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Were the Nazis a Völkisch Party?

Paganism, Christianity and the First Nazi Christmas

Samuel Koehne

The consideration of movements and sub-cultures within particular societies has always formed an integral part of intellectual history. In studies of Nazism and religion in recent years, there has been a trend towards arguing a deliberate disjunction or separation of the Nazi Party from the longer German anti-Semitic *völkisch* movement (dating from the nineteenth century) from which Nazism itself arose—a perspective that is challenged in this essay. While there are excellent studies on the heterogeneous nature of Christian response to the Nazis, there has not been a comparable approach in examining how the Nazis viewed religion.¹ Yet this is certainly needed, as one of the consistent features of the *völkisch* movement was its diversity. Roger Griffin argued a “striking feature of the sub-culture...was just how prolific and variegated it was” such that “the only denominator common to all was the myth of national rebirth.”² It contained a colourful, varied and often bewildering range of religious beliefs.

The problem is that historians have tended to argue that the leaders of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*,

¹ For the “particularist” or “heterogenous” nature of Protestant experience, see Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001); Kyle Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). My great thanks to Professor John Conway for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful suggestions.

² Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), 86–90, here 87–88. As he noted, the term *völkisch* generally meant “integral and racist nationalism.” See also George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 3–9; George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 285–88.

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NSDAP) adhered either to paganism or to an “Aryanised” Christian faith. Certainly Uwe Puschner recorded that two major “religious concepts and camps” existed in the völkisch movement from around 1900, one advocating an “Aryanised” German-Christianity and the other a “revival of the pre-Christian religion of the ancient Germans.” Yet Puschner also argued that “völkisch schemes of religion” formed a spectrum, from attempts “to germanise Christianity up to the decisive rejection of Christianity and the constitution of new Germanic religions.” This meant “there were efforts to attempt to account for Christian religious convictions in the Germanic world of faith and fuse Christianity with (constructed) Germanic religious ideas, in which Jesus Christ was approximately equated with Baldur or Odin.”³ These latter points indicate the capacity to view paganism and Christianity as part of the one continuum.

I argue that we can observe the same process in the early Nazi Party, although there has been a lack of consideration of such heterogeneity of religious response. Part of the reason for this is the growing prevalence of an approach towards understanding the Nazi Party as adhering to a particular form of Christian faith, a “positive Christianity” that amounted to an “Aryanised” form of faith.⁴ The Nazis certainly had a stated support for “a positive Christianity” in Point 24 of their Program (proclaimed February 24, 1920), after noting that they would support religion “so long as it does not offend the ethical or moral feelings of the Germanic race.”⁵

Much debate in recent years has revolved around the question of whether “positive Christianity” was principally included for political ends, or was intended to

³ Uwe Puschner, “Weltanschauung und Religion, Religion und Weltanschauung. Ideologie und Formen völkischer Religion,” *Zeitenblicke* 5 (2006): 1-27, here 11. On “Christ [transformed] into the Germanic sun god” see Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 72.

⁴ See Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14-15.

⁵ See the program published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* (VB) 45 (15 May 1920).

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indicate the Nazis were a Christian party, demarcating them from other völkisch groups.⁶

In 2003, two prominent articles appeared on this very topic in this journal. The first, by Richard Steigmann-Gall, suggested that the time was ripe for a reassessment of the field. The present article answers this call for such a “rethinking,” and in fact determines some of the “exact intellectual antecedents” for early (and prominent) Nazi views on religion.⁷

Steigmann-Gall asked “How Anti-Christian were the ‘Pagans?’” in the Nazi Party, and his article was followed shortly thereafter by one from Derek Hastings, who (in a similar vein) addressed assumptions of anti-Catholicism amongst the Nazis.⁸ Steigmann-Gall ultimately posited a dichotomy in religious terms. He argued “the contested nature of religious meaning in the [Nazi] movement” but also that the battle-lines were drawn between neo-pagans and those advocating an “Aryan” Christianity, referring to these respective groups as “paganists” and “positive Christians.”⁹ He agreed that the neo-pagans were a part of the Nazi Party but he questioned the extent to which

⁶ The largest body of critique is provided in the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007). More generally on national-religious trends, see George S. Williamson, “A Religious Sonderweg? Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular in the Historiography of Modern Germany,” *Church History* 75 (2006): 139–56; *Zerstrittene “Volksgemeinschaft”: Glaube, Konfession und Religion im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Manfred Gailus and Armin Nolzen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Wolfgang Altgeld, *Katholizismus, Protestantismus, Judentum: Über religiös begründete Gegensätze und nationalreligiöse Ideen in der Geschichte des deutschen Nationalismus* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1992); Manfred Gailus and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten: Konturen, Entwicklungslinien und Umbrüche eines Weltbildes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

⁷ Richard Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion: How Anti-Christian Were the ‘Pagans?’,” *Central European History* 36 (2003): 75–105, here 104. Searching for the intellectual roots of Nazism has become an increasingly important part of the literature in recent years: Derek Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism: Religious Identity and National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Émigrés and the Making of National Socialism, 1917–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ For a summary of previous literature: *Ibid.*, 75–80; Derek Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement? Religion, Race and Culture in Munich, 1919–1923,” *Central European History* 36 (2003): 383–87.

⁹ Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 12; on the dichotomy between “paganists” and “positive Christians” see for example 86–87, 261–63. Steigmann-Gall used the term “paganists” because he argued that paganism was not a “coherent religious system” (xv). The notion of “positive Christianity” as a “religious system” also lacks coherence: Samuel Koehne, “Reassessing *The Holy Reich*: Leading Nazis’ Views on Confession, Community and ‘Jewish’ Materialism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (2013): 423–45.

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they were anti-Christian.¹⁰ As I establish in this paper, the notion of a religious dichotomy does not capture the breadth of belief in the early Nazi Party.

Steigmann-Gall also believed that the Nazi Party in the early years (1919-1923) had “little need to tone down its message for the sake of public relations” and that “there was nothing to be lost in a frank expression of the movement’s ideology” in this period.¹¹ Despite this, his work was mostly limited to a consideration of the 1930s.¹² Given the dearth of recent analysis, Derek Hastings specifically set out to deal with the question of religion in the early period of the Nazi movement. He has proposed that there was a “distinct Catholic-völkisch orientation” in the early years, and that the Nazis opposed “political Catholicism” but not “religious Catholicism.”

Hastings has certainly provided a great deal of evidence demonstrating that there were Catholics who believed Nazism and Catholicism were entirely compatible, and that some of those who propagandized for the party in the early years were Catholic clergy.¹³ But he also argued that the Nazis explicitly sought to dissociate themselves from “Germanic racial and religious ideas,” specifically from two major völkisch figures, Theodor Fritsch and Artur Dinter.¹⁴ This perspective has led to the present query as to whether the early NSDAP should still be seen as a völkisch party.

I argue it is clear that the Nazis were still a part of the völkisch movement, including its diverse religious trends, and that there is an urgent need in the

¹⁰ Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion” cf. Irving Hexham, “Inventing ‘Paganists’: A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall’s *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007): 59-78.

