

# Christianity's Complicity in the Shoah: Continuities and Discontinuities

By Mary C. Boys

To what extent is Christianity complicit in the genocide perpetrated by the Third Reich? What continuity exists between Christian teaching about alleged Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion and Nazi ideology? To what extent is such teaching discontinuous with it?

These questions cannot be adequately addressed without reference to the generally “tormented” history between Jews and Christians.<sup>1</sup> The charge that the Jews were (and in the thinking of many Christians, remain) “Christ killers” stands at the center of this history, yet this accusation functioned differently in various historical periods and thus had different effects. In the rhetoric of the early church, particularly in the literature categorized as *Adversus Judaeos*, the charge served primarily to form a distinct identity separating “us” from “them.” It was the North Star in a constellation of accusations that Jews were faithless, blind, carnal, and legalistic, tropes that resonated throughout theological commentary and pastoral exhortation. Yet, for the most part the accusation remained in the realm of rhetoric.

In the medieval period, however, many Christians thought of Jews as less than human. The malevolent figure of Judas symbolized the quintessential Jew. Christians denounced Jews as usurers, bribers, and secret killers who needed the blood of Christian children for their Passover rituals. Although the Enlightenment resulted in Jewish emancipation, it also led to preoccupation with the “Jewish Question” (*Judenfrage*) regarding whether Jews should or even could be integrated into “Christian” nations. Further, in much of the twentieth century, Protestants and Catholics associated Jews with Bolshevism. In Catholicism, the traditional disparagement of Judaism developed new layers as Jews were conflated with communists, liberals, Freemasons, and the secular state. Lutherans, who constituted about 60 percent of German Christians, carried the legacy of Martin Luther’s “On the Jews and Their Lies.”<sup>2</sup>

How, precisely, to assess the degree of Christian complicity is fraught with difficulty. Not surprisingly, Holocaust historians differ in their judgment about the extent of Christian responsibility. Quantification, however, is not the issue, as if continuity and discontinuity could be apportioned in a mathematical formula. The preponderance of evidence, however, reveals that Christian teaching—both in what was explicitly said and in what was left unsaid—bears considerable culpability for the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the larger context in which the Third Reich carried out genocide reveals other significant causes of the Shoah.

## Continuities

A dominant legacy of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition is that of “marking out ‘the Jews’—flesh and blood Jews—for ostracization, alienation, marginalization, torment, and on many occasions, death.”<sup>3</sup> In this respect, then, Christian teaching formed the *precondition* of Nazi ideology. Had “Christianity not irrevocably transformed ‘the Jews’ into mythical beings, Nazism would not have chosen to do the same.”<sup>4</sup> But the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition served not only as a precondition but also as an *enabler* insofar as its depiction of Judaism as degenerate fused with racial antisemitism in sectors of Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a consequence, many Christians would have found it difficult to distinguish between the antisemitism of the Third Reich and that of the churches. Further, a number of its members promulgated views that were deeply imbued with Nazi ideology. Even though a minority of Christians attempted to distance themselves from antisemitism and expressed moral sympathy

for Jews, the longstanding negative portrayal of Judaism complicated developing any theological sympathy.<sup>5</sup>

Recent research also reveals that the Nazis were neither so “pagan” nor so anti-Christian as many had assumed. Christian teaching shaped a number of their leading figures. Moreover, “For every Protestant who expressed misgivings privately, there was another who believed Nazism meant a return to Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> Postwar interviews with Nazi perpetrators, and in many cases, their wives as well, reveal that they believed themselves forgiven by the merciful God of Jesus Christ—in contrast to the vindictive God of Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

The extent to which references and allusions to the Christ-killer charge became part of German culture may be seen in issues of the weekly tabloid *Der Stürmer*, published from 1923 to 1945. “The Jews are our misfortune” (*Die Juden sind unsere Unglück*) ran along the bottom of each front page. During Holy Week in April 1927, an article, “Golgotha,” appeared:

The Galilean Jesus Christ was an avowed mortal enemy of the Jews, before the entire world. He told them flat out what he thought of them: “You are children of the devil! Your father is a murderer from the very beginning. And you seek to act according to your father’s desires.” His [Jesus’] struggle was for liberation. The liberation of a native agricultural people out of indentured servitude under the bloody dominion of the racially foreign Jews. This is why Christ had to die. Death on the cross. Because he was not a trader and Pharisee and perverter of the Scripture. Because he had the courage to confess himself to his people and against the Jews. The Promised Land was going to ruin. What was left remained a gravestone.

But the murderers of Christ live. They live in the midst of the German people. And strive for its collapse. The hand of Judah lies heavily upon it [the German people]. It [the German people] has been driven into debt. Eroded and maltreated in body and spirit. The German people is on the path to Golgotha. All Judah wants its death. Because his [Judah’s] father is a murderer from the very beginning. And because the Jew wants to act according to its father’s desires. Germany is to go down in a racial chaos of humanity. Is to be wiped out, out of the heroism of its history.

