Niemöller—that “we must obey God rather than man”. “Insignificant people, submissive as dogs”—that was how Hitler had regarded the clergy. “They will betray anything,” he told Dr. Rauschning, “for the sake of their little incomes.” But the history of the struggle to “nazify” the Evangelical Church proves that he underestimated the living force of Christianity. The issue was not immediately plain: the Protestant Church in Germany was divided, and the Dean of Chichester shows in this pamphlet how cunningly advantage was taken of those divisions. But with the organisation of the “German Christians” under a Reichsbishop the battle was joined between the new racial paganism and the Protestant religion. Secret police, concentration camps, all the powers of a ruthless State machine were exercised against the Confessional pastors. Niemöller was only one of five hundred imprisoned. It is a heroic story set against the stiff formal background of synods, committees, arguments over administration, sermons and doctrinal discussions.



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THE CROOKED CROSS

FOR those who had eyes to see, the Nazi attack on the Churches was the earliest and also the clearest exposure of the true character of National Socialism. Though the treatment of the Jews was more shocking by reason of its brutality and sadism, this cruel campaign revealed less of the inner nature of the forces that had climbed to power at the beginning of 1933. Anti-Semitism fitted in naturally with the racial doctrine which was the chief instrument of Hitler and his associates for reviving and solidifying the national ambitions.

Anti-Semitism had a negative as well as a positive advantage from Hitler's point of view. The very violence of the outbreak would lull to sleep suspicions aroused by other aspects of the Nazi spirit. Other nations might well feel that, while the Nazi energies were so fully occupied with the congenial task of persecuting these helpless people, it would leave them little time or inclination to become a threat to peoples dwelling outside the borders of Germany, and this consoling, if cynical, conclusion would be confirmed by the belief that those who were racially akin to the Germans had nothing to fear from the national resurgence. Events proved that these calculations were not without foundation. The persecution of the Jews, though it deeply shocked

men and women of all countries who think first in terms of ordinary humanity, had very little effect on diplomats or statesmen.

The attack on the Churches was in a different category. For this no racial excuses could be advanced. The strongly national tinge running through all Church life in Germany made such an outbreak astonishing. That the Churches should find themselves in opposition on various points to a free-thinking liberal Government, like the Weimar regime, was intelligible; though, in fact, the relations between the Churches and the Republic were far more friendly than might have been expected. But that a movement which claimed to restore the national spirit, to introduce a lost social order, and to be the bitter foe of "Godless Communism", should find itself in opposition to the Churches was indeed a matter for surprise. The answer from Berlin was quickly forthcoming. What appeared to be persecution was not such really. The parsons were interfering in politics. The actions of the State were not of a persecuting character. They were merely defensive. If the parson would stick to his job he would not get into trouble. This explanation was easily accepted by many in other countries, who disliked the notion that religion had anything to do with public affairs. There were indeed some who accepted this piece of propaganda until war broke out.

Once again politicians were put off the scent by the reflection that a theological and ecclesiastical conflict must be a purely internal matter, with which they

had nothing to do. Though in one sense this judgment was entirely correct—obviously no intervention was called for—yet this unexpected phenomenon had much to teach the statesmen and diplomats, if they had given their attention to it in time. The truth was that the attack on the Church conveyed a political lesson of the first importance. It revealed the Nazi party as a gang determined to impose their power on their fellow-Germans without scruple, and thereby exploded the supposed racial basis of the Nazi philosophy. The attack also brought to the front the implications of the *Weltanschauung*—the word repeated *ad nauseam* by the fervent young Nazis. The *Weltanschauung* was a view of life and of the world, demanding the loyalty given to a religion, and endowed with a missionary enthusiasm that recognised no frontiers.

The False Messiah

The real power of the National Socialist Movement in Germany can only be understood when it is recognised as a form of religion. Every substantial political movement has about it an element of faith. But ordinary political movements in Western Europe do not claim the complete devotion, body and mind, of their adherents. This is precisely what National Socialism does. Nazism and Communism have this fundamental totalitarian characteristic in common. They can brook no rival loyalty. As Karl Barth said in his lecture to the Swiss Evangelical Church in December, 1938, "National

Socialism is a religious institution of salvation. . . . It is impossible to understand National Socialism, unless we see it in fact as a new Islam, its myth as a new Allah, and Hitler as this new Allah's Prophet." The comparison is apt. Dr. Ley, the leader of the Labour Front, has said, "I believe on this earth in Adolf Hitler alone. I believe in one Lord God who made me and guides me, and I believe that this Lord God has sent Adolf Hitler to us." There is, however, a profound difference between Mohammedanism and Hitlerism. Mohammed was a prophet who believed in a transcendent God, before whom he bowed and by whom he would be judged. Hitler's God is immanent in himself; he is a demi-God, not a prophet. The Divine is for him merely the power which enables him to do more efficiently what he wants.