¹¹ Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 13-14.

¹² Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 8. Bergen argues that “Steigmann-Gall’s analysis rarely extends past 1937”: Doris L. Bergen, “Nazism and Christianity: Partners and Rivals? A Response to Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007): 31.

¹³ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, see also Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008). Hastings incidentally demonstrates that some of those who ardently opposed the Nazis were also Catholic clergy.

¹⁴ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 73, 104-6.

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historiography to reconnect the Nazi Party to the milieu from which it arose.¹⁵ Major histories of the Nazis consistently note that they came from a broader völkisch sub-culture, and historians like Richard Evans have examined the role played by existing trends of anti-Semitism, eugenics and Social Darwinism.¹⁶ These are all important factors. The aspect of race and an extreme racialised anti-Semitism were certainly prominent in the Nazis’ views on religion. Yet I believe that we require a much deeper analysis of the intellectual roots of National Socialism when it comes to religious beliefs. Concepts in the early party often came from earlier völkisch religious trends, so much so that there has been (at times) an unfortunate misrepresentation of evidence in recent work. I argue further that it appears “positive Christianity” meant very little in the Nazi Party at the very time that it was proclaimed as a part of their Program.

My arguments derive from two streams of inquiry: how did leading members express their views on religion in the months following the declaration of support for “positive Christianity” and how did the Nazis depict their public celebrations of religious festivals in the early years? These are essential but unanswered questions.¹⁷ In particular, I am examining the views of those Nazis who were most prominent at the 24 February gathering of the German Workers’ Party (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or DAP, later the NSDAP), when the program was promulgated. In terms of religious festivals, I have

¹⁵ In this regard, I believe that Kurlander and I are pursuing similar ends, though we differ in our interpretations: Eric Kurlander, “Hitler’s Monsters: The Occult Roots of Nazism and the Emergence of the Nazi ‘Supernatural Imaginary,’” *German History* 30 (2012): 528–49.

¹⁶ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin, 2004), 22–51, 159–60; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998), 49–52, 76–89; Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Nazism, 1919–1945: A Documentary Reader*, 3 vols (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1983), vol. 1, 1–10.

¹⁷ The celebrations of solstice and Christmas in the early years have not been thoroughly examined, though Gajek and Perry have completed excellent studies on the Nazi views of Christmas (particularly after 1933): Esther Gajek, “Christmas Under the Third Reich,” *Anthropology Today* 6 (1990): 3–9; Richard Faber and Esther Gajek, *Politische Weihnacht in Antike und Moderne: Zur ideologischen Durchdringung des Fests der Feste* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997); Joe Perry, “Nazifying Christmas: Political Culture and Popular Celebration in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 38 (2005): 572–605; Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 189–238.

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focused most on the first Nazi Christmas (celebrated for solstice in 1920) while also considering Christmas celebrations for 1921 and 1922 (though in less detail). There was no Christmas celebration in 1923, owing to the failed Munich Putsch.

The evidence shows that despite nominally advocating “positive Christianity” neither paganism nor the esoteric were closed out of the NSDAP in its foundational years, and that a false dichotomy is established if we argue a fundamental division between paganism and Christianity either in the völkisch movement or the Nazi Party in this period. This paper considers these early years for three specific reasons. First, there is the issue that “the earliest years of the Nazi movement in Munich have received startlingly little direct treatment.”¹⁸ Secondly, this period (1920-1923) was a distinct era in the life of the Nazi Party, an era during which it moved from a small and obscure organisation, which Hitler referred to as a “tea club” engaged in “parish-pump politics,” to a revolutionary movement.¹⁹ Thirdly, this was also a period during which the Nazis were closely connected to their roots in the völkisch movement, and during which they were more open about their concepts and their ideology. This means that the closer in time we are to the promulgation of the Program, the more likely we are to gain insight into the “untempered” views of the Nazis.²⁰

That said, there was a clear change by 1923 and a large propaganda effort was made to portray the party as Christian. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that the Nazis’ official newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (VB), moved from solely publishing

¹⁸ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 5.

¹⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936), 241, 378. These years are much debated, see: Georg Franz, “Munich: Birthplace and Center of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party,” *The Journal of Modern History* 29 (1957): 319-34; Dietrich Orlow, “The Organisational History and Structure of the NSDAP, 1919–1923,” *The Journal of Modern History* 37 (1965): 208-26; Reginald H. Phelps, “Before Hitler Came: Thule Society and Germanen Orden,” *The Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963): 245-61.

²⁰ A point strongly argued by Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 14.

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information on entertainment (like theatre schedules and sport) to publishing full lists of the church service times for Munich (Catholic, Old Catholic and Protestant).²¹

The Völkisch World of Thought²²

The Nazis drew on a völkisch literature that was eclectic, though generally adhering to racism and anti-Semitism. Those involved sought a religious faith that was “appropriate” for Germans or “racially specific,” and George Williamson characterised the desire for “the revival of a specifically ‘Germanic’ religiosity” as a common drive across many völkisch groups.²³ In order to understand the question of continuity, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to some of the major authors in this movement and their views on religion.

One of the most prominent writers was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was a personal hero of Hitler’s (they met in September 1923).²⁴ In his work *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) Chamberlain described the “religious instincts of race.” In his view, these were “in-born religious tendencies,” though he also used the term “racial soul.”²⁵ He depicted “Aryans” as possessing instincts that led them to spiritual searching,

²¹ VB-80 (29/30 April 1923); Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 403.

²² This summary is not intended to be definitive. *Völkisch* thought has its own extensive literature: Hubert Cancik and Uwe Puschner, *Antisemitismus, Paganismus, völkische Religion* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2004); Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich: Sprache–Rasse–Religion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001); Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus H. Ulbricht, eds., *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung”, 1871–1918*, (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1996); Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Uwe Puschner and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Beziehungs- und Konfliktgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012). For a useful survey, see Peter Staudenmaier, “Occultism, Race and Politics in German-Speaking Europe, 1880–1940: A Survey of the Historical Literature,” *European History Quarterly* 39 (2009): 47–70.

²³ Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 286; Stefanie v Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht, *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne: Entwürfe “arteigener” Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

²⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*, 151, 660n.116.

²⁵ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century: A Translation from the German by John Lees*, 2 vols (London: J. Lane, 1911), vol. 2, 108–12. He described racially delineated “tendencies of mind” as “the racial soul” (193). See also Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

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while Semites (and particularly “the Jews”) were lacking in religious instinct because they were materialists.²⁶ This led Chamberlain to argue that Christianity blended “alien elements” and was engaged in a kind of racial struggle: “Reduced to its simplest expression, this strife was a struggle for mastery between Indo-European and Jewish religious instincts.”²⁷ He went so far as to argue that a kind of spiritual “arrest of development” had occurred in “the Jews,” though all “branches of the Semitic stem” were “always astonishingly poor in religious instinct.”²⁸

Another very influential writer was the notorious anti-Semite Theodor Fritsch, who argued a racially derived Marcionite view that attacked the “false god” Yahweh.²⁹ In *The False God* (first published 1911) Fritsch argued the biblical prophets were the “anti-Semitic writings of antiquity,” relying on a notion that the Israelites and the Jews were “two racially different peoples.”³⁰ Such themes were taken up by Artur Dinter, a successful völkisch novelist whose best-selling work *Sin against the Blood* was consistently promoted in the VB.³¹

²⁶ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century: A Translation from the German by John Lees*, 2 vols (London: J. Lane, 1911), vol. 1, 120-21, 214-17, 225, 234. See the lengthy discussion of Jews as “materialists” possessing a “minimum of religion” and “poverty of [religious] imagination” (411-23).