Germany awake! It is almost midnight! ...<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, on Easter 1933, the paper has a sketch of a Nazi soldier and a German woman standing together, gazing at the crucified Jesus; a church steeple is visible in the background. The caption reads: “The Jews nailed Christ onto the cross and thought he was dead. He is risen. They nailed Germany to the cross and thought it was dead, and it is risen, more gloriously than ever before.”<sup>9</sup>

Theological claims did not exist in a vacuum, as is shown in the fusion between Christian teaching over the ages about Jews and Judaism with the growing antisemitic ideology in early twentieth-century Germany (with parallels in Austria). Particularly after the devastating defeat in World War I, many Germans sought redemption in a regeneration of its people through a resurgent nationalism in which radical antisemitism became identical with the campaign against the Weimar Republic (1919–1933).<sup>10</sup> Various “patriotic” groups coalesced around the need to “purify” the German people—a tragic echo of the preoccupation of sixteenth century Christians of the Iberian Peninsula with “purity of blood” (*limpieza de sangre*). Thus, by the end of the 1920s, many were demanding that Jews be excluded from citizenship, and the boycott against Jewish businesses widened. In the final years of the Weimar Republic, no significant social or political groups existed to counter radical antisemitism. By the 1930s, the liberals, who had championed Jewish emancipation in the nineteenth century, were no longer a potent political force. The workers’ movement, less influenced by antisemitism, was preoccupied by class issues and gave short shrift to the ideology of the National Socialists.

Although we lack detailed knowledge of how the faith formation of European Christians in the 1930s and 1940s affected their view of Nazi propaganda, we have ample documentation of the lack of forthright criticism of Nazi ideology with regard to the “Jewish Question” by ecclesiastical authorities. Both Catholics and Protestants protested about issues of concern, particularly about the so-called “Euthanasia” program in which mentally and/or physically handicapped persons were gassed in various clinics and installations throughout Germany. They were far more vociferous in denouncing the killing of the handicapped than in opposing brutal policies against the Jews.<sup>11</sup> The authorities challenged Nazi strictures on the churches, but they were largely silent in the face of the Nuremberg Racial Laws, *Kristallnacht*, and the concentration/death camps.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the churches played a key role in the management of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor” and the “Reich Citizenship Law.” The latter law denied Jews citizenship, and the former mandated that anyone who had three or four Jewish grandparents be considered a Jew, regardless of religious affiliation. Ironically, the system the Nazis designed to assess whether a person was a “true” German (i.e., Aryan) or a Jew required a signed and stamped document proving (or not) that a person’s grandparents had been baptized. Thus, the Christian churches became the “single most important site for the implementation of Nazi racial segregation.”<sup>13</sup> With millions of Germans seeking four baptismal records, the staff of the churches carried an extra workload, “but there is no record of complaint about being made complicit in the racist process.”<sup>14</sup>

A 1938 religious education booklet for Catholic adults, *Nathanaelfrage* (“Nathanael’s Question”), took issue with the notion of an Aryan Christ, but “warned that [although] Christ might have been part of the Jewish people and a Jew through his birth and adherence to Jewish customs, ... this would not mean he was racially a Jew.... Christ became less and less ‘Jewish.’ His manner (*Wesen*), his word and work, were not Jewish but divine. All his life he had stood against the Pharisees and the ‘voice of [Israel’s] blood and the longings of its national ambitions.”<sup>15</sup> This booklet reveals the increasingly racialized discourse, in which the Catholic hierarchy also engaged. For example, in a Lenten address of 1939, Archbishop Konrad Gröber of Freiburg objected to portraying Jesus as an Aryan, but insisted that Jesus was Jewish “only on His Mother’s side, since He was conceived of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>16</sup> As Ulrike Ehret concludes, “National Socialist race theory was no longer rejected out of hand (criticism was reserved for ‘race religion’), as the Church had done since the late 1920s; this was now taken as a given category including the racial image of the Jews. This essentially abandoned the Jews to anti-Semitic vilification and persecution.”<sup>17</sup>

Although Christian teaching had resulted in the dehumanization of Jews over the centuries, the prevalent, non-genocidal antisemitism in the general population “prevented any serious opposition to the Nazis once they had decided to embark on the murder of the Jews.”<sup>18</sup> It was not so much that antisemitism in the churches inevitably led to the Final Solutions, but rather that it “predisposed” many not to act.<sup>19</sup> As Robert Ericksen provocatively asks: “Is it possible, however, that ordinary Germans who became killers for the Nazi state felt they had received permission from their churches or from their universities?”<sup>20</sup>