The secret of the success of National Socialism lies precisely in the religious, mystical element, symbolised in the Swastika. The terrible *débâcle* that immediately followed the last war left masses of the German people eager for redemption, for a reversal of their fate, and passionately longing for some star to which to hitch their waggon. Reason does not play the part in the German mentality that it does in the French or English. The great German philosophers have been half mystics. The young German especially was looking for something romantic and mysterious that would hold out the prospect of a speedy millennium which would save him from his fear of standing alone by planting him in a national community, and would give him the

assurance that defeat would be reversed. Into this Messianic mood the dervish-like ragings of Hitler, with their call for blind obedience, fitted admirably. The Germans do everything to excess. There is, as Coleridge (who admired them), said, a *nimiety*, a too-muchness about the Germans. The German people had fallen into an unreasonable excess of depression. Hitler raised them into an equally unreasonable excess of exaltation and defiance. Hitler had felt the pulse of the common man. He knew what he was doing. His instinct was uncannily correct.

Hitler's aims are fundamentally political. They are the possession of power for the German people, and for himself, as the controller and representative of the German people. At the moment he has achieved considerable success. His power over the German people is complete, and he has extended his control over a number of other peoples. This success has been due to his clear perception that physical force by itself will not achieve power. It must go hand in hand with kindling ideas. The sword needs propaganda as its ally. "Any attempt to contend with a World View by material force will fail in the end, unless the struggle takes the form of an attack on behalf of a new spiritual outlook. Only in the struggle of two World Views can the weapon of brute force, persistently and ruthlessly employed, bring about a decision favourable to the party it supports." Philosophical ideas are not sufficient. The common man does not live by philosophy but by faith. "Faith," he said, "is harder to shake than reason."

Hitler's Promises

Thus Hitler himself bears witness to the fact that he is engaged in a conflict of religions. How much he really believes in the doctrines of blood and soil it would be hard to say. What is certain is that he correctly gauged the situation, when he saw the necessity of providing some kind of religious, philosophical, mystical spell to rally the dim multitudes to his political purposes. From the first he had recognised that he must get control of the Churches, because they represented a spiritual force that would otherwise challenge his supreme mastery of the minds of men. Since he did not wish to arouse unnecessary antagonism in the early stages he had to conceal his ultimate aims until his power was thoroughly established. He would need the support of members of the Churches and of that larger number of Germans that respected, even if they did not practise, the Christian religion.

Hitler therefore in *Mein Kampf* took up the position that a political leader should not confuse his task with that of the religious reformer. Any other position would, he said, lead to catastrophe in Germany. Thus, when he first came into power, he made a bid for Christian support by his ferocious denunciations of "Godless Bolshevism" and by a vague, but specious, promise to uphold the Churches. In his speech to the Reichstag on March 23, 1933, Hitler said, "The National Government sees in the two Christian confessions most vital factors in the survival of our nationality. Their rights will not be

touched. The National Government will accord and secure to the Christian Confessions the influence that is due to them in schools and education." This piece of propaganda was highly successful. There was much in the current Nazi teaching to raise doubts. This declaration lulled to sleep many who were only too anxious to accept the new saviour. One of the first acts of the new regime was designed still further to allay any fear of a conflict between National Socialism and Christianity. On July 20, 1933, a Concordat between the German Government and the Vatican was signed at Rome by Cardinal Pacelli and Franz von Papen. By this striking act Hitler wished to appear in the light of a more effective supporter of Christian traditions than the Weimar Government had been.

German or Christian

But there can be no doubt about Hitler's own personal attitude. It has been made clear by two separate witnesses who have had first-hand opportunities of knowing his mind. They are both men who have been disappointed in Hitler, but for entirely opposite reasons. For Kurt Luedecke (*I Knew Hitler*, p. 465) Hitler is a traitor to the true radicalism of National Socialism. Dr. Hermann Rauschnig, on the other hand, is a conservative, who abandoned Hitler because he was alarmed at the anarchical nihilism which he believes to be its inner essence. Luedecke reports that Hitler said "with passionate energy", "Of course, I, myself, am a heathen to the core". In

Dr. Rauschning's hearing Hitler said (*Hitler Speaks*, p. 57), "One is either a German or a Christian. You cannot be both." Hitler shrewdly recognises that even a Unitarian view of Jesus Christ is dangerous, because it implies a belief in immortality. "We don't want people who keep one eye on the life in the hereafter. We need free men who feel and know that God is in themselves."