²⁷ Ibid., 2, 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 1, 213-14, with adjustments.

²⁹ Evans notes Chamberlain’s undeniable influence but argues that “durable popular anti-Semitic propagandists” like Fritsch had a greater impact on the party rank-and-file: Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 33-34, 217-18.

³⁰ Theodor Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott: Beweismaterial gegen Jahwe*, 9th edn. (Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, 1921), 25. See also Achim Detmers, “Die Interpretation der Israel-Lehre Marcions im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung*, ed. Gerhard May, Katharina Greschat, and Martin Meiser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 275-77. On first publication (as *Beweismaterial gegen Jahwe*): Uwe Puschner, “Völkische Geschichtsschreibung: Themen, Autoren und Wirkungen völkischer Geschichtsideologie,” in *Geschichte für Leser: Populäre Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig and Erhard Schütz (Munich: Franz Steiner, 2005), 290.

³¹ *Sin against the Blood* sold 235,000 copies by 1927, making it Dinter’s most popular book: Donald R. Tracey, “The Development of the National Socialist Party in Thuringia, 1924-30,” *Central European History* 8 (1975): 26-39, esp. 26, 38.

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Dinter lauded Chamberlain, and argued “*Race is everything!*” as the key not only to history but the “*personality of the individual person.*” When it came to religion, Dinter continued his racial determinism: “*I possess my religion only through my race, because it is only my race that makes my religion possible for me...Race and religion are one!*” He argued (relying on Fritsch) that the Israelites were not Jewish, and that the Prophets were the voice of a subjected race “against foreign Jewish oppressors.”³² All of these writers supported the notion that Jesus was an Aryan.³³

But there were even stranger currents of thought, including neo-paganism. Conveniently in November 1920 the editors of the VB (which was not yet the Nazi paper) asked Hugo Christoph Heinrich Meyer to provide a “sure guide through the difficult field of German Faith writings.”³⁴ Meyer wrote an extensive article that considered those authors and works he believed were most relevant in the search for a “pure German faith.” Two figures that featured prominently were Dr Ernst Hunkel, and Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen.

Hunkel had been prominent even before World War I as an advocate of “Germanic” faith. He “espoused racial ideas and connected them with Nordic beliefs of a mystical nature,” and even established a Germanic commune, the “Freeland Settlement Donnershag.”³⁵ Meyer was positive in his review of several of Hunkel’s books, including

³² Artur Dinter, *Die Sünde wider das Blut: Ein Zeitroman*, 10th edn. (Leipzig: Matthes und Thost, 1920), 430–31, 160–73. His emphases.

³³ Ibid., 178. For Dinter this had the consequence that Christianity was a racially specific religion. See also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 26–66.

³⁴ “Deutschgläubiges Schrifttum,” VB-102 (25 November 1920). Of recent works, see Karla O. Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁵ Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 112, 120–21; *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung”, 1871–1918*, 265–67. Donnershag was established on 13 July 1919, on a basis of “race,” “German Faith” and “German law”: Alfons Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum* (Berlin: Germania, 1923), 96–99.

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some that advocated new “Germanic” rituals and ceremonies in place of existing religious forms.

Meyer mentioned Wolzogen for the work he had published in 1919 as a *Guide to German Faith*. This book was fully intended to promote Germanic faith notions and rituals to a broader audience. In Meyer’s view it acted as a German Faith “confession,” simultaneously noting that Wolzogen demanded that people leave the church.³⁶ In a further and far more critical article, Meyer dealt with Guido von List (Guido List) and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (Adolf Lanz). These were two of the most prominent figures in religious terms, though they have received scant attention from either Steigmann-Gall or Hastings.³⁷

Writers for the VB and Nazi reports certainly relied on List’s notions of the “Armanen,” a supposedly ancient Aryan “priesthood of the sun or the sun-Wotan.”³⁸ List believed that the Armanen were “priest-kings” and a high caste of the ancient priesthood of Wotan (the German term for Odin).³⁹ For List, the sources to rediscover the faith of the Aryan “religion of light” (*Lichtreligion*) were “myths, fairy-tales, sagas, opinion and custom, as well as our Germanic Bible, the *Edda*,” referring to the Norse

³⁶ VB-102 (25 November 1920); Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben: Versuch einer gemeinverständlichen Darstellung der wesentlichen Gesichtspunkte der deutschreligiösen Gemeinden und Verbände* (Oranienburg-Eden: Verlag Jungborn, 1919).

³⁷ “J. Lanz von Liebenfels,” VB-108 (16 December 1920). There are two references in Hastings, and none in Steigmann-Gall: Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 38, 41. Meyer’s main objection was that (in his view) Liebenfels “is far more an Orientalist than a Germanist” and that “Guido von List stands closer to the Kabbalah than to the *Edda*.” Meyer was firmly in favour of the *Edda*. This provides some contemporary evidence of concerns about “cosmopolitan and orientalist elements” in völkisch thought: Kurlander, “Hitler’s Monsters,” 538–39; Felix Wiedemann, “The North, the Desert, and the Near East: Ludwig Ferdinand Claß and the Racial Cartography of the Near East,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12 (2012): 326–43.

³⁸ Guido List, *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen (Ario-Germanische Hieroglyphik)*, (Vienna: Verlag der Guido-von-List-Gesellschaft, 1910), 45, 116–17. See also Guido List, *Die Armanenschaft der Ario-Germanen*, 2 vols (Vienna: Verlag der Guido-von-List-Gesellschaft, 1908), vol. 1, 17–20.

³⁹ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 56–65.

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poems.⁴⁰ He had a bewildering variety of other methods: use of place-names, runes, and heraldry (supposedly based on “the magical runes”) but his “basic sources for the ancient religion were the *Edda* and the runes.”⁴¹

Liebenfels was one of the disciples of List, whose ideas also appeared in the VB under Nazi control. Liebenfels argued in favor of a concept of “Theozoology” and a world-view that argued the degradation of “god-like Aryan supermen” or “god-men” through bestial miscegenation, meaning that the “root of all evil in the world actually had a sub-human animal nature.”⁴² His key focus was race, and the supposed dangers of superior “Aryans” interbreeding with “lesser races,” or with beasts.