While Christian complicity cannot be quantified, ample evidence exists of the churches’ feeble response to Nazi ideology and even enthusiastic support, such as among “Hitler’s priests.” Their sense of the compatibility of Catholic Christianity with Nazi racial theory is chilling. So, too, is the [Protestant] German Christian Movement’s (*Deutsche Christen*) 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*) that presented Jesus as an Aryan, de-judaized the New Testament, and blamed the degenerate Jews for Jesus’ death. Despite their confessional differences, Protestants and Catholics were united in their

opposition to Jews. As Doris Bergen concludes: “Two traditions had shaped the life of the churches in Germany since the time of Luther and even before. One was hostility toward Jews and Judaism, the other confessional strife. Both of them thrived in the Third Reich.”<sup>21</sup>

Even in the immediate postwar period, the churches showed little empathy to what Jews had experienced. Particularly problematic is the way in which high Catholic officials, clerics, agencies, and monasteries, along with the collusion of various governments, facilitated the escape of Nazi war criminals. This is a complicated story, part of the church’s extensive efforts to ameliorate the situation of the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons amidst the chaos of postwar Europe. The efforts of agencies such as the Vatican’s Relief Commission for Refugees were marred by the assistance also extended to Nazis, apparently justified by a twofold rationale: Aiding the anti-communist Nazis would prevent the spread of communism, and offering forgiveness and assistance to Nazis and their collaborators provided the possibility of conversion or return to the practice of Catholicism.

It would take a considerable period of time before the churches began to confront what Christian teaching over the ages had contributed to the reception of Nazi ideology.

## **Discontinuities**

However extensive, shameful, and sinful Christian complicity in the Shoah, it alone does not bear the blame. Christianity’s legacy of denigrating Judaism (and too often vilifying Jews) never, even its most extreme voices, sanctioned state-sponsored genocide, the “Final Solution.” The teaching of Christianity may have been a “necessary cause leading to the Holocaust, [but] it was surely not a sufficient one.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is important to sketch out the larger context in which interrelated developments in science, nationalism, colonialism, fascism, and World Wars I and II were causal factors. Racism and antisemitism were integral to all.

In the realm of science and medicine, eugenics and racial hygiene held many in thrall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, not only in Germany but also in Great Britain and the United States. Since heredity was considered to be determinative and immutable, the only recourse was to prevent the decay by such methods as compulsory sterilization, the killing of persons disabled by mental or physical deficiencies, and the destruction of foreigners (especially Jews, but also the Roma). By the end of World War II, some 200,000 “deficient” children and adults had been put to death in killing centers overseen by medical personnel. The importance of cleanliness and purity of blood was most effectively conveyed by designating others—especially Jews—as the foil. The Jew as a racial pariah became a fundamental theme of the curriculum in German schools. Moreover, in the various concentration camps, medical professionals oversaw the selection process and the gassing of victims, and engaged in unethical (and often gruesome) medical experiments.”<sup>23</sup>

The “Jewish question” was central to nationalist movements as nations-in-formation worked out the constituency of their citizenry. When Germany became a unified nation-state in 1871, Jews held full legal equality, but tensions raised by rapid urbanization and antisemitic societies gave rise to more exclusionary perspectives. Germany’s expansionist policies under Wilhelm II, Kaiser from 1888-1918, led to Germany’s colonization of Southwest Africa (now Namibia) and East African (now Tanzania), as well as Cameroon, Togo, and Samoa. Germans pursued a campaign of “deliberate annihilation” against Southwest Africa’s Herero and Nama peoples: “Germany’s first racial state and society took shape, not under the Third Reich, but under Imperial Germany in its prime African colony. The German army, colonial administrators, and settlers learned that against Africans they could practice the most brutal measures possible, and could do so with active support of the very center of German state power, the Kaiser, the military staff, and the civilian government.”<sup>24</sup> Organizations such as the

Pan German League, formed at the end of the nineteenth century, exacerbated the racialization of national identity.

World War I accentuated the desire to dominate others, but after defeat and the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which stripped Germany of its colonies, many in Germany gave way to the “pathos of victimization”—and the Nazis cleverly exploited both the aspiration of domination and the misery of loss.<sup>25</sup> The Nazis regarded the loss of World War I as a “call to world domination, a threat, and a rationalization for murder of the Jews and anyone else cast in the role of shirker, traitor, or defeatist.”<sup>26</sup> Fascist leaders made use of race science to justify authoritarian means of binding a nation into a single people by means of an aggressive foreign policy, militarism, and exaltation of the nation-state. Jews in particular were pariahs because as foreigners they detracted from the purity of a nation’s people. Other peoples as well were regarded as threats: some Slavic peoples, most notably Russians; ethnic Poles, the Roma and Sinti peoples (“Gypsies”), and homosexuals. The Jews alone, however, “were thought to pose an evil going beyond the evidence of the senses.”<sup>27</sup>

