

## **“In Life and in Death”: Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the Path from the Great War to the Confessing Church**

“Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to obey in life and in death.”

– Barmen Declaration, May 31, 1934

“You may be sure that we would not be capable of existing as a corps of sworn brothers if we did not have conviction and faith in a God who stands over us and our Fatherland, who created our people and this earth and sent us our Führer.”

– Himmler on Religion, 1936<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) are associated with landmark achievements in twentieth-century Protestant theology, including their opposition to Nazism. Barth played a leading role in crafting the Barmen Declaration (1934), which gave a doctrinal basis for Protestant resistance to German nationalism, and Bonhoeffer articulated a pacifist ethic and trained pastors in an illegal seminary to resist Nazi ideology. This paper argues that both theologians’ resistance to fascism was shaped by their experience and interpretation of World War I. The Great War brought trauma to both figures: for Bonhoeffer the loss of his older brother in battle, and for Barth the loss of confidence in a modern theological paradigm that was powerless to help its devotees oppose the war. The thought of both theologians calls the contemporary church to oppose resurgent American nationalism and authoritarianism by unmasking its idolatrous mythic ground.

Historians and theologians have long associated Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) with landmark achievements in twentieth-century Protestant theology. Barth, a Swiss theologian from the

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1. Quoted from J. S. Conway. *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1968 [reprint 2001]), 363.

Reformed tradition, and Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, found innovative ways to think beyond the many theological impasses of the nineteenth century. The legacy of their thought remains unparalleled. Indeed, renowned twentieth-century progressive Catholic theologian Hans Küng has even identified Barth as the “initiator of the postmodern paradigm” in theology.<sup>2</sup>

Along with their contributions to Christian thought and ethics, Bonhoeffer and Barth are also well known for their opposition to Nazism. Barth played a leading role in crafting the Barmen Declaration (1934), which gave a doctrinal basis for Protestant resistance to the nationalist “German Christian Movement” and to Nazism. Bonhoeffer, who worked to train German pastors in an illegal seminary to resist Nazism in the churches, was one of the only theological voices to express early concern for Jews; he is especially well known for his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Though many Protestants (for example, the French Reformed pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda Trocmé) and Catholics (for example, the Franciscan priest St. Maximilian Kolbe) found ways to resist Nazism, Bonhoeffer and Barth distinguished themselves by offering a deep and perennially instructive theological critique of Nazi ideology.

In theological circles Barth and Bonhoeffer hardly qualify as “muted voices”—there are national and international societies devoted to the study of both figures and an avalanche of secondary literature about them as well. But what has often been muted in the study of Barth and Bonhoeffer is the degree to which World War I framed the landscape of their theological thinking. Indeed, their shared theological opposition to German nationalism and fascism was rooted in their experience, memory, and interpretation of the war. This substantial claim deserves a monograph for its fullest explication, but here I will lay out the basic lines that a longer analysis might follow. The Great War brought trauma to both figures. Bonhoeffer lost one of his older brothers to wounds received in battle in 1918; Barth lost confidence in an entire modern theological paradigm that proved powerless to help its devotees oppose the war and its foundation in nationalism. Both theologians stood in the shadow cast by the slaughter of the First World War; but this shadow became the backdrop for their recovery of a theological method that empowered resistance to Nazism. In that respect, their stories have remained enduringly illuminative for Christians facing other expressions of totalitarianism. I conclude this study, then, by pondering the possibility—in the spirit of both theologians—of a twenty-first-century Confessing

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2. Hans Küng, *Theology for a New Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 271-275.

Church movement to oppose resurgent forms of nationalism, particularly the American form.

### *DIE DEUTSCHE CHRISTEN: GERMAN NATIONALIST RELIGION IN THE THIRD REICH*

In October of 1935 a Lutheran pastor named Riechelmann in the coastal German city of Schortens sent a letter to the editor of the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*.<sup>3</sup> Pastor Riechelmann thanked the editor for an August article that criticized a statement the local church council in Saxony had made that apparently expressed sympathy for Christians committed to resisting Nazi principles. The pastor expressed further support for *Der Stürmer's* effort "against the Jewish death watch beetles who are undermining our German nation," and promised his strident support: "We will fight alongside you and we will not give up until the struggle against all Jewry and against the murderers of Our Savior has been brought to a victorious end, in the spirit of Christ and of Martin Luther." The pastor concluded with "In true fellowship, I greet you with Heil Hitler!"<sup>4</sup>

At Christmas a year later, an unnamed pastor preached a sermon in an Old Prussian Union church in Solingen, south of Wuppertal.<sup>5</sup> The preacher began by invoking in mythological fashion an ancient German Yule tradition, in which solstice torches symbolized the promised return of longer days. "The deepest darkness of the longest night," intoned the preacher, "could not take away from them the hope of seeing again the light of the sun, which their God would give them in the coming year." Like their primeval ancestors the congregation was now standing "in the light after long darkness." The darkness his contemporary hearers were emerging from is Germany's life after World War I. "But then he came," affirmed the preacher, "who, despite the great darkness in so many German hearts, spoke of light and showed them the way to the light." The Swastika is now the great sign of the light that has arisen for the German people. "In this hour, Adolf Hitler is our benefactor, who has overcome the winter night with its terrors . . . and has led us under the Swastika to a new light and a new day."

Less than twenty years after the Great War, many pastors of churches that were heirs to the Reformation read racist periodicals, pledged to join the struggle for victory over the Jews, spoke of Adolf Hitler in messianic

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3. The translated text of the letter is from Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 377. On *Der Stürmer* as an instrument of anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda, see Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 134.

4. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 377.

5. *Ibid.*, 364-365.

terms, and saw the Swastika as a salvific sign of God at work in the political realm to bring about a glorious new age. How did it come to this?

To appreciate the thought of Bonhoeffer and Barth, one must understand the epic crisis that gripped German churches in the 1930s. Both theologians saw the profound struggle for the church's identity, known as the *Kirchenkampf*, as a struggle for the very soul of Christianity.

This struggle was a complicated phenomenon because of its contextual density. Many historians, including Klaus Scholder, Victoria Barnett, J. S. Conway, and Doris Bergen, have superbly described the path to this crisis, and following their accounts gives some clues. To grasp a Lutheran pastor's vicious racism and unqualified support of Hitler, one must start with Germany in the 1920s. In this immediate context, the ostensible incompetence of the Weimar government in dealing effectively with widespread economic frustration and with fear of civil war and of communism deeply disillusioned many Germans. But this political situation accounts only fractionally for the rise of broad Christian support for the aims of the National Socialist German Workers Party in the 1930s—it is only one feature of a much larger matrix.