He supported the notion of Christianity as a “racial cult religion,” interpreting the Bible through a bizarre exegesis that argued the Old Testament taught the dangers of racial admixture, supported Moses as a “Darwinist” and preacher of “racial morality”—rewriting the Ten Commandments as laws for racial purity—and advocated “a dualistic heresy which describes the battling forces of Good and Evil, typified by the Aryan acemen and their savior Frauja, a Gothic name for Jesus, who calls for the sacrificial extermination of the sub-men, the ‘apelings’ and all other racial inferiors.”⁴³ This was the world that the Nazis came from, and these were the sorts of writings and notions that were often used in the VB with the assumption that readers were also immersed in this

⁴⁰ Guido List, *Die Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 3rd edn. (Berlin: Guido von List-Verlag, 1920), 58. I have translated “deutsch” as “German” and “germanisch” as “Germanic.” The latter refers to an older usage relating to the early Germanic tribes. See: Bernard Mees, “Hitler and Germanentum,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004): 255–70.

⁴¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 49, 66–77, esp. 66, 71. Wolzogen was attracted to the ideas of List, dedicating one of his plays in 1909 to “Guido von List in Vienna, who has rediscovered the ancient wisdom of the Armanen.” List attended the play’s performance and was introduced to the audience (45).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 90–4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90, 112, 197; J. Lanz-Liebenfels, *Das Buch der Psalmen teutsch, das Gebethbuch der Ariosophen, Rassenmystiker und Antisimiten* (Düsseldorf-Unterrath: Herbert Reichstein, 1926), vol. 1, 13. Liebenfels was summarising his writings, which dated back to the early twentieth century, including: *Moses als Darwinist*; *Moses als Antisimit*; *Das arische Christentum als Rassenkultreligion der Blondan*. “Antisimiten” was Liebenfels’ idea of “anti-simia” (against the ape).

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völkisch subculture and conversant with such texts. It is interesting to find that the “positive Christian” Nazi Party did not exclude these figures or their concepts.

Early Views: Adolf Hitler, Max Sesselmann, and the Problem of Widar Wälsung

In order to understand whether “positive Christianity” was more than just a vague construct, and an attempt at dissociation from völkisch trends in religion, we must consider the religious views of Nazi leaders who were prominent at the meeting when the Program was proclaimed. Hastings largely dealt with the address given by the principal speaker, Dr Johannes Dingfelder, and the report on the event in the VB. Because of his arguments regarding the potential influence of Franz Schröngamer-Heimdal, he focused particularly on the fact that Dingfelder used the same piece of “völkisch word-play” as this earlier author. In both formulations “*Arbeit*” (work) became “*Arbol*” (dialect form) which became “*Sonnengebot*,” translatable as the offer or the commandment of the sun, though generally indicating sun-worship.

Two issues arise from this. First, it is difficult to see any especial connection between the content of Dingfelder’s speech and the German Workers’ Party (DAP). By his own account Dingfelder had delivered this same speech five times before. He had no knowledge of the DAP or its goals prior to being invited and his recollection makes it clear that he was contacted and asked to speak *ad hoc* only four days before the gathering as a prominent figure who was known to deliver a rousing address. Dingfelder believed that this was the very reason that Anton Drexler asked him to speak (Drexler was co-founder of the German Workers’ Party). He also believed he was invited because no-one else would speak, owing to a supposed threat against speakers at the event.⁴⁴ Dingfelder

⁴⁴ “Wie es kam!,” Reel 52, File 1214, *Hauptarchiv der NSDAP*/Central Archive of the NSDAP (Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace), microform. Hereafter, I will refer to HA-File#.

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agreed to present one of his speeches on the condition that it would be noted he was only appearing as a “guest of the DAP”—which the VB duly reported.⁴⁵ None of this was mentioned by Hastings in his book, as he was more interested in possible connections between Schröngamer-Heimdal and the Nazi event.⁴⁶

Secondly, Schröngamer-Heimdal’s “word-play” demonstrates the widespread influence of Guido von List on the völkisch movement. There is a kind of abstract connection between “-beit,” “-bot” and “-gebot” but the translation of “Ar” to the “sun” remained unexplained in Hastings’ work. It only becomes clear when we turn to one of List’s most influential books, *The Secret of the Runes*. List argued of the “Ar-rune” that “ar” meant “the sun, the primal fire, the Aryans and the eagle.”⁴⁷ Following this process, he created multiple interpretations “reading” everything from myths to heraldic devices.⁴⁸

List’s broader influence can be seen when Franz Schröngamer-Heimdal wrote in 1918: “What then is work [Arbeit]? As it stands, one does not note the origin of this little word....The common people do not say ‘Arbeit’ but rather ‘Arbot.’ ‘Ar’ however means the sun and ‘bot’ signifies a commandment [Gebot]. Therefore Arbeit means as much as the commandment of the sun [Sonnengebot].”⁴⁹ So far as I have been able to ascertain List did not directly translate “Arbeit” to “Sonnengebot,” but it is apparent that

⁴⁵ Ibid. According to Dingfelder the anonymous report in the VB was written by Max Sesselmann: VB-17 (28 February 1920).

⁴⁶ Though he did mention Dingfelder stated he had not met Drexler before: Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 213n.151.

⁴⁷ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 145, 274; “ar, Sonne, Urfyr, Arier, Adler usw.” in Guido List, *Das Geheimnis der Runen* 5th edn. (Berlin: Guido von List-Verlag, 1938), 13. *Secret of the Runes* was published as a series of articles in 1906, then as a book from 1908.

⁴⁸ For instance the Fleur-de-lys became “the ‘Ar-mal,’ the symbol of the sun or divinity”: List, *Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 112.

⁴⁹ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 213n.155. My translation. See also Dingfelder’s speech “Was uns not tut,” HA-1214.

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both his conception of “Ar” and his method of interpretation informed Schröngamer-Heimdal’s work.

Hastings also argued that “Widar Wälsung” was a pseudonym used by Schröngamer-Heimdal to write a series of five articles on “Was Jesus a Jew?” that appeared in the VB, which “shaped perceptions of the principle of Positive Christianity at the very moment of its public articulation.”⁵⁰ Hastings may well be correct as to the identity of the author. “Widar” derived from Odin’s son and avenger in the *Edda* and the name “Wälsung” itself was strongly associated with Richard Wagner and his *Ring of the Nibelungen*—denoting the descendants or tribe of Wotan.⁵¹ It was also connected to groups like the *Wälsungen-Orden* (The Order of Odin’s Children) whose literature in the Central Archive of the Nazi Party is specifically neo-pagan.⁵² Schröngamer himself had added the “Nordic suffix ‘Heimdal’ to his name,” which was intended to signify “the Nordic Germanic god” Heimdall.⁵³ Heimdall was a “Nordic god...who is considered to be the guardian of the gods,” a “watchman” of the “heavenly bridge” who would blow his horn “at the beginning of Ragnarok to warn the gods.”⁵⁴

Choosing to refer to oneself as a “watchman” of the pagan gods or “Odin’s son/tribe of Odin” (Widar Wälsung) indicates at least some interest in paganism.⁵⁵ The first of Wälsung’s articles in the VB began with a form of pagan-Christian blending, “faith” meant a person could agree with Peter when he said “Truly, you are Christ, the

⁵⁰ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76, 69. Widar Wälsung, “War Jesus ein Jude? Eine deutsche Antwort,” VB-16 (25 February 1920), VB-17 (28 February 1920), VB-18 (3 March 1920), VB-19 (6 March 1920), VB-20 (10 March 1920).