Both writers also agree that Hitler avoided an open attack upon the Churches, not only because he did not wish to become involved in complications, but also because he was convinced that the Churches had lost all life and would wither away when the mass enthusiasm of the new fanatical nationalism got into the saddle. The young would be captured by the dynamic appeal to believe only in themselves, in Germany and above all in the Leader, and to secure by this means a domination, first of their own people, and then of the whole world. Hitler's method for dealing with possible opponents, whether it be in the national or in the international sphere, is the same. He aims at the formation of sympathetic groups, at undermining resistance by a mixture of promises, flattery, blackmail and terror. It is characteristic of his mentality that he believes there are few men who cannot be won over by the hope of reward or the fear of pain.

The Nazi attack on the Protestant Church in Germany provided a perfect example of that method of disintegration from within, which Hitler has since practised with such success in other fields.

The Nazi Faith

The fundamental tenet of the Nazi faith is the sacredness of the German race, which, though called by God to rule the world, is attacked and hemmed in by the powers of evil, incarnate in the Jews, and in a whole group of grasping, jealous powers who combined in diabolic international systems for the sole purpose of defeating the Divine purpose. Like St. George, he, Hitler, has been raised up to deliver the Chosen People from these foul adversaries. This is what the Swastika stands for. This is the religion of the Crooked Cross. We have compared it to Mohammedanism. Like Mohammedanism it is very largely borrowed from the Bible. It is a fantastic imitation of Judaism, with the God of Holiness and Love left out. An illuminating statement of this German Faith is to be found in a Kiel High School paper published in 1935:—

“We believe that God has revealed Himself to us in our German blood and German consciousness, in our German home and German history. That is our German Faith. We regard the word ‘heathen’ as an honourable term, not as a reproach. We are proud of our German Faith, our Northern Heathenism.

“We cannot take our religious faith from the Jews any more. We recognise no international religion of humanity because People and Races are different. Therefore we German Heathen want no more Jewish foreign religion in Germany. We

do not believe in the Holy Ghost any more. We believe in the Holy Blood.

"The foundation of the Jewish-Christian teaching is the dogma of Original Sin. The foundation of our heathen feeling for life is a belief in the value of healthy Blood.

"Whoever has thoroughly grasped the thought of Race must reject the Jewish foreign religion in every form, Catholic or Evangelical, German Church or German Christian.

"We believe in God, the inscrutable, mysterious power of Fate, which we experience in Blood and Consciousness, Home and Universe."

So far as the Protestant Church was concerned, Hitler thought that he would have an easy task. His upbringing under Roman Catholic auspices left him deeply imbued with two ideas. Though he hated the Roman Catholic Church and thought its days were numbered, he retained a profound respect for the secular grandeur of an institution which had lasted two thousand years. He felt he had something to learn from its astuteness, its knowledge of human nature, its political sense. At the same time he shared the contempt for Protestantism to be found among the more unthinking of Roman Catholics. He attributed Bismarck's failure in the *Kulturkampf* of the '70s to the fact that, as a Protestant, he did not understand a real Church. Just because the Protestants did not know what a Church was they would soon submit to pressure. The Protestant parsons would cause no difficulty. "They are

insignificant people, submissive as dogs, and they sweat with embarrassment when you talk to them. They have neither a religion that can be taken seriously nor a great position to defend like Rome. They will betray anything for the sake of their little jobs and incomes."

Hitler relied on the disintegration wrought in the Protestant Church by the absorption of sceptical and critical ideas during the last half century. "Do you think," Dr. Rauschnig heard him say, "these liberal priests, who have no longer a belief, only an office, will refuse to preach *our* God in their Churches? I can guarantee that, just as they have made Haeckel and Darwin, Goethe and Stefan Georg the prophets of their Christianity, so they will replace the Cross with our Swastika."

"German Christians"

One of the first tasks of the Nazis, after their seizure of power, was to find some means of grafting the Swastika on to the Evangelical Church. Hitler was astute enough to see that this must be done from within. He elaborately dissociated himself from the affair. "I am a Catholic," he said, when I asked him in July, 1933, whether he wished to form a State Church, "I have no position in the Protestant Church." All he was doing was to protect it (as rulers had always done) from falling into chaos. The truth, of course, was that the only element making for chaos was the violent minority which was endeavouring to "nazify" the Evangelical Church.