In his important study of three pro-Nazi theologians, Robert P. Ericksen has observed that many in post-World War I Germany believed the modern worldview had seriously eroded the deep traditional markers of German identity.<sup>6</sup> This "crisis of modernity," as Eriksen put it, was comprised of three destabilizing elements: industrialization; the democratic revolution; and the collapse of rationalism into widespread relativism, at least among intellectuals.<sup>7</sup> Modernity, so promising in the early nineteenth century, had helped midwife the catastrophic destruction of the war, the unimaginable defeat of the finest army in the world, and the cultural-economic pall that hung in the air of Weimar Germany. However, this wider crisis of modernity could not finally account for the loss of Germany's glory. Someone must be to blame.

On the margins of German culture lay a movement rooted in the nineteenth century, called the *völkisch* (or "racial-ethnic") movement. The *völkisch* movement orbited around images and stories of the vocation and destiny of the German people, and functioned as the purveyor of a kind of nationalist mythology.<sup>8</sup> According to Scholder, the worldview of the *völkisch* movement, originating in ideas of the philosopher Fichte, saw history as the arena of a radically dualistic struggle between light and

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6. Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emmanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1985), 2.

7. *Ibid.*, 2-4.

8. I use the term in its technical sense: the Greek word *mythos* classically referred to stories about the gods and the ultimate origin and meaning of human experience.

darkness.<sup>9</sup> In this apocalyptic battle the German *Volk* were the destined victors, implying a divinely given mission to the whole world.

By the time of the Great War, theorists in the *völkisch* movement had increasingly racialized this myth, identifying this cosmic struggle now as a battle between the Jews and the Aryan people. It was this version of the myth that Hitler adopted and vigorously expounded.<sup>10</sup> In the instability and disillusionment of the Weimar period this anti-Semitic myth became plausible. In relation to the situation in Germany in the 1920s, Scholder maintains that “without war and defeat *völkisch* antisemitism would almost certainly have remained a fringe phenomenon.” But in the context of vast cultural uncertainty, the *völkisch* worldview offered Germans a “primordial cause” for its loss of the war.<sup>11</sup> Dark, secretive, international forces must have colluded to ensure the destruction of Germany. It was somehow the fault of the “other,” and *völkisch* mythology claimed to know who these “others” were. Without the *völkisch* movement, Scholder argued, “the spread and rule of the National Socialists is inconceivable.”<sup>12</sup> It was but a short step from the nationalist mythology of the *völkisch* movement to Hitler’s millennialist dream of a Europe purified from non-Aryan “outsiders.”<sup>13</sup>

The *völkisch* movement was intrinsically religious. It nurtured deep convictions about a divine vocation of the German people and was puritanically rigorous in its insistence on waging war against evil. Scholder notes that this worldview was not at first conducive to constructive relations with Christian churches, because of its radical dualism and especially because Christianity’s founder was a Jew.<sup>14</sup> But the groundwork for rapprochement had been laid in much nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theology, which had maintained that Christianity in all its forms was in some way discontinuous with Jesus himself. This viewpoint took rather prosaic shape, for example, in the theology of the great historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack, who maintained in his famous 1900 book *Das Wesen des Christentums* that the

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9. Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Volume 1: *Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions 1918-1934*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 75.

10. See Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 143-146. Conway incisively observes that Hitler skillfully exploited the anti-Semitic *völkisch* myth in a way that accounted plausibly for all of Germany’s ills and at the same time drew on deep religious themes of German culture.

11. Scholder, *Churches* 1:75, 79.

12. *Ibid.*, 174.

13. Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 32. Barnett here states, “For Nazis, the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the community of German people) that Hitler sought represented an earthly version of a heavenly kingdom. All of his goals, from his plans to conquer Europe to the plan to eliminate ‘non-Aryan’ people, were guided by this apocalyptic vision of a thousand-year German Reich.”

14. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:81.

essence of Jesus' message was, in part, "God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul."<sup>15</sup>

This same approach in the hands of an anti-Semitic ideologue like Paul de Lagarde, however, took on ominous hues. Lagarde believed, Scholder notes, that only the religion of Jesus could offer the German people a solid spiritual grounding, all other forms of Christianity—Protestant and Catholic—having been corrupted by "Jewish Paulinism."<sup>16</sup> This argument from a respected scholar of the Bible and Near Eastern cultures provided the *völkisch* movement with a "credible" way to connect its wishes for a truly German religion to the figure of Jesus Christ,<sup>17</sup> who was deftly turned into a non-Jewish redeemer-hero of the German *Volk*.

Protestant churches grounded their theological identities in the Reformation quest to return *ad fontes*—back to the sources. A keynote of Lutheran tradition was the story of the Protestant reformer's search for the real essence of Christianity—and the *völkisch* movement offered a new but familiar version of that search. Amid widespread political and social embitterment, fear of modernity's massive cultural shifts, and a longing to "restore the German Reich to its former glory,"<sup>18</sup> the *völkisch* myth popularized scapegoating. Its rhetoric of ethnic re-enchantment voiced a yearning for religious revival through a return to perceived traditional values, none of which was lost on Hitler.

All of this makes the birth of the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christian) movement in 1932 contextually understandable. Indeed, historian Doris Bergen has helpfully identified the *völkisch* movement as one of the "legitimizing precursors" of the *Deutsche Christen* cause of blending popular German racial myths with Protestant Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

The "German Christians" were radical supporters of Nazi ideology in the religious sphere. This was their motto: "the Swastika on our breasts and the Cross in our hearts."<sup>20</sup> As early as 1920 the National Socialist Party had expressed the expectations of that support in its program: "We demand freedom for all religious confessions in the state, *in so far as they do not endanger its existence nor offend against the customs and moral feelings*

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15. See Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986 [1957]), 51.

16. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:82.

17. *Ibid.*: "[German religion] meant purifying Christianity of all Jewish overlays and corruptions and returning to its original essence: the pure religion of the saviour."

18. Barnett, *Soul of the People*, 26.

19. Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: the German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1-3 and 27-29.

20. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 45; also see Karl Barth: *Theologian of Freedom*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 336, fn. 47.

of the Germanic race.”<sup>21</sup> The Nazis, then, had already indicated long before Hitler’s rise to power that church life in Germany must be subordinated to their *völkisch* vision. Unsurprisingly, in 1932 the *Deutsche Christen* declared that their goal was to pursue in the ecclesial realm the ideals of the National Socialist Party and to effect in the churches the kind of sweeping changes Hitler had achieved in the political and social realms. A single unified church of the German people, a *Reichskirche*, under the leadership of a single *Reichsbischof*, and thus an end to sectarian division, was their aim.<sup>22</sup> Politically adroit, the *Deutsche Christen* managed to gain majorities in one synod and church council after another, which allowed them to alter the liturgy and to replace personnel. In this way they were able to place Hitler’s personal choice for *Reichsbischof*, Ludwig Müller, in that role.<sup>23</sup>

A document titled “The Ten Principles of the Religious Movement of German Christian,” prepared by German Christian leader Joachim Hossenfelder for a May 1933 conference that sought to create a unified German Protestant church, contains two telling paragraphs:<sup>24</sup>

2. We . . . want . . . an Evangelical Reich Church that acknowledges the National Socialist State out of belief and preaches the gospel in the Third Reich.

3. The Evangelical Church is the Church of the German Christians, i.e., the Christians of Aryan race.<sup>25</sup>

What the Ten Principles meant in practice for the churches was clearly grasped in a 1933 book by J. Beckmann:

The Church must enter completely into the Third Reich, it must be coordinated into the rhythm of the National Revolution, [and] it must be fashioned by the ideas of Nazism, lest it remain a foreign body in the unified German Nazi community.<sup>26</sup>

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21. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:84-85. Italics added.

22. See especially *ibid.*, 1:189-216.

23. See Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler*, 148-149.

24. Hossenfelder had issued a longer statement in June 1932, titled “Principles of the Religious Movement of ‘German Christians.’” See Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 339-341, for the text.

25. Text from *ibid.*, 345.

26. Quoted in *ibid.*, 46. Conway excerpts the quote from J. Beckmann, *Artgemäßes Christentum oder schriftgemässer Christusglaube* (Essen, 1933). I am indebted to my colleague Eva Erickson from Berlin for helping me with Beckmann’s book, the title of which translates approximately as *Racially-Appropriate Christianity or Scripturally-Appropriate Faith in Christ*. According to Erickson, Beckmann rejected a *Deutsche Christen* proposal made by thirteen pro-Hitler Christians that for Germans, only a Christianity rooted in German custom, tradition, and theology is acceptable. Bergen notes that the *Deutsche Christen* used the

Beckmann rejected the *Deutsche Christen* belief that the church and its message must be viewed as the cultural property of the Reich, which meant Christianity must therefore be thoroughly “Germanized”: if it was to be relevant to its time and place, that is, as a German *Volkskirche*.

In 1933 any sense that the Protestant bodies of the *Reichskirche* would retain autonomy in their affairs, especially in the content of their teaching and proclamation, was erased by Hossenfelder’s Ten Principles. He produced this statement as a kind of manifesto for *Deutsche Christen* control of Protestant church life under the new situation of Nazism. Thus according to the German Christian platform, to “preach the gospel in the Third Reich” really meant to “preach the gospel of the Third Reich.” The church of the *Deutsche Christen* was to be an extension of the National Socialist Party and a mouthpiece of German *völkisch* religion blended with a few, carefully selected heroic features of the figures of Jesus and Luther. To this end, as is well known, Reichsbischof Müller even published a Germanized version of the Sermon on the Mount that removed its Jewish language and turned the beatitudes into expressions of idealized Aryan manhood.<sup>27</sup>

In the early 1930s, German churches widely and uncritically held the dogma of “German Exceptionalism”: German culture was unique in world history. German Exceptionalism was part of the macro-story, along with the overarching *völkisch* myth, which included anti-Semitism and blame of the “other” for Germany’s plight, the tantalizing appeal to the pre-World War I golden age of the Bismarckian Empire, and Hitler’s promise to restore German greatness for a thousand years. While the *Deutsche Christen* would fall from the favor of the National Socialist Party rapidly in 1936-1937, as the Nazi government tacked in a more overtly anti-Christian direction, the damage had been done.<sup>28</sup> The faith of the Protestant Churches was being reconfigured to reflect in culturally appropriate terms a gospel the Reich could accept.

How could ministers who were heirs to the rich theological traditions of the Reformation fall in lock-step with the overtly anti-Christian ideology of the *Reichskirche*? How do we account for Pastor Riechelmann’s anti-Jewish rage and for the *Deutsche Christen* preacher’s Christmas encomium to Hitler as the light of the world bringing salvation under the sign of the Swastika? Distance makes it difficult to enter into the deep

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German word *Art* along with *Rasse* (race), *Blut* (blood), and *Volk* (people/ethnic group) as code terms for their racial ideology.—See Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 23.

27. See, for example, this review of Müller’s book in the June 6, 1936, *Canberra Times*.—<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2417334>; on both Müller’s and the German Christians’ proclivity to “masculinize” Christianity, see Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 74-81.

28. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 150-152.



places of their consciences or to grasp the routes by which they justified their convictions. But the cultural framework in which such convictions were formed and in which decisions were made is clear. The alluring promise of restored national greatness and a meta-explanation for defeat in the Great War brought German life to a profoundly existential crisis. Scholder's assessment remains insightful: "without war and defeat *völkisch* antisemitism would almost certainly have remained a fringe phenomenon."<sup>29</sup> And perhaps without war and defeat, the rise of the National Socialist Party and Hitler's skilled nationalist exploitation of a feeling of German cultural malaise might also have been less likely.

### RESISTING NAZI RELIGION: BARMEN, BARTH, AND BONHOEFFER

If the devastation of the Great War made a nationalist Aryanized Christianity plausible and even desirable to many Germans, for others the devastating experience of the Great War prepared them for later resistance to this same ideology. Many clergy, theologians, and lay people found Nazism morally repugnant and the very idea of a *Deutsche Christen Reichskirche* heretical. In opposition to the tactics and ideology of the "German Christians," the establishment of the Confessing Church (*die Beken nende Kirche*) is at once a story of courage and tragedy. The Confessing Church was a resistance movement that struggled for the internal autonomy and theological integrity of Protestant churches in light of both Nazi and *Deutsche Christen* ideology.<sup>30</sup>

While there are many little known and unsung heroes of theological resistance to Nazism, both on the Protestant and Catholic side,<sup>31</sup> the Barmen Declaration of 1934 remains a landmark document in the Church struggle, and it is vital to understand Bonhoeffer and Barth in relation to this confession of faith.

The names Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth are synonymous with ecclesial opposition to Hitler. Long before there was the Confessing Church, Barth and Bonhoeffer had already developed theological frameworks that not only empowered resistance to Nazism, but made such resistance a moral imperative.