⁵¹ On “Widar”: Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993). He notes “Vidarr” was “mainly known as Odin’s avenger.”

⁵² HA-851; Phelps, “Before Hitler Came,” 251.

⁵³ “Franz Schröngamer-Heimdal,” in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 5 vols (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2008), vol. 2 part 1, 747-48.

⁵⁴ “Heimdall,” in Simek, *Northern Mythology*.

⁵⁵ Schröngamer-Heimdal was interested in the *Edda* and in “Widar,” arguing in favour of a kind of pagan-Christian synthesis in 1918: Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 52-54.

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son of the living God” but also that “reason confesses with the Germanic soldier under the cross...Truly this must be a heroic light-god!”⁵⁶ The series further demonstrates List’s influence, as well as that of Theodor Fritsch.

The final article by “Wälsung” cited Schröngamer-Heimdal’s work, and engaged in a series of interpretations of various words and terms that linked to List. While claiming that “Ar” meant “spirit,” it argued that Aramaic was “an *Aryan* language,” indicated by “*Ar-amaic*” and that those who spoke it were the same as the “Armanen.” The author claimed that Israel was not a Jewish word but was “ancient Aryan” (*urarisch*) and that it meant the people “of the ‘eternal Light-spirit,’ that is the ‘people of God,’ the ‘chosen people!’” which “are and were however not the Jews” but “the *Aryan* people”: “The Aryans, Arameans, Armanen, Germanic tribes (*Arier, Aramäer, Armanen, Germanen*) are the predecessors and successors of Christ, (*Vorläufer und Nachfolger Christi*) the actual Christians, who cling to the eternal Light-spirit.”

This was completely in line with the völkisch notion that the Israelites were an Aryan people of Palestine, meaning that the Israelites and Jews were separate races. This concept was a popular one, and was incidentally used by Georg Schott when a mass Nazi Party gathering was held on “National Socialism and Christianity” for summer solstice on June 21, 1923.⁵⁷ The idea of “Aryan Israelites” had the consequence of turning the Old Testament (or at least sections thereof) into Aryan myth, as Wälsung argued: “Precisely the best in the Bible, the Prophets, the Psalms etc. are of Aryan origin.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ VB-16 (25 February 1920). For the statement by Simon Peter, see Matthew 16:16, the “light-god” is an odd interpretation of: Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47.

⁵⁷ VB-123 (23 June 1923). His speech is dealt with in: Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 409-10. Hastings does not mention the conception of Israelites as non-Jewish.

⁵⁸ VB-20 (10 March 1920).

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While Steigmann-Gall has argued that the Nazis sought to simply reject the Old Testament, this was a more complicated interpretation.⁵⁹

In general terms, some of the major conceptual approaches at the time were these: Christians adhering to traditional or orthodox faith saw the Old and New Testaments as conjoined and “divine revelation,” German Faith advocates also argued they were conjoined and therefore rejected Christianity outright as an “Asiatic religion.”⁶⁰ While there were völkisch-Christian radicals like Friedrich Andersen who argued for the expulsion of the Old Testament and the refounding of Christianity solely on Jesus, the Aryan Israelite viewpoint meant a dual perception of the Old Testament—that it contained “Jewish thought” which should be rejected but also “Aryan” teachings derived from the Israelites (whose “Aryan” conception of god then was that of Jesus).⁶¹

The basic idea was that the Old Testament came from “the literatures and religions of older pre-Jewish peoples of culture” (Theodor Fritsch) or drew on “old Aryan conceptions” (Houston Stewart Chamberlain).⁶² What would be retained from the Old Testament was up to the individual author, though generally it seems to have included the Prophets. One of the greatest consequences was that this created parallel “Christianities”: one being a perverted and “Jewish” understanding of “Aryan” religion that became orthodox Christian faith (conjoining all of the Old and New Testament), and one a religion that traced the “Aryan” faiths through the Bible to Jesus. Steigmann-Gall argued that neo-pagans referring positively to Christianity indicated “ambiguity and ambivalence” but the situation was complex. The belief that Christianity was a

⁵⁹ Steigmann-Gall consistently argues the expulsion or rejection of the Old Testament in *The Holy Reich*.

⁶⁰ Quotations from: VB-13 (13 February 1921); von Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben*, 16.

⁶¹ Friedrich Andersen, *Der deutsche Heiland* (Munich: Deutscher Volksverlag, 1921). A nine point summary of his views appeared in: “Los vom Alten Testament”: VB-101 (21 November 1920).

⁶² Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Foundations* 1, 237, 414-15, 420-22; Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 25.

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corruption of Aryan (pagan) faiths may well explain some of this apparent “ambivalence.”⁶³

Wälsung’s articles were republished as a book by Lorenz Spindler Verlag in 1920, which simultaneously published Friedrich Döllinger’s *Baldur and the Bible*. This argued directly that much of the Old Testament was “Germanic” myth. Döllinger was one of the many pseudonyms of Karl Weinländer, and he summarised his own views whilst writing under another assumed name (Hermann Wieland) on *Atlantis, the Edda and the Bible*.⁶⁴ Weinländer (as Wieland) referred to his own book *Baldur and the Bible* in the foreword, arguing that “Döllinger” had shown “that Jesus was not a Jew, but was rather an Aryan, that therefore Christianity derives from an Aryan-Germanic source and that the pre-Jewish and allegedly Jewish culture of Palestine was Germanic.”

In short, Döllinger presented the idea that paganism *was* Christianity. In an example of cross-fertilisation, he considered the “people of God” to be the “Aryans, Aramaens = Armanen” (*Arier, Aramäer = Armanen*) who were worshippers of the “light-god” and “were the predecessors and successors of Christ (*Vorläufer und Nachfolger Christi*).”⁶⁵ Indeed, Wälsung and Döllinger were advertised together in the Nazis’ newspaper in January 1921 by the VB’s own bookshop.⁶⁶

They proclaimed many of the same ideas. Wälsung argued Hallelujah “is an Aryan cry of jubilation and means the affirmation of the All-El or the All-light-spirit,”

⁶³ Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion,” 103-5.

⁶⁴ Hermann Wieland, *Atlantis, Edda und Bibel: Das entdeckte Geheimnis der Heiligen Schrift, des deutschen Volkes Rettung aus Not und Tod* (Nuremberg: C. K. Wuzel, 1922). Some sense of the work can be gained by his third chapter, “The Idafeld (The garden of Eden) on Atlantis.” For its influence on Liebenfels: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 209, 262n.1. On Weinländer/Döllinger/Wieland: *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*, 206. He also wrote as Werner Stauffacher.

⁶⁵ Widar Wälsung, *War Jesus ein Jude? Eine deutsche Antwort*, 1st edn. (Nuremberg: Lorenz Spindler Verlag, 1920); Friedrich Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel: Germanische Kultur im biblischen Kanaan und Germanisches Christentum vor Christus* (Nuremberg: Lorenz Spindler Verlag, 1920), esp.49, 69. On “Baldr” see Simek, *Northern Mythology*.