The declared aim of this minority, who called themselves "German Christians", was a united Church, a People's Church and a Church racially German, a Church founded on blood and soil, a Church that rejected altogether the idea of a Christian world citizenship.

The demand for a united Church was part of the general Nazi scheme for bringing every activity of German life under the complete control of the Party, a process called by the ambiguous name "co-ordination" (*Gleichschaltung*). Since the one Party State itself was the submissive servant of the small group of adventurers who led it, the one Party State meant a State in which Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, Himmler and Hess would have at their mercy the life and liberty of every citizen of the country. They are men without morals and without mercy.

Since their character was well-known amongst educated people in Germany, the demand for a united Church had to be narrowly examined by those responsible for the Church. The argument in favour of a united Protestant Church was from one point of view difficult to resist. For more than a century the German people had been striving to gather into one the congeries of kingdoms, duchies and principates which was the legacy of the Holy Roman Empire of the German People. Bismarck's Empire of blood and iron had been able to achieve a federation. The post-War changes had swept away the kings and princes, but in many ways the particularist spirit remained. Of this particularist spirit one of the most evident remaining signs were the

twenty-eight separate Churches (*Landeskirchen*) which still existed. Moreover German Protestants were divided into Lutherans and Calvinists. The move for unity excited wide sympathy. The question was, How was that unity to be obtained and to be maintained? The proper Church answer was, By voluntary action and by consent.

Reichsbishop

But this was not at all to the mind of the German Christians. Their object in pressing so hard for a unified Church was to make it easier to imbue the whole body with Nazi principles, to impose upon it the *Führerprinzip*, and so to make the Church an instrument for the promotion of Hitler's ambitions for Germany. They demanded a Reichsbishop. At this point there emerged a Pastor Ludwig Mueller, a naval chaplain, unknown to fame, but in the confidence of Hitler.

The constitutional representatives of the Evangelical Church were Dr. Kapler, Dr. Marahrens, Bishop of Hanover, and Dr. Hesse, a Calvinist from Elberfeld. With Pastor Mueller, they drew up a constitution for the united Church which accepted the office of Reichsbishop. What the Church leaders refused to do was to choose Mueller as the first Reichsbishop. They put forward Pastor von Bodelschwingh, a man of deep piety and wide pastoral experience. Their choice was confirmed by the Churches. The fury of the "German Christians" knew no bounds. As a result of their agitation Hitler

intervened, though keeping himself in the background. On his instructions a lawyer, Dr. Jaeger, was appointed State Commissar with plenary power for the Church of Prussia, much the largest of the German Protestant Churches.

Such action was wholly illegal. When Jaeger first attempted to put the Church under police supervision and dismissed pastors without trial a violent opposition was created. In order to silence it a synod was elected in which a "German Christian" majority was obtained by Nazi party propaganda, assisted by Hitler himself. Mueller's appointment was afterwards confirmed, when this Synod met at Wittenberg in September. The whole procedure is characteristic of Hitler's methods. He has always attempted to cover his most arbitrary acts by a cloak of constitutional procedure, in order to satisfy the orderly instinct so deep in the German mind.

The Confessional Movement

The elaborate sham by which the Reichsbishop was imposed on the Evangelical Church only deceived those who wished to be deceived. There were many pastors who, in no way accepting the Nazi ideology, were yet swept off their feet by the national resurgence. But, by this time, a group of pastors had been formed, determined to uphold the purity of the Gospel and the spiritual independence of the Church. Hitler, whose knowledge of religious matters was of the most superficial, had made a bad mistake when he relied on the old Lutheran spirit of subservience

to the State and the debilitating effects of "liberalism" in theology to make easy his task of bringing the Protestant Churches into line. Great changes had been wrought in the world of Protestant theology. The War had revealed the weakness of a religion that was mere moralism. Sincere Christians had been thrown back on the Living God, the God of the Bible; criticism had done a useful work in bringing to the front the apocalyptic element in the New Testament; and, not least important, the separation of the Church from the State introduced by the Weimar Republic had taught the younger generation of Protestant pastors to rely on the inherent spiritual power of the Church itself, now that the Prince, the Summus Episcopus, had been withdrawn.