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29. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:79.

30. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. revised, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: OUP, 2005), s.v. "Confessing Church."

31. One of these figures on the Protestant side, for example, was Günther Dehn (1882-1970). Among Catholic "muted voices" in the church struggle are figures like St. Maximilian Kolbe, mentioned earlier. Much less is known in English-speaking scholarship on Catholic resistance to Nazism. See Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, xv-xvii.

*Barmen*

In May 1934 representatives of the Confessing Church met at Barmen and drafted the declaration that has become the symbol of Protestant resistance to Nazi theology. Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian who was at that time a professor of theology at Bonn, wrote the six theses of the draft, “while,” as he said, “the Lutherans slept.”<sup>32</sup> The preamble to the declaration stated unequivocally that the methods and “alien principles” of the *Deutsche Christen* have “grievously imperiled” the faith and unity of the German Evangelical Church.<sup>33</sup> The declaration made clear that its confession of faith stood in opposition to “the errors of the ‘German Christians’ of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the church.”

Each of the six affirmations of the Barmen statement were at once theological and political. In a context in which Nazi ideology proclaimed that its worldview and program must embrace the totality of people’s lives, Barth insisted—and representatives at the Synod unanimously agreed—that the most foundational convictions of the Christian faith forbid any claims to totality made by any political power on the lives of people. The declaration’s celebrated first affirmation reads: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to obey in life and in death.”<sup>34</sup> This affirmation rebuffed the *Deutsche Christen* claim that Hitler represented a new divine revelation to the German people. After each subsequent affirmation the statement “we reject” followed—a structure that imitated the anathemas of the classic creeds of Christianity. This structure made explicit that the document was meant to have confessional or doctrinal force in the churches that accept it.

These rejection statements of the declaration identified many of the Nazi political ideals that the *Deutsche Christen* had “baptized” as false doctrines. The declaration thus critiqued the ideas that Hitler represents God’s revelation to the German people in the political sphere of life, that the church must retool its message to make space for *völkisch* ideology, and that the church must be subservient to the interests of the state. It further refused any claims of the state to exceed the bounds of its limited purview in human affairs. Nazi religion sought to subsume the

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32. *Karl Barth: Letters, 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesant, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981), 15. The editors state that Asmussen and Breit had taken an afternoon nap. Barth may have intended his quip as a double entendre.

33. *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, Vol. III, Part Five: *Statements of Faith in Modern Christianity*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 506.

34. Barmen, Affirmation 1, from Pelikan, *Creeds and Confessions*, 3:507.

theological under the political in order to absorb it; Barmen worked in the opposite direction, declaring political trespasses on the church's theology invalid. And then it went a step further by daring to condemn the political when it transgressed its divinely circumscribed moral limits. Barmen ran counter to the attempts of pro-Nazi theologians, like Paul Althaus, to reframe Martin Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in ways that required absolute obedience to Hitler from all Lutherans. In some ways it is remarkable that the Lutherans at Barmen signed a document that more properly reflects a kind of Reformed-Calvinist restriction of the state than the traditional Lutheran "throne and altar" understanding of these relationships. But the situation in 1934 was dire, and too much seemed at stake to quibble over a 400-year-old theological disagreement about the church-state relations.

#### *Karl Barth and World War I*

Karl Barth was the theologian who drafted the six articles and remained their most forceful advocate. Barth resolutely refused to let the substance of Christian faith which formed the identity of the church be assimilated into or co-opted by the alien ideology of ethnic nationalist religion. Nor would he silently allow the distinctive Christian doctrine of God to be transfigured into an ideology about a twentieth-century Aryan war deity, a German "God" of and for German culture, whose truly Germanic son Adolf Hitler was the redeemer. For Barth, the God of the Bible and Christian confessions was neither an exalted version of a human being, nor the mascot of a culture, but the transcendent One who stood over against humanity, a God whose nature is eternally other than what human beings and systems wish divinity to be.<sup>35</sup>

For Barth, whatever political sources lay beneath the rise of the National Socialist Party and the *Deutsche Christen* Imperial Church, the ultimate issue was theological. He saw clearly that the real issue for the churches could be framed as two questions: which "God" is God? and when the Nazis spoke of "God," were they in any legitimate sense speaking of the God of the Christian faith?

Protest against the German Christian [*Deutsche Christen*] heresy . . . must be directed fundamentally at the source . . . at the fact that, next to the holy scripture as the sole revelation of God, the German Christians claim German ethnic identity [*Volkstum*], its past and its

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35. Karl Barth, "The Humanity of God" in *The Humanity of God*, trans. by John Newton Thomas (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1974), 39-41.

political present, as a second revelation. We thereby recognize them as believers in "another God."<sup>36</sup>

Barth's point was not merely rhetorical, but theological in the deepest sense. The Nazi and *Deutsche Christen* elevation of German ethnic identity to a principle of revelation had nothing in common with the Christian God. Historian J. S. Conway has described how in Nazi orphanages children were taught to pray at meals "Oh Führer, My Führer, sent to me by God."<sup>37</sup> Hans Schemm, unintentionally perhaps, summarized National Socialist political theology when he declared, "Our confession of God is a confession of totality. . . . To give ultimate significance to the totalities of race, resistance and personality, there is added the supreme totalitarian slogan of our Volk: 'Religion and God.'"<sup>38</sup> Barth saw through all of this with penetrating clarity, identifying it as "the darkness of Hitlerism."<sup>39</sup>

Barth had not somehow just recently stumbled on a theological-hermeneutical framework that helped him discern Nazism's true identity as a form of racist idolatry. Rather, his convictions emerged out of a series of experiences in the early years of World War I that had given the Swiss theologian the lenses to see Nazi ideology as the nationalist theology it was. Actually, Barth had been developing his anti-fascist theological vision since 1914.

In 1914 Karl Barth was a young pastor in the Swiss village of Safenwil. He had been trained by some of the greatest theological minds of Germany, men like Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, with international reputations and deep credibility in academic and ecclesiastical circles. These theologians represented the German Liberal Protestant tradition at its height and were devoted to bringing Christian faith, critically understood, into vital conversation with modern thought. As a Reformed pastor, Barth worked to bring his theological learning into connection with the lives of his Swiss parishioners struggling with the economic and social complexities of industrialization. He became an advocate of socialist causes, particularly as they pertained to the rights of workers. Ministerial life brought him up against the inadequacies of some of his training; the distance between a von Harnack seminar on the history of dogma and Sunday sermons that addressed the daily struggles of people in a rural village challenged Barth, and he began to wonder about the adequacy of aspects of his theological framework. As he looked back years later, Barth referred to the time just before the World War as "the

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36. Quoted by Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 21.

37. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 155.

38. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:192-193.

39. *Letters, 1961-1968*, 304. While Barth uses this phrase over thirty years later, it trenchantly describes what he saw in the 1930s.

great naivety of the years before the earthquake” — an allusion to a passage from the biblical book of Amos.<sup>40</sup> But the earthquake came in August 1914. His biographer, Eberhard Busch, writes that “the outbreak of [the war] shook him and disturbed him to the depths of his being.”<sup>41</sup>

On September 4, 1914, Barth wrote his friend and fellow-Swiss pastor Eduard Thurneysen to inform him of correspondence with one of the highly-esteemed representatives of the German liberal Protestant tradition, Martin Rade.<sup>42</sup> Barth knew Rade well, having worked for him on a widely-read progressive periodical titled *Die Christliche Welt*. Rade had written a statement justifying the German cause in the war, and Barth reported to Thurneysen that he “issued a detailed, carefully edited manifesto” against Rade and his German friends’ “condition.” By condition Barth meant his German friends’ “spiritual condition [which] is now more incomprehensible to me, even if it is not more congenial.”<sup>43</sup> Reflecting on the situation in Germany as the war began, Barth told Thurneysen,

The unconditional truths of the gospel are simply suspended for the time being and in the meantime a German war-theology is put to work, its Christian trimming consisting of a lot of talk about sacrifice and the like. Here is sufficient proof that the “truths” [his teachers upheld] were nothing more than surface varnish and not an inmost possession of this “*Christliche Welt*.” It is truly sad! Marburg and German civilization have lost something in my eyes by this breakdown, and indeed forever.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, twenty years before Barmen, Barth already had begun to articulate the problem that will reappear in more vicious guise in the Nazi era. Christian beliefs were either surrendered in the face of the national expediency of a serviceable war theology or their vocabulary—like the word “sacrifice”—was being stripped of its uniquely Christian meaning and set to work justifying the creation of mass death. Barth quite properly referred to the theologians’ justification of German national self-interest as a “breakdown.”

But a month later an event happened that had truly seismic consequence for Barth and his theological development. Years after the experience, Barth wrote that a particular day in 1914 stands out:

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40. *Letters, 1961-1968*, 277.

41. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 81.

42. *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1964), 26.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II and his counselors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realized that I could no longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me at least, nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future.<sup>45</sup>

Among the names on the list were Adolf von Harnack (by now general director of the Royal Library, Berlin), Wilhelm Herrmann (professor of Protestant theology, Marburg), and Reinhold Seeberg (professor of Protestant theology, Berlin).<sup>46</sup>

The manifesto was published in October 1914, two months after Germany had declared war on Belgium on August 4 and its armies had violated Belgian neutrality.<sup>47</sup> Among the names of theological professors were both liberal and conservative Protestants, as well as Catholic theological professors. The German title of the manifesto was *An die Kulturwelt!* – “To the Civilized World.” Although the German entry into Belgium was anything but civilized, the manifesto called the international community’s censure of German behavior in Belgium “lies.” The paragraphs end with the invitation: “Have faith in us! Believe that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, and a Kant, is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes.”<sup>48</sup>

As a Swiss pastor, Barth experienced the war as a massive trauma. The aftershock of the 1914 earthquake brought the whole towering intellectual-spiritual-philosophical edifice in which he had been vested crashing down. The war forced Barth to search for what his friend Thurneysen called a “wholly other” foundation for theological work and ministry. This foundation must not be culture, the achievements of a society, or even the best current philosophical or ethical thought. It was exactly these kinds of foundations that seduced his theological professors

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45. Karl Barth, “Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century,” in *The Humanity of God*, trans. from the 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: University Press, 1965), 9. Barth misremembers the day as in August 1914, when in fact it must have happened in October.

46. For the original German text, see: [http://planck.bbaw.de/online/texte/Aufruf\\_An\\_die\\_Kulturwelt.pdf](http://planck.bbaw.de/online/texte/Aufruf_An_die_Kulturwelt.pdf).

47. See James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War I* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 36-39. On the date of the Manifesto was issued: [www.referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brills-digital-library-of-world-war-i/manifesto-of-the-93beww1\\_en\\_0378](http://www.referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brills-digital-library-of-world-war-i/manifesto-of-the-93beww1_en_0378).

48. English text from: [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto\\_of\\_the\\_Ninety-Three\\_German\\_Intellectuals](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three_German_Intellectuals).

to suspend their Christian faith in support of the war. "Is it not remarkable," Barth stated in a 1916 address, "that the greatest atrocities of life—I think of the capitalistic order and of the war—can justify themselves on purely moral principles?" Unless Christians hold clearly to another kind of foundation for their actions, they can perpetrate evil by acting "ethically," especially if they acquiesce to that form of ethics Barth called "the righteousness of the state."<sup>49</sup> The Great War compelled Barth to reject the totalizing discourse of both the state and culture.

From World War I to the end of his career, Barth vigorously argued that the reality to which the Christian term "God" points is no one's national deity. In an address less than a year after the war ended, Barth maintained that "the Divine is something whole, complete in itself, a kind of new and different something in contrast to the world. It does not permit of being applied, stuck on, and fitted in."<sup>50</sup> The theological justifications his professors gave for the German emperor's war policy and the later heresies of the *Deutsche Christen* and of German *völkisch* religion were for Barth species of the same genus. That genus was a breach of the First Commandment. Against these aberrations, Barth's admonitions in 1919 about idolatry and treating cultural and political systems as ultimate—and his 1933 lecture, "The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom"<sup>51</sup>—remained central to his theological vision. Along these lines, in a remarkable sermon on Jesus as a Jew, preached on the second Sunday of Advent 1933, Barth repeatedly critiqued the *Deutsche Christen* word *Volk* and the religious ideology they had built up around it:

The fact that God's word exists in the church is founded neither on the spiritual life of man nor is it a cultural accomplishment, nor does it belong to the ways and nature of a *Volk* or of a race. . . . It is rather a mystery with which our very existence is coated from the outside in and not from the inside out.<sup>52</sup>

A few years later (1938), Barth contended that the issue facing the Confessing Church is understanding and practicing anew what it means that "God stands above all gods," and to accept that this theological decision is also a political decision "against a state which as a totalitarian

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49. Karl Barth, "The Righteousness of God [1916]" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 18.