⁶⁶ VB-4 (13 January 1921).

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going on to note that Christ called out on the cross to “El-Elion—one thinks of our German light (*hell*), of Helios and Elies—and the noteworthy thing was, that the *Jews* did not understand him, a proof, how foreign to them the ‘Light-spirit,’ the ‘Father’ was!”⁶⁷ Wälsung did not believe that the Aryan “Light-spirit” god of Jesus was the god of the Jews. Exactly the same idea appeared in Döllinger’s work. He argued that “*Jesus Christ was a German*” whose “god is a different one to the Jewish [god],” and who “in his greatest distress” as he was nailed on the cross “turned not to the Jewish god Yahweh but rather to the Germanic god of light Eli-Elion (Baldur), whose name was incomprehensible to the surrounding Jews.”⁶⁸

This also illustrates that Wälsung was drawing on Fritsch’s book *The False God*. Fritsch promoted the notion of a fundamental difference between “El-Elion and El-Schaddai,” the former being “spirit of light” equivalent to Ahriman in Zoroastrian teaching and the Christian God, the latter being the “spirit of darkness” equivalent to Ormuzd and the Devil.⁶⁹ Ahriman and Ormuzd derived from a broader völkisch interest in the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky, who had written on them in *The Secret Doctrine*.⁷⁰ Fritsch argued that El-Elion and El-Schaddai were the “gods of the Canaanite peoples, before the Jews came into the country,” and established the link repeated by Wälsung: “I find in Elion a connection to the Greek helios—sun, light.” He argued that “El-Schaddai” became solely the god of the Jews (Yahweh), using Jesus’ cry to “El-Elion” as he was crucified as a principal piece of evidence that Jesus adhered to the “light spirit”

⁶⁷ VB-20 (10 March 1920). This refers to Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

⁶⁸ Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel*, 133.

⁶⁹ Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 59-66, here 61-63.

⁷⁰ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 18-23.

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and that the god of the Jews was not the god of Christ (whose El-Elion was a supposedly different deity).⁷¹

Of course, one could also find precisely these passages from Fritsch by reading Artur Dinter’s *Sin against the Blood*, and this was undoubtedly Wälsung’s source.⁷² Wälsung made no effort to connect his articles to the (NS)DAP or “positive Christianity” but he made every effort to connect them to the work of Dinter. Three of the articles relied extensively (and openly) on quotations taken from *Sin against the Blood*.⁷³ Although Wälsung did not agree with all of his views, he quoted with approval Dinter’s notion that the “spiritual opposition between Jesus and the Jews can only be explained as the opposition of their race” because the “form of our feelings and thoughts” were connected “in the most intimate relationship and interaction to the type of our blood and nerves,” a point Dinter sought to prove by arguing a “blackthorn” never bore “apples or pears.”⁷⁴

Wälsung further quoted Dinter’s idea that “the interconnection of religion and race is unmistakable everywhere” and the conclusion: “that Jesus is not a Jew, but rather was an Aryan or, which is the same thing, Indo-Germanic.” This fitted with Wälsung’s own explanation that “eternal God the Father and the Holy Spirit” would not place Christ into the “impure, unholy body of a Jew,” but the “highest developed and purest, the most beautiful [form]” that “was and is until today the Aryan-Indo-Germanic racial

⁷¹ Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 63, 65. He also used the term *Lichtgeist*. Wälsung however argued the name “Jesus Christ itself is of Aryan origin” and connected to “*Sohn des Ja, Jovis, Jahwe*.”

⁷² Dinter, *Sünde wider Blut*, 372–77. This quoted large sections from *Der falsche Gott* (1916) including the material on “El-Elion” and “El-Schaddai.”

⁷³ VB-17 (28 February 1920), VB-18 (3 March 1920), VB-19 (6 March 1920). This is not mentioned by Hastings.

⁷⁴ VB-17 (28 February 1920).

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type. It is without doubt that the highest spirit also chose the best form...”⁷⁵ The “Galileans” were supposedly “Germanic tribes” (*Germanen*) owing to a belief that was widely held in the völkisch movement, that “Aryan migration” from northern lands to southern countries during the ice-age had seeded all of the world’s great civilisations.

Some of Wälsung’s lines of argument were akin to Chamberlain’s notions of the “racial soul,” or the concept (expressed by Willi Damm in the VB on February 4, 1920) that “The blood is the carrier of the soul.”⁷⁶ This idea was not uncommon. A later article similarly stated “[t]he soul of the person lies in the blood” so that anyone who “polluted” the blood also polluted the soul.⁷⁷ Wälsung certainly argued that the “impure spirit” was borne in “Jewish blood.”⁷⁸ Wälsung’s articles were ultimately a mystical and racial account, with connections to List’s ideas on the Armanen as well as intrinsic links to Theodor Fritsch and explicit links to Artur Dinter. If these truly “shaped perceptions of the principle of Positive Christianity” then those perceptions were that “positive Christianity” embodied völkisch religious ideas.⁷⁹

Yet Hastings’ argument that this series supported the Nazi Program, and specifically “positive Christianity,” does not stand up to the evidence. Wälsung was undoubtedly influential in a broader sense, but there was no direct link to the Nazi Party. There are no references to the DAP, National Socialism or “positive Christianity” in his

⁷⁵ VB-17 (28 February 1920), VB-18 (3 March 1920), VB-19 (6 March 1920).

⁷⁶ VB-10 (4 February 1920), in German: “*Das Blut ist der Träger der Seele*.” Damm cited Schröngamer-Heimdal as an inspiration.

⁷⁷ VB-78 (2 September 1920). Fritsch (writing as Fritz Thor) argued: “whosoever pollutes his blood, *kills the god within himself*”: *Der neue Glaube*, in Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum*, 141.

⁷⁸ VB-17 (28 February 1920).

⁷⁹ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76.

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articles from 1920. Given this, I would query Hastings’ assertion that this series was a “manifesto built on the principle of Positive Christianity.”⁸⁰

A basic issue is this: who knew that “positive Christianity” actually appeared in the Nazi Program? It was hardly a key emphasis at the time, and this aspect of the Nazi platform certainly didn’t appear in the VB, or in other newspapers that reported on the event. Instead, newspaper articles consistently highlighted Dingfelder’s address and only two aspects of the Nazi Program, the demand for a “Greater Germany” and Feder’s notion of “Breaking the slavery of interest.”⁸¹ A secondary issue is that there was no mention of or connection to the Nazi Party in the series “Was Jesus a Jew?”

I would agree with Hastings that the articles were prominent in the VB, but they were no more prominent than the series that preceded them in the same column of the paper (“The Jewish Patriarchs in the light of Anti-Semitism”) which relied heavily on Eugen Dühring and concluded the Old Testament should no longer be taught in schools.⁸² This series had ended in the VB on February 21, 1920, and was replaced in the very next issue by Wälsung’s articles. Hastings provides no further evidence for his assertion that this series of articles “dominated” the “discussions within the DAP more generally beginning on the night of the party’s first mass meeting,” or for his broader point that they “dominated religious-oriented conversations within the movement

⁸⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁸¹ See the newspaper reports stored in HA-1478. See also Reginald H. Phelps, “Hitler and the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei,” *The American Historical Review* 68 (1963): 984–85.