It thus happened—most providentially—that, when the challenge of the Nazi dogmas burst upon the Church, they were confronted within the Evangelical Church itself by a powerful group, prepared to take their stand with equal determination on the unchanging dogmas of the Christian Church, contained in the historic Confessions of Faith. Their insistence on the Confessions of Faith led to the opposition becoming known as "the Confessionals". The controversy raged round two points, the nature and constitution of the Church and the Christian doctrine of man. To the claim of the secular power to impose a spiritual dictator in the person of the Reichsbishop they opposed the spiritual independence of the Church and its right to fashion its own government. The government of the Church, they maintained, is not a mere matter of convenience, but part of its

spiritual essence. They also rejected the attempt to limit Church offices to those of "Aryan" stock; the doctrines of blood and soil were in flat contradiction to the universality of the Christian revelation and to the redemption offered to men of every race through the Blood of Jesus Christ. The Reichsbishop promulgated—on his own authority—a "muzzling order" forbidding pastors to introduce into their sermons any matter of Church controversy or to write books or pamphlets thereon, under pain of suspension from their office and the loss of one-third of their income.

The so-called law was categorically rejected by four thousand Confessional pastors who had formed themselves into an Emergency League (*Notbund*). The Confessional Front contained within itself different groups or tendencies. There were the younger pastors, men like Martin Niemöller, who had come under the influence of the revival of a positive Christianity. Many of them were Calvinists, but many were Lutherans; all owed something to the fearless proclamation of the supremacy of God by the Swiss prophet, Karl Barth. At the other end of the Front, so to speak, was the more conservative wing represented by the Lutheran bishops of Hanover, Bavaria and Württemberg, Dr. Marahrens, Dr. Meiser and Dr. Wurm. The more definite Confessionals were for the most to be found in the largest of the provincial Churches, that of Prussia, the constitutional organisation of which had been destroyed by Reichsbishop Mueller. The other bishops had contrived to preserve their Churches intact, and they were all strong Lutherans. For both

these reasons they were more inclined to attempt a *modus vivendi* with the State.

A Drastic Step

For months the controversy swayed from side to side. Sometimes the Reichsbishop seemed to be willing to reach a reasonable solution. But whenever he did so, something always upset the arrangements. And there is no doubt that leading forces in the Nazi Party were furtively at work, using the "German Christians" as an instrument to prevent anything that would promote an independent Church, uncontrolled by Nazi ideology. This pressure, exercised through the official Church Government only, had the effect of welding more closely the Confessional Forces. At Barmen in May, 1934, they held a great Synod at which the whole German Evangelical Church was represented, Lutherans, Reformed and United. It declared that Mueller's Church Government had forfeited any claim to be the constitutional government of the Church, because it had betrayed the principles of the Gospel, and had attempted to subordinate the Word of God to secular powers who were claiming to be the instruments of a new revelation. The Synod took a drastic step; it drew up plans for the creation of a new and true Church government, and appointed a Council of Brethren to be the nucleus of such a government. By this action what had been the Confessional Movement became the Confessional Church.

The Reichsbishop counter-attacked in the Autumn

by holding a so-called National Synod which included only reliable Nazis. The chief act of the Synod was the promulgation of an oath requiring every minister to swear to be true and obedient to the leader of the German People and State, Adolf Hitler, and to accept conscientiously all the orders of Mueller's Church Government. Mueller's next step was to issue decrees bringing the independent Churches of Württemberg under his control. Bishop Wurm and Bishop Meiser both protested vigorously and were placed under arrest in their own houses. This action caused strong public protests both in Württemberg and Bavaria, and only served to show how popular the bishops were with their flocks. Dr. Jaeger, the lawyer who was the real power behind the Reichsbishop, thereupon removed Bishop Meiser from his office. With every fresh aggression on the part of the Church Ministry the popularity of the two redoubtable bishops increased by leaps and bounds. A mass demonstration of ten thousand people gathered on the Adolf Hitler Platz at Nuremberg to support Dr. Meiser. Their case was taken up throughout Germany.

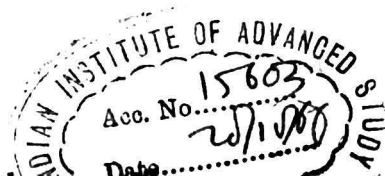
The Reich Confessional Synod met in October at Dahlem, where Pastor Niemöller's parish was, and drew up a statement demanding that the Reich Government should cease to interfere with the Church. The combination of this firm action with the popular enthusiasm in South Germany, and the fact that important German Christians began to go over to the Confessional side had a remarkable effect. Dr. Jaeger was forced to resign, while the Reichsbishop

retired into the background. Though he kept his title and his stipend, he ceased to be of any importance. Thus the first round of the conflict between the Party and the Church, in which the Nazis attempted to disintegrate the Church from within, ended with a defeat. The Evangelical Church had shown that it had an unexpected spiritual power.