50. Karl Barth, "The Christian's Place in Society [1919]" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 277.

51. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 224.

52. *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. Dean G. Stroud (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), 67.

state cannot recognize any task, proclamation, and order other than its own, nor acknowledge any other God than itself."<sup>53</sup>

From a theology forged from the moral wreckage of World War I, Barth in 1935—now professor of theology at Bonn and therefore a state employee—refused to begin his lectures with *Heil, Hitler* and would not “swear an unconditioned oath of allegiance to the Führer.”<sup>54</sup> For this act of resistance he lost his university position and was forced to return to Switzerland in the early summer of 1935.

### *Bonhoeffer and World War I*

Though vigorously committed to the work of the Confessing Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not present at Barmen in May 1934. His chief contribution during this period was assisting the Anglican bishop and president of the ecumenical movement, George Bell, in drafting an Ascension Day letter, titled “A Message Regarding the German Evangelical Church to the Representatives of the Churches on the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work from the Bishop of Chichester.”<sup>55</sup> This pastoral letter was sent on May 10, 1934, just days before the gathering at Barmen, but its ostensible purpose was to indicate that one item on the agenda for an August ecumenical meeting in Denmark was the situation in the German Evangelical Church.

In the letter, Bishop Bell enumerated the concerns of many member churches about the unprecedented assumption and use of autocratic power by the German *Reichsbischof* and the actions taken against clergy “on account of their loyalty to the fundamental principles of Christian truth.”<sup>56</sup> Bell also noted concerns of member churches about the *Reichskirche’s* “introduction of racial distinctions in the universal fellowship of the Christian Church.”<sup>57</sup> Bishop Bell had solicited Bonhoeffer’s opinion on an earlier draft of the letter, to which Bonhoeffer had replied on May 3.

Bonhoeffer had offered frank advice on the draft. He indicated that Bell’s letter must directly address the “real issue”: clergy were being coerced by the *Reichskirche* “on account of their loyalty to what *is* the true

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53. “1928-1938,” in *Karl Barth: How I Changed My Mind*, introduction and epilogue by John D. Godsey (Richmond, Va: John Knox, 1966), 46-47.

54. “1928-1938,” in *Karl Barth: How I Changed My Mind*, 47. See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 255-263 for a detailed account.

55. The text of the letter is found in *DBWE*, Volume 13: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, London 1933-35 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 144-146. For the setting, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 369-372.

56. *DBW* 13:144-145.

57. *DBW* 13:145. This statement is in reference to the notorious “Aryan Paragraph,” which forbade anyone of Jewish ancestry to hold church office.



Gospel—namely their opposition against the *racial and political element as constituent for the Church of Christ*.<sup>58</sup> In a further editorial expansion, Bonhoeffer asked Bell to add the phrase “and political principles” to Bell’s “the introduction of racial distinctions.” “It is always the same error,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “the swastika in the Church seal! Many sources of revelation besides and except Christ. Other constitutive norms for the Church than Christ himself.”<sup>59</sup> Like Barth with whom he was in frequent contact, and also like the first article of the Barmen Declaration, Bonhoeffer urged Bishop Bell to make clear that the christological center of the church’s identity was non-negotiable. Both Bonhoeffer and Bell apparently intended the Ascension Letter to be a prelude to Barmen; thus the timing of the letter was critical.

While the Barmen Declaration vindicated Bonhoeffer’s views and briefly united the Confessing Church, the aftermath left him isolated from many of the participants in that Synod. This was, as Bonhoeffer’s biographer Eberhard Bethge notes, because of his single-minded focus on the Sermon on the Mount as the way to practice the confessional truths of Barmen.<sup>60</sup> For Bonhoeffer, it was necessary to declare the church’s absolute loyalty to only one Lord; but it was then equally necessary to live out Christ’s Lordship in concrete acts of nonviolent resistance based on Jesus’ teachings. This second point was apparently too much to ask of many of Barmen’s signatories.

Bonhoeffer’s distinctive insistence on the Sermon on the Mount as the central biblical text for guiding the concrete practice of the Barmen Confession had roots that predate the *Kirchenkampf*. Once the *Reichsbischof* and the *Deutsche Christen* controlled the ordination process and seminary instruction, the Confessing Church started to train its own pastors clandestinely. That Bonhoeffer directed an illegal underground seminary at Finkenwalde is widely known—it was from this experience that he wrote his most renowned book, *Nachfolge* (1937; English translation: *The Cost of Discipleship*), which included his extensive reflections on the Sermon on the Mount. But even before this time the Sermon on the Mount had become vital to Bonhoeffer’s thought.

On February 22, 1932, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on the Day of National Mourning, in remembrance of the dead of the Great War. “What is the meaning of the 1914-1918 event, what is the meaning of the millions

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58. DBW 13:140. Italics in the original text.

59. DBW 13:140.

60. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 372.

of dead German men for me, for us, today?" he asked.<sup>61</sup> The world is in revolt against the spirit of Christ, Bonhoeffer argued, "and the great power of rebellion is called—war!"<sup>62</sup> He then held up the kind of confusion World War I had created among many former Christians, who had then subsequently lost faith because of the tragedy of the war. We cannot blithely blame those who lost faith, said Bonhoeffer, because "we who were pulled into this event of 1914-1918 . . . are partially to blame" for their loss of faith.<sup>63</sup> In the face of this loss we are now called to be faithful. But being faithful means embracing "the Word of Christ, with his sermon about the kingdom of peace."<sup>64</sup> What does the Day of Remembrance mean? Principally Bonhoeffer maintained it must be heard as a divine call to live the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, instead of remembering the dead of World War 1 by glorifying war and sacrifice, Remembrance Day was an opportunity for Christians to take Jesus' nonviolent ethic seriously.

In the fall of that same year (1932) Bonhoeffer spoke to students on the topic "Christ and Peace." What Christ has said on peace is "binding," Bonhoeffer insisted.<sup>65</sup> The message of the Sermon on the Mount is unambiguous, and the thrust of Bonhoeffer's argument was not that the New Testament gives Christians a political program to impose, but a summons to be obedient to the commandment to love God and neighbor.<sup>66</sup> He vigorously articulated themes that reappear five years later in the *The Cost of Discipleship*, including his well-known image of "cheap grace." Bonhoeffer starkly avowed that God's command "you shall not kill" and Jesus' command to "love your enemies" are not optional for Christians. Following Jesus means conforming oneself to these commands. Except for what Bonhoeffer calls Good Samaritan activity, "every form of war service . . . and every preparation for war, is forbidden for the Christian faith." "What is sin for an individual," he declared, "is never virtue for an entire people or nation."<sup>67</sup> It is crucial to remember that Bonhoeffer is a Lutheran pastor-theologian, and that his tradition's Augsburg Confession (1530), following 1,500 years of Just War thought,

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61. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cross of Christ and Remembrance of the Dead," in *A Testament to Freedom: the Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, rev.ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 201.