⁸² “Die jüdischen Patriarchen in antisemitischer Beleuchtung,” ending VB-15 (21 February 1920). Dühring argued “in terms of racial categories” and “condemned the Jew as a whole, not just some of his characteristics,” because he “linked depravity in culture, morals and manners to inherent racial traits possessed by all Jews.” Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 131. See the sections from Dühring and the positive review of his views in: VB-12 (9 February 1923); VB-121 (21 June 1923). The VB openly acknowledged that he opposed Christianity owing to its connection to Judaism: VB-75 (20 September 1922).

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beginning on the evening of 24 February 1920.” He referred back to the articles themselves to support these claims.⁸³

According to the police report on February 24, following Dingfelder’s speech—which was highly religious—Hitler (the meeting chairman) read out the program. “The first speaker” following this was “[Max] Sesselmann, editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter*.” He spoke on “moral order,” on materialism, and welcomed “the program of the DAP.” Sesselmann closed with an idea deriving from his role as a German Socialist leader: “First and foremost we have to again think and act German and only then will we be Socialists in the truest sense of the word.” Three more people spoke, two of whom openly opposed the DAP.⁸⁴

This discussion was certainly lively and the meeting uproarious, but there is no evidence that Wälsung and his ideas were being discussed. I would suggest that this was probably Schröngamer-Heimdal explaining his own ideas in the VB, especially given he had only been a member of the DAP for twenty days. In order to make any connection between Wälsung and the (NS)DAP, one had to make the first leap between knowing that Wälsung was Schröngamer-Heimdal then make the next leap to knowing that Schröngamer-Heimdal was a member of the DAP. Having done so, one might conclude that this was a party which relied heavily on the religious notions of Dinter and Fritsch.

I would argue it is more relevant to consider the perspectives of the two most prominent DAP members who spoke at the meeting: Adolf Hitler and Max Sesselmann.⁸⁵ Both men were clearly aware of the Program and its points, so how did

⁸³ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76, 79.

⁸⁴ This report can be found in HA-1478.

⁸⁵ Phelps, “Hitler and the DAP,” 983-85. Ernst Ehrensberger was active in the DAP and also spoke.

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they conceive of religion in the months following this declaration? Reginald Phelps’ description of Max Sesselmann as a “person of note” in the early Nazi Party is an accurate one, and he often spoke at meetings alongside Hitler.⁸⁶ This is probably because Sesselmann’s völkisch credentials were well established, particularly as the leader of the German Socialist Party (*Deutschsozialistische Partei*, DSP) in Munich.⁸⁷

Exactly two months after he spoke in response to the Nazi Program, Max Sesselmann attended a national conference of the German Socialist Party. The meeting took place on April 24–26 and reconsidered the DSP’s own Program, which had been declared as the manifesto of the VB itself in January 1920.⁸⁸ The DSP were partly examining their program in light of the Nazis’ own proclamation and the agenda item on “religion” mirrored Point 24: “We have to germanize but dejudaize our current Christianity. We are not hostile towards religion but friendly. We stand for a Christian religious viewpoint without binding ourselves.”⁸⁹

This incidentally shows that this section of the Nazi Program was having some impact, but also that the DSP leader Alfred Brunner did not think “Positive Christianity” had a particular meaning and formed instead a very general statement of support. He

⁸⁶ Phelps, “Before Hitler Came,” 255; Adolf Hitler, *Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen: 1905–1924*, ed. Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), 1288.

⁸⁷ Sesselmann was a DAP member from December 1919, a member of the Thule Society from March 1919 (chairman from 1924) and a member of the German-völkisch League for Defence and Resistance (*Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund*, DVSTB). He was editor of the *Münchener Beobachter* and (after it was renamed) of the *Völkischer Beobachter* until March 1920. See VB-79 (5 September 1920); HA-865; Franz, “Munich: Birthplace of the NSDAP,” 327–28; Phelps, “Before Hitler Came,” 255–56; Albrecht Tyrell, *Vom Trommler zum Führer: der Wandel von Hitlers Selbstverständnis zwischen 1919 und 1924 und die Entwicklung der NSDAP* (Munich: Fink, 1975), 77; Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 66, 72, 210n.99. On the Schutz- und Trutzbund, see Uwe Lohalm, *Völkischer Radikalismus: Die Geschichte des Deutschvölkischen Schutz- und Trutzbundes, 1919–1923* (Hamburg: Leibniz, 1970).

⁸⁸ I believe this is a new point in the literature. See “Deutschwirtschaft” by the editors in VB-3 (10 January 1920)—the paper was called the “Deutschwirtschaftszeitung” at this point—and compare to the DSP Program in 1918 and 1920: “Aus der Bewegung” (report on the Nuremberg DSP), VB-2 (7 January 1920); Rudolf von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam: Urkundliches aus der Frühzeit der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung*, 1st edn. (Munich: Deukula-Verlag, 1933), 171–82 and 205.

⁸⁹ *DSP-Parteitag*: 13, in HA-109.

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held that the DSP could even support the movement for a “German religion.” In the discussion on religion at this event, Max Sesselmann gave his vote of support to “Dr Lanz Liebenfels,” arguing “an Aryan religious idea has to permeate our movement.”⁹⁰

Sesselmann’s own explanation of his views on religion stands in stark contrast with the manner in which Hastings has depicted him: “in May 1919 the editorial duties at the *Beobachter* were taken up by two professing Catholics, Max Sesselmann and Hanns Georg Müller, whose ideas conflicted strongly with [the anti-Christian ideas] of Sebottendorff.” Both men were members of the Thule Society, and the evidence provided by Hastings is that Sesselmann’s family were prominent Catholics, and that Hanns Georg Müller was listed as Catholic in a VB report.⁹¹

The notice on Müller in the VB for May 12, 1921 described him as “Catholic, single, residing in Munich.” Müller himself claimed he was a member of the pagan *Wälsungen-Orden* from around Autumn of 1919.⁹² According to Goodrick-Clarke he was later a member of the Edda Society (*Eddagesellschaft*), a group founded by Rudolf John Gorsleben in 1925 to reconstruct “the Aryan religion” on “the basis of the runes, occultism, and the Edda.” This placed Müller amongst some of the most prominent neo-pagans, German Faith advocates and anti-Christians, including Mathilde von Kemnitz (Mathilde Ludendorff) and Otto Sigfrid Reuter (author of the German Faith work *Siegfried or Christ?*). Gorsleben himself had the dubious honour of being the “Party

⁹⁰ Ibid., 27–8. This meeting was briefly noted in VB-48 (22 May 1920).

⁹¹ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 66, 126–27. More evidence must be adduced to demonstrate Sesselmann was “outspokenly Catholic.” The clear evidence from April 1920 shows him to be an advocate for Liebenfels.