The Old Gods

The set-back encouraged the Confessionals to take a bolder line, but it also made the Nazis more determined to get the Church under control. The Provisional Church Government published a careful statement on February 21, 1935, warning the members of the Church against the new heathenism which had appeared with the declared object of fashioning a new type of man. In it the orthodox Protestant leaders—who understood very clearly where they stood and what it was that threatened them—set forth with precision the religion which the Nazis are promoting as a substitute for Christianity. The unbridgeable gulf between the Cross and the Crooked Cross stands out starkly.

In this new religion they said the old German gods reappeared—with a difference! Odin was now regarded as the symbol of those primitive forces of the soul of the Nordic man which still lived as he had done five thousand years ago. As the Eternal Wanderer he is the symbol of the Nordic soul ever seeking and pushing forward. In this new religion the relations between God and man are turned upside



down. Man creates God in his image. He says, "If I did not exist, God would not exist." "The God whom we honour, would not exist, if our soul and blood did not exist." "I am the origin of myself in my eternal and my temporal life." "The Christian Churches are a monstrous travesty of the simple and glad message that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us." As a consequence the Old Testament must be discarded as a book of religion, and whatever in the New does not fit in with this Nordic faith. There must be no more sermons about the Lamb of God.

As the Confessional leaders pointed out, such a religion radically rejected the notion that the Bible contained a Divine Revelation and substituted for it the Voice of the Divine in the Blood, in the vitality of the Race, in the rhythm of nature and the evolution of history. Thus the God in which it believed was not personal but pantheist, naturalistic and ultimately atheist. Since faith was derived from the Blood, everything racially foreign must be removed from religion. Consequently Paul could only be regarded as a corrupter of the "pure Jesus teaching", and a mere Jewish rabbi. The only sin known to the new religion is a sin against "the Blood". The need for divine Grace is removed, and the Cross becomes the sign not of victory but of collapse. The principle of honour must replace the Christian idea of love, which is but another name for a weak humanitarianism.

The Confessional leaders pointed out, with quiet irony, that this body of ideas was merely a development (though a very perverse one) of those "liberal"

and Freemason conceptions which the Nazis professed to find so loathsome. They called upon their people to choose whether they would revere the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ or this other God. They could not do both. The memorandum also appealed to the Government for perfect freedom to uphold this faith and to controvert those errors, which were flooding the Press, the theatre and even the schools, with Government encouragements.

This bold challenge was a clarion call. Seven hundred pastors who read the manifesto were either arrested or put under house arrest and five thousand more were warned by the Secret Police not to read it. It was thus made clear that the new heathenism was the official religion of the Third Reich. In order to press this point home a new law was promulgated, transferring all Church disputes from the courts of justice to a bureau of the Ministry of Interior.

The State Demands

The struggle between the Evangelical Church and the Nazi regime entered on a new phase in July, 1935. The office of Reich Minister for Church Affairs was created, and a Herr Kerrl, a lawyer from the Prussian Ministry of Justice, only in the loosest sense a Churchman, was made the first minister. Henceforward it was plain that the Government intended to assume control over the Church. Kerrl had not been long in office before he issued a decree which established this control in the most complete manner. "The Reich Minister for Church Affairs

is empowered, for the restoration of orderly conditions in the German Evangelical Church and the Regional Evangelical Churches, to issue ordinances with binding legal force."

Herr Kerrl's dictatorship was marked by a continuance of the methods which had been used by the Reichsbishop, the methods of profuse expressions of good will, accompanied by threats and diversified by violent and illegal action, which are characteristic of the Nazi mind. At first Kerrl let some of the pastors out of prison. (It is important to bear in mind that from 1934 onwards there never was a time when there were not pastors in prison without any attempt at legal trial.) His new plan for restoring order to the harassed Evangelical Church turned out to be a series of committees for the different regional Churches at the head of which was placed a Reich Committee. A much respected Churchman, Dr. Zoellner, was appointed chairman of the Reich committee.

A new gleam of hope seemed to appear and many of the moderate Confessionals showed themselves ready to co-operate for the sake of peace. The more far-sighted, known as the Dahlem group, of whom Pastor Niemöller was the leader, were doubtful from the first. They were suspicious of organisations which ultimately had no Church authority, but only that of the State, and they refused to serve on them. On the other hand the committees that were formed in Württemberg and Bavaria were wholly Confessional, because "German Christians" were a negligible factor in these Churches; and these committees

strongly criticised Dr. Zoellner, because the first appeal had not only affirmed the Confessional basis of the Church but "the National Socialist development of the people on the basis of Race, Blood and Soil". This was as good as saying that no one could be a Churchman who did not also accept the Nazi ideology.