62. "Remembrance," 202.

63. *Ibid.*, 203.

64. *Ibid.*

65. "Christ and Peace," in *Testament to Freedom*, 93.

66. *Ibid.*, 94.

67. *Ibid.*, 95.

allowed Christians to “engage in just wars [and] serve as soldiers” (Article XVI).<sup>68</sup>

In this lecture Bonhoeffer voiced his critique of war in a rapidly militarizing Germany, where Hitler’s *völkisch* war theology, with its violent rhetoric and promises of destruction for Germany’s enemies, had become a plausible balm for the painful memories of the Great War. Less than a year before Bonhoeffer’s lecture, National Socialist students at the University of Halle had effectively forced pastor and theologian Günther Dehn out of a faculty position for having articulated similar views.<sup>69</sup>

Bonhoeffer grounded his pacifism, so culturally and ecclesially incongruous in that setting,<sup>70</sup> on the same theological foundation from which Karl Barth spoke: the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ, and not an external cultural, philosophical, or national framework. But Bonhoeffer came to that framework by a different trauma than Barth’s. Bonhoeffer was approximately 10 years old when his older brothers Karl-Friedrich and Walter were called up for military service in 1917.<sup>71</sup> Bethge notes that Bonhoeffer’s parents might have used their status and connections to place their sons out of harm’s way; but Karl-Friedrich and Walter insisted on joining the infantry. On April 23, 1918, Walter was mortally wounded. A few hours before he died, he dictated a letter that would contain his last words to his family “I think of you with longing, my dears, every minute of the long days and nights. From so far away, your Walter.”<sup>72</sup> Grief incapacitated Bonhoeffer’s mother for months and gripped the Bonhoeffer household. It is significant that Bonhoeffer’s mother gave him Walter’s Bible, which he used throughout his life.<sup>73</sup>

When Bonhoeffer came to the United States in 1930 for a year of study at Union Theological Seminary, he gave a lecture on the war from his German perspective. In nascent English he described for his American audience the endless “stream of tears” the war brought to a thousand German families each day.<sup>74</sup> He mentioned the death of Walter and the wounding of Karl-Friedrich, and recalled the specific time when people were apprised of the deaths of thousands of 17- and 18-year-olds killed in

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68. *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, Vol. II: *Reformation Era*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 67.

69. Scholder, *Churches*, 1:171-177.

70. Christian pacifism was anathema to the *Deutsche Christen*. See Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), 316-318.

71. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 27.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, 28.

74. “Lecture on ‘War,’” in *DBWE*, Volume 10: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 412.

a single battle—"Germany was made a house of mourning."<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer further described post-war conditions in Germany, including hunger and suicides, but gratefully recalled that American Quakers were the first to bring aid to German children.<sup>76</sup> Near the end of his lecture Bonhoeffer reflected theologically: "it seems to me one of the greatest tasks of our church [is] to strengthen the work of peace in every country and in the whole world. It must never more happen, that a Christian people fights against a Christian people. . . ."<sup>77</sup> Whether he gave this lecture before or after he had met the French pacifist Jean Lasserre is unclear. But Lasserre and Bonhoeffer became friends, and mutually influenced each other's thought. It was Lasserre who engaged Bonhoeffer on the meaning of Jesus' peace ethic, and, according to Bethge, prompted Bonhoeffer to think in ways that would lead to his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, Bonhoeffer's trauma from the Great War differed from Barth's. The Swiss theologian experienced World War I as obliterating his moral and intellectual landmarks, leaving him trying to pastor a church from within a theological no-man's land. But the German theologian vividly and personally recalled the actual misery World War I brought to his and countless German families: he remembered the death, anguish, and the end of the family as he had known it. Walter's Bible was doubtless a daily token of loss.

Nonetheless, both Barth and Bonhoeffer faced the rise of Nazism from their experience of the war, and had come to many of the same theological conclusions. Both theologians saw the Nazified *Reichskirche*, the beliefs of the National Socialist Party, the person of Hitler himself, and many Christians' veneration of this—or their pietistic indifference to it—as expressions of idolatry, disobedience, and a capitulation of the Gospel to an alien worldview. Of particular note is that Bonhoeffer saw war and racism as themselves contrary to the substance of the Christian faith. In his 1933 statement "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer contended that the church must question the legitimacy of the state's actions, that the church had an "unconditional obligation to the victims of any societal order," and that it might even "seize the wheel" of a state that failed to perform its God-given task.<sup>79</sup> In a 1967 letter to Bethge, regarding the publication of the first edition of his biography of Bonhoeffer, Barth said of his reading of the book, "especially new to me was the fact that in

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75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 414.

77. *Ibid.*, 417.

78. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 153.

79. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *DBWE*, Volume 12: *Berlin 1932-1933* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 362.

1933 and the years following, Bonhoeffer was the first and almost the only one to face and tackle the Jewish question so centrally and energetically." The Swiss theologian further confessed as a personal fault that he did not make this a decisive issue in articles 1 and 2 of the Barmen Declaration.<sup>80</sup>

At the center of Bonhoeffer's concern for victims, even if that concern must take the shape of derailing the state, was his conviction about the centrality of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. He eloquently expressed this conviction in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Christ has taken on this *human form*. He became a human being like us. In his humanity and lowliness we recognize our own form. He became like human beings, so that we would be like him. In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people, attacks Christ. . . .<sup>81</sup>

Ultimately, for Bonhoeffer war and racism were an assault both on human dignity revealed and secured in the Incarnation and on the Incarnate One himself. In this respect Bonhoeffer used the heart of Luther's theology to critique traditional Lutheran social ethics, a topic worthy of much deeper analysis in its own right. Clearly, the trajectory of Bonhoeffer's thought moved from Walter's death to engagement with the Sermon on the Mount, to the Confessing Church, and finally to the work which led to Bonhoeffer's death: his involvement in the failed plot to end a monstrous state.<sup>82</sup>

## CONCLUSION: FOR OUR TIME

Christian theology faces the present and future by entering into a conversation with its own past. The brilliant historian of Christian doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006) observed that whether in the arts, philosophy, science, or theology, we do not move forward creatively by, as it were, doing a "standing broad jump, which begins at the line of where we are now." Rather, Pelikan argued that progress forward needs to be more like "a running broad jump through where we have been to

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80. Karl Barth: *Letters, 1961-1968*, 250.

81. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, in *DBWE*, Volume 4: *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 302. Analogously in Barth's 1919 address, "The Christian's Place in Society" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Barth states that the Christian community is "a building open on every side, for Christ died for all—even the folk outside" (274).

82. The many questions surrounding Bonhoeffer's decision to become involved in the plot against Hitler are beyond the purview of this paper. For that issue, as always, Bethge is the most reliable biographical guide. But see Mark Theissen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, and Daniel P. Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2013) for a critique of the consensus.

where we go next.” And we do this by “including the dead in the circle of discourse.”<sup>83</sup> My analysis of the *Deutsche Christen* movement, the Barmen Declaration, Barth, and Bonhoeffer is not an exercise of antiquarian interest. My main concern is with the present moment. As a Christian theologian living and working primarily in the context of the early twenty-first-century United States, I have sought the guidance from the Christian tradition to help me face squarely the present situation. And among the dead worth listening to I can think of none better than Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The present situation is nothing short of a moral and theological catastrophe. According to the Pew Research Center, in the 2016 presidential election 58 percent of Protestants, 60 percent of white Catholics, and 81 percent of Evangelicals voted for a candidate whose subsequent victory was greeted with shouts of “Hail, Trump!” by White Nationalists and Neo-Nazis—the same groups this candidate refused to unequivocally denounce during the campaign.<sup>84</sup> With lenses borrowed from Barth and Bonhoeffer, what I see is, first, American Christianity’s dangerously fatal attraction to forms of authoritarian absolutism; and second, the pervasive and perverse influence of America’s own *völkisch* myths on the churches.

In his insightful book *Myths America Lives By*, Richard T. Hughes identified five American myths, three of which are instructively analogous to German *völkisch* myths from the 1920s and 30s: the myth of the chosen nation; the myth of the Christian nation; and the myth of the innocent nation.<sup>85</sup> Whether early twentieth-century German or early twenty-first-century American, *völkisch* myths always have scapegoats, always offer meta-explanations for the pain or dislocation of the present, and always exploit religious dimensions of a culture. This is because *völkisch* myths are in reality a totalizing discourse, meaning they offer to explain the whole in exchange for ultimate loyalty. Barth and Bonhoeffer, and certainly the Barmen Declaration, saw through this kind of discourse in the 1930s, and would insist that the only way for Christian churches to avoid, critique, and denounce the intoxicating song of nationalist mythologies is for the churches to get their own story straight. But they would also say this is maddeningly difficult when the churches’ story has

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83. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 65 and 81.

84. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>; for a report on the use of Nazi-era slogans following Trump’s presidential victory, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/us/alt-right-salutes-donald-trump.html>.

85. Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

become so accommodated to these nationalist mythologies that even Christians cannot tell the difference.

In relation to this very problem, Günther Dehn, the Lutheran theologian and Confessing Church pastor mentioned earlier, made a prophetic statement in 1931. Dehn had been the target of a smear campaign by right-wing, nationalist students and faculty at the University of Halle, because of his pacifist commitments and especially because he refused to equate death in battle for Germany as having any connection with sacrificial death in Christian theology.<sup>86</sup> Dehn wrote:

It could be that the church of today stands on the threshold of a most difficult struggle with modern nationalism, in which her very existence will be endangered. . . . Distorted idealism is demonic. It is simply not true that this fanatical love of fatherland, which in my view is colored by religion but actually disassociated from God, really helps the fatherland. On the contrary, it will lead the fatherland to destruction.<sup>87</sup>

Patriotism—the proper love of one’s *patria*—can so swiftly be distorted into nationalism: a twisted, demonic version of itself. Two years before Barmen, Dehn, influenced by Barth, named this danger for the church. Complicity in nationalism threatens Christian churches with loss of their distinctive identity. It is a threat to their soul.

Is it perhaps time for a new Confessing Church movement? I ask this question but am cautious, for two reasons. First, later in life Barth hated the idea of Barmen being used like “an old flag” brought out and waved every five years or so, but never practiced.”<sup>88</sup> Barth, the Barmen Declaration, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have all at times been treated by conservatives as patrons of various reactionary, even oppressive, causes.<sup>89</sup> Second, I am cautious because besides the difficulty of knowing who would call such a synod in the fractured landscape of American Christianity, American nationalist myths are so deeply embedded in church life that it is hard to imagine church leaders taking inordinate risks. It is worth recalling that in 1936 Martin Niemöller warned that the real problem then was not between the Confessing Church and the *Deutsche*

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86. See Scholder, *Churches*, 1:171-1777; and Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 144.

87. Quoted in Eriksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 144, who translates the quote from Dehn’s *Kirche und Völkerversöhnung: Dokumente zum Halleschen Universitätskonflikt* (1931).

88. *Karl Barth: Letters, 1961-1968*, 150.

89. See, for example, Eric Metaxas’s biography of Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer scholar Clifford Green titled his review of Metaxas’s book “Hijacking Bonhoeffer.” See: <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/hijacking-bonhoeffer>. Several authors of a 1995 collection of essays titled *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans) refer to Barmen in support of various conservative agendas.

*Christen*, but between the Confessing Church and the “middle” — churches and pastors who, in historian Victoria Barnett’s words, chose the “cautious course that endangered neither them personally nor their church institutionally.”<sup>90</sup>

All caution aside, I come back to the fundamental question that motivated Bonhoeffer and Barth: whether in life or in death, how will the church speak from its own distinctive center, even at cost to itself? Are American churches morally and theologically up to the task of unmasking as idolatry a resurgent nationalist myth that victimizes immigrants, women, differently gendered persons, Muslims, the other, the poor, and even the good creation? In spite of all relevant objections to a new Confessing Church movement, there stands the stark alternative—to let churches, in the words of Barth, “fall into the abyss,”<sup>91</sup> where what passes for “Christianity” will be an accommodating and dehumanizing nationalism cloaked in the threadbare garb of America’s own *völkisch* myths and default-setting of individualistic pietism.

If we can learn anything from the path that led from the Great War to the Confessing Church, it is this: Beware! We become like the stories we tell ourselves.

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90. Barnett, *Soul of the People*, 50.

91. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, as referenced by Clifford Green in his edited volume, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 178-179.