This broad and brief outline of contributing causes does not exculpate Christianity. It does, however, suggest the multifaceted character of the Shoah. Moreover, the heuristic of “continuities” and “discontinuities” is itself inadequate to account for the complex ways in which Christian teaching and the churches functioned vis-à-vis the Third Reich. For example, some Christians who held highly problematic theological views of Judaism nevertheless showed outstanding moral courage—most notably, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The timidity Pope Pius XII manifested in the face of Nazism is in part explained by his obsession with communism as the greater threat to Western civilization.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the complexity of the situation should not overshadow the manifold ways in which Christians enabled the genocidal actions of the Nazi regime.

## Conclusion

I write as a Catholic Christian for whom staring into the tarnished mirror of history is deeply disturbing. Although the Shoah defies comprehension, what we do understand imposes a moral obligation on all of us who are Christian—and offers an unsettling case to all religious people of the consequences of denigration of the religious other. If, however, we Christians are to do more than lament—a necessary response—then it is incumbent upon us to take a long, hard look at what the anti-Jewish teachings of the churches inspired or justified during the Holocaust. The question of Johannes Baptist Metz—“Ask yourselves if the theology you are learning is such that it could remain unchanged before and after Auschwitz. If this be the case, be on your guard.”<sup>29</sup>—cries out for a response.

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<sup>1</sup> See the 1998 statement from the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” says: “The history of relations between Jews and Christians is a tormented one.” See [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_16031998\\_shoah\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html) (accessed July 9, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Jews, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context, vol. 1: The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 399.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Kevin Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 229-230.

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- <sup>6</sup> Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Christianity and the Nazi Movement: A Response," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007): 185-211; citation, 205.
- <sup>7</sup> See Katharina von Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> See <http://churchesandtheholocaust.ushmm.org/page/der-sturmer-images>. I thank Victoria Barnett, Staff Director for Church Relations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and her summer assistant, Andrew Kloes, for these excerpts from *Der Stürmer*.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> See Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.
- <sup>11</sup> See Doris L. Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," *Central European History* 27/3 (1994): 329-48.
- <sup>12</sup> Response to *Kristallnacht* by church authorities was minimal. The only public response among Catholic clergy was from Bernhard Lichtenberg, Provost of Berlin's St. Hedwig Cathedral, who, among other defiant acts, prayed for the Jews from the pulpit each evening for three years. Arrested in October 1941, Lichtenberg responded to his prosecutors: "I think I am not only authorized but obliged, to preach to the Catholic believers, that they may not let themselves be confused by unchristian dispositions but live by Jesus Christ's commandment: 'Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.' That includes Jews." Lichtenberg also organized the office of the Special Relief of the Diocese of Berlin (*Hilfswerk beim Ordinariat Berlin*), and drew Dr. Margarete Sommer, a member of the Berlin Catholic resistance circle, into the organization; after Lichtenberg's death, she became the organization's director. Lichtenberg also worked with resister Dr. Gertrud Luckner, who led actions on behalf of Jews in Berlin and Munich through the German Catholic charity Caritas. Yet such figures were few in number. See Brenda Gaydos, "Seliger Bernhard Lichtenberg: Steadfast in Spirit, He Directed his Own Course" (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, Washington D.C., 2010, 311-312.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118.
- <sup>14</sup> Cited in Ulrike Ehret, "Catholicism and Judaism in the Catholic Defence against Alfred Rosenberg, 1934-1938: Anti-Jewish Images in an Age of Race Science," *European History Quarterly* 4/1 (2010): 35-56; citation, 44.
- <sup>15</sup> Ehret, "Catholicism and Judaism," 46.
- <sup>16</sup> Cited in Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," 335.
- <sup>17</sup> Ehret, "Catholicism and Judaism," 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 105.
- <sup>19</sup> So Donald J. Dietrich, *Catholic Citizens in the Third Reich: Psycho-Social Principles and Moral Reasoning* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), 305.
- <sup>20</sup> Ericksen, *Conscience and Complicity*, 22-23.
- <sup>21</sup> Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," 348.
- <sup>22</sup> Yosef H. Yerushalmi, in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977), 103.
- <sup>23</sup> See Patricia Herberer, "Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, eds., Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39-53; citation, 52.
- <sup>24</sup> Eric D. Weitz, "Nationalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, 54-67; citation, 62-63.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 65.
- <sup>26</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "World Wars," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, 95-110; citations, 97.
- <sup>27</sup> See John Connelly, "Gypsies, Homosexuals, and Slavs," in *The Oxford Handbook of*

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*Holocaust Studies*, 274-289; citation, 288.

<sup>28</sup> See Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church*, trans. Peter Mann (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 29.

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