Dr. Zoellner, whose good faith nobody questioned, was soon in difficulties with the committees. But it was not the Confessionals who caused him trouble. In a number of provincial Churches "German Christian" bishops had been appointed during the Mueller-Jaeger regime even though they represented only a small minority of the pastors and parishes. The committees wished them to resign as a first step to appeasement. This a number of them absolutely refused to do. After an interview with Herr Hitler, Kerrl strongly supported them in their refusal, thus revealing again the covert influence of the Führer behind the scenes.

It was not long before Herr Kerrl instituted sharper attacks on the Confessional Church. The first step was the confiscation of the trustee funds of the Church by the secret police; the next was an order requiring all writings multigraphed for distribution to be submitted to censorship before being sent out. Printing had been forbidden for a considerable time. But the Confessionals had created a very thorough and ingenious system for keeping in touch with their members by the use of typescript and manifolding. Kerrl next proceeded to deny to all Church associations or groups the right to exercise executive or

administrative functions, such as the appointment of pastors, the examination and ordination of theological candidates, making collections, or holding synods. The meaning of these orders was plain: they were designed to paralyse the "Provisional Church Government" (*Vorläufige Leitung*). The Confessional Church refused to pay any attention to what they regarded as entirely illegal action.

A new and more vigorous Provisional Church Administration was formed in the spring of 1936 which included Pastor Niemöller, Dr. Boehm and Pastor Albertz.

The new Provisional Church Government very soon took a bold and determined initiative to test the real mind of the Nazi Government. In all that had happened so far, as has been pointed out, the Führer kept well in the background. The Confessional leaders had to meet the criticism that they were unduly suspicious of Kerrl, whose intentions were, it was asserted, really benevolent. There was only one way in which the whole situation could be cleared up, and that was to appeal directly to Hitler himself.

Questions to the Führer

Pastor Niemöller and his colleagues in the Provisional Church Administration understood that secrecy was essential. If they tried to put the Führer in the dock publicly, their object would not be achieved. Ways were found therefore to despatch to Hitler a memorandum which asked him searching questions. Had the attempt to dechristianise the

German people, which was being so vigorously pursued, the co-operation of responsible statesman, or was it merely permitted? Were Goebbels and Rosenberg authorised to interpret "Positive Christianity" in a way that deprived it of all meaning? Were the attacks of party officials on the Christian Faith authorised by the Government? Why was the Church not allowed freely and publicly to answer these attacks?

The Confessional Pastors have often been slightly spoken of, and not only in Germany—because, as it was said, they were only interested in parsons' problems and not in broad human questions. The memorandum to Hitler disposes of that charge. Not content with pleading for freedom to uphold their religious faith, they boldly criticised the regime in two fundamental respects. The Evangelical Christian, they said, was gravely injured in his loyalty by the existence of concentration camps in a State claiming to be founded on law, and by the power given to the Secret Police to take action against individuals without any process of law. They also asked Hitler directly whether he wished to accept the semi-divine position of a kind of mediator between God and the Peoples, which was freely accorded to him in certain quarters. The memorandum became public property, probably by Nazi action, and no reply ever came from Hitler. But the conflict was much accentuated. Many Germans who had very little idea of the acuteness of the struggle had it brought home to them, and pressure on the Church increased. Baldur von Schirach intensified his efforts to obtain complete control of

the youth of Germany. Herr Rust, the Minister of Education, closed the Theological School at Elberfeld. The Church Committees were in the final stages of collapse. Dr. Zoellner and the Reich Church Committee resigned on February 12, 1937, on the ground that Kerrl made their task impossible by constant interference whenever—in the interest of order—they found it necessary to take action against “German Christians”. Kerrl replied in a speech which made the situation perfectly plain. “There has now arisen a new authority concerning what Christ and Christianity really is. This new authority is Adolf Hitler.”

Pastor Niemöller

The failure of the Church committees showed that there was no hope of reducing the Evangelical Church to the control of the Party by any method that pretended, with whatever camouflage, to have a Church character. More direct action was needed. The only way was to attack the parsons in their persons and their property. The latter Kerrl instituted by setting up Finance Departments which could regulate the terms of service of all Church officials. This was followed by a wave of arrests. Some five hundred pastors found themselves in a prison cell for longer or shorter periods.

At last, on July 1, 1937, the Party stretched out its hand to seize the man for whom Hitler had the bitterest, quite personal, hatred, Martin Niemöller. It was not till the following February that he was brought to trial. The former submarine officer, who

became a pastor after the World War, had struck the imagination of the world by the courage, the simplicity, the forthrightness of his defence of the freedom of religion in Germany, an impression all the stronger because it was known that he was an ardent patriot who had even voted National Socialist, and, as late as 1933, had preached a sermon applauding the national resurgence. He now stood before a judge charged with abuse of the pulpit for political purposes in accordance with an old law that Bismarck (grim irony) had concocted as a weapon against the Roman Catholics in his unsuccessful *Kulturkampf*. It was a tribute to the persistence of the concept of justice, even under the Nazi regime, that the Special Court passed a sentence which would have allowed him to go free. No less clear a proof of the fact that in the Nazi State justice in the end is merely Hitler's will, was afforded by the seizure of Niemöller by the Gestapo as he was about to leave the court and his re-incarceration in a concentration camp where he has languished ever since. Though he has not suffered the physical barbarities meted out to some other pastors, only a stout heart and a profound faith could have sustained for so long a man by nature boundlessly active and energetic.

In his last sermon he had said, "We have no more thought of using our own power to escape the arm of the authorities than had the Apostles of old. No more are we ready to keep silence at man's behest when God commands us to speak. For it is, and must remain the case, that we must obey God rather than man".

This was the spirit that animated all the Confessional pastors, whose names are less known to fame. As the months wore on during 1938 and the early part of 1939 and the preparations for war became more and more intense in Germany, the pressure on all independent thought in the Evangelical Church increased. Attempts were made by Kerrl acting as the Government of the Church to impose on pastors a new oath of personal loyalty to the Führer; the leadership of the Confessional Church was paralysed by orders forbidding them to meet; and a law was promulgated by Dr. Werner in April, 1939, enabling the president of any provincial Church to remove any pastor from one parish to another and to allow German Christian minorities to set up a pastor in any parish where the lawful pastor was not sufficiently Nazi. In July a regulation was issued by Dr. Werner for the spiritual guidance of the provincial Churches which made the Nazi *Weltanschauung* obligatory for all members of the Evangelical Church. For Germans, he said, Christianity can only be understood within the boundaries of people and race.

Despite enormous difficulties, many of the Confessional pastors went on with their spiritual work wherever possible, undeflected, though the organisation of the Confessional Church had practically become non-existent.

The Church in War

Since the shadow of war has enveloped the German people few details that throw any light on the

Church conflict can be descried. A tendency to concentrate on the national struggle manifested itself. The constraints of war, both in the spiritual and in the material sphere, have caused the cessation of all opposition to the regime for the time being. This is intelligible. What the future holds no man can say. It is difficult to believe that the frightful loss and suffering imposed on the German people in a totally unnecessary war will not in some way produce a reaction against the Crooked Cross. Is it too much to hope that, when that day comes, those who have been faithful to the Cross of Christ and suffered so much, will have a message that may gradually receive a wider hearing from a disillusioned people, nauseated by a propaganda that has wrought so much injury to their bodies and their souls?

The New Paganism

The epic story, here too slightly sketched, suggests certain reflections on the place of religion in human society. The new paganism invented by Hitler and his associates, like the Bolshevism of Stalin, demonstrates at once the necessity for a mystical element in political movements, and the grave dangers that are attached to it. The worship of the Messianic Führer, the belief in the racial election of the Germans, the laudation of force as an instrument of the Divine action, are all parts of the technique for attaining and retaining power. This religion must be swept away if the concentration of power inevitable in modern society is to be made fruitful for, and not

destructive of, human happiness. But this can only be done, if the false mysticism be replaced by a true faith, by one that recognises the existence of a Supreme Moral Law of universal validity as the determining factor in the universe. To fall back on mere utility will fail once again to provide the necessary basis for human co-operation.

The Crooked Cross, in its perversity, has some light to throw on the meaning of freedom. It is not without significance that, when the Party, of which it is the symbol, triumphed over academic, industrial and political freedom, there remained one liberty that it could not subdue, the liberty to believe in that which is above all human systems.

In Volume III of the *Cambridge Modern History* that acute thinker, Neville Figgis, draws the following conclusions from his survey of political thought in the sixteenth century: "Religious liberty is rightly described as the parent of political." The idea of sovereignty is the first need for the true conception of the State. But it is no less necessary to realise its limitations. "Religious liberty arose, not because the sects believed in it, but out of their passionate determination not to be extinguished, either by political or religious persecution." When to-day the totalitarian State threatens more frightful tyrannies than any in the past, religious faith has an essential part to play in the maintenance of freedom.

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