⁹² See Müller’s signed affidavit in: Hermann Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft: Vom okkulten Mummenschanz zum Hakenkreuz* (Munich: Kiessling, 1994), 246. My thanks to Peter Staudenmaier for pointing this out to me. Franz also reported Müller’s membership in the *Wälsungen-Orden*: Franz, “Munich: Birthplace of the NSDAP,” 327.

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speaker” when the police first began to refer to the “National Socialist” German Workers’ Party.⁹³

What appeared alongside the statement on Müller spoke to the fact that the Nazis were still part of the völkisch movement. There was a more prominent notice to “all our readers and friends of the German-völkisch movement” from the “Völkischer Beobachter (Bookshop division).” The large advertisement recommended “in particular” eight books, including Fritsch’s *Handbook on the Jewish Question* and Dinter’s works *Sin against the Blood* and *Sin against the Spirit*.⁹⁴ The early Nazi Party was not dissociating itself from the work of these men. Both authors continued to be promoted and defended in the VB.⁹⁵ Interestingly, the previous issue of the Nazi newspaper had also promoted (in “Munich News”) the regular meeting of the “‘Friends’ of the Germanic Order, of the German-faith and Germanic Faith community.”⁹⁶

If one of the major DAP figures present on February 24 was declaring himself in support of Liebenfels, what of the other? By August 13, 1920 Adolf Hitler was delivering a lengthy speech that relied on Guido von List and Theodor Fritsch (amongst other völkisch writers). The speech was of some significance, given that it addressed the

⁹³ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 155, 159, 254n.14; Reginald H. Phelps, “Hitler als Parteiredner im Jahre 1920,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 11 (1963): 277. On Reuter and his significance: Uwe Puschner, “Reuter, Otto Theodor Ludwig Sigfrid,” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 21 (2003): 465–67, available online at <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de>.

⁹⁴ VB-37 (12 May 1921). Rosenberg did criticise the notion that “true Occultism” was necessary in order to succeed as a völkisch party and attacked Dinter for his supposed interest in spiritualism: VB-60 (31 July 1921). Despite this, Dinter’s works were still being advertised by the VB bookshop in: VB-95 (14 December 1921).

⁹⁵ See the continued advertisement of Fritsch’s publications and the defence of both *Sin against the Blood* and *The False God* by 1923: “Buchbesprechung” in VB-62 (8/9 April 1923) and VB-76 (25 April 1923); “‘Antichristentum,’” VB-93 (16 May 1923). The VB also included material through Dinter’s personal request and notices to celebrate Fritsch’s birthday: VB-71 (6 September 1922); VB-75 (20 September 1922).

⁹⁶ “‘Freunde’ des deutschen Ordens, der deutsch-gläubigen und germanischen Glaubensgemeinschaft”: VB-36 (8 May 1921). The same column had notices on public meetings regarding Sunday laws. On the *Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft*: Puschner and Vollnhals, *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*, 158–61. At the time, Andersen argued that this group and the *Deutschgläubige Gemeinschaft* formed “a type of cartel”: Andersen, *Der deutsche Heiland*, 137.

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question “Why are we anti-Semites?” Brigitte Hamann established that Hitler opened with ideas taken from List that the “Aryan during the ice age engaged in building his spiritual and bodily strength in the hard fight with nature, arising quite differently than other races who lived without struggle in the midst of a bountiful world.”⁹⁷

Only six months after the Nazis publicly stood for “Positive Christianity,” Hitler openly addressed pagan notions. Speaking of the “Nordic races,” Hitler stated:

We know that all of these people held one sign in common: the symbol of the sun. All of their cults were built on *light*, and you find this symbol, the means of the generation of fire, the Quirl, the cross. You can find this cross as a swastika not only here, but also exactly the same carved into the temple-posts in India and Japan. It is the swastika of the community (*Gemeinwesen*) once founded by Aryan culture.⁹⁸

This provided an equivalency between the “cross” and the Quirl (which can be translated as a whisk or whorl) as symbols of the sun—a more broadly accepted notion in the völkisch movement. The idea of a common Aryan spiritual inheritance around “cults of light” was conceptually in line with Guido von List.

In *The Secret of the Runes*, List provided an illustration of the Quirl as a circular symbol containing a swastika, in a row of ten symbols that included a swastika and a cross (though he called the cross “Fyrfos”). This is not to say that this is where Hitler

⁹⁷ Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship*, trans. Thomas Thornton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210–13. The summary of List's view (as quoted) is: George L. Mosse, “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 93.

⁹⁸ Speech, 13 August 1920, Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 186. On this speech, see also Reginald H. Phelps, “Hitlers ‘grundlegende’ Rede über den Antisemitismus,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16 (1968): 390–420. Phelps noted various probable influences on Hitler's speech, including Ludwig Wilser, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Theodor Fritsch's *Handbook on the Jewish Question* (397). Sebottendorff credited Ludwig Wilser with first establishing the notion that the swastika was a “common Aryan symbol of the sun”: von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 240. See also Döllinger's description of the swastika as “the symbol of all Aryan peoples, indicative of the religion of the light- or sun-god”: Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel*, 65.

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derived the notion that “the sign of the sun” was common to the “Aryans,” but it is illustrative both of the existence of such ideas in völkisch ideology and of what a Quirl meant.⁹⁹ It is also very possible that List was a source, given his notions were similar to Hitler’s.

List drew a direct link between the “Fyrfos” and the swastika, describing it at one point as indicating “*Feuerzeugung*,” the “generation of fire,” close to Hitler’s turn of phrase (*Feuerzeugung*).¹⁰⁰ In another work, List argued that the Fyrfos meant “generation of fire,” that it was “the most sacred secret symbol” of the Armanen and that it was a symbol of the sun. In this last instance, he argued “the sun in all religions was the highest symbol of divinity.”¹⁰¹

List equated “Hermes Trismegistus, Wotan, Krishna, Buddha, Christ” as equivalent “god-men” (*Gottmenschen*). This is an interesting point, given Hitler mentioned the swastika as common to Germany and the temples of both India and Japan.¹⁰² The actual religions connected to such temples (Hinduism, Buddhism) were irrelevant to Hitler. His concern was the supposedly common “Aryan” religiosity. He went on to discuss Christianity. It does not appear to have been previously established in the literature that Hitler also then drew on the ideas of *The False God*.¹⁰³

He introduced his speech with a long consideration of the difference between people of the northern and southern climes (relying on List), and held that the “Nordic” race possessed three necessary characteristics for the development of states, all of which

⁹⁹ The influence of Liebenfels and List on Hitler has remained a contested one: Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*, 49–50.

¹⁰⁰ List, *Geheimnis der Runen*, 20, 44.

¹⁰¹ List, *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen* 1, 43–45.

¹⁰² Ibid., 22. List added “Goethe, Beethoven, Kant, Richard Wagner, Bismarck” He held it was a great error that “a ‘god-man’ would appear as the son of god” only once “in the entire life of humanity.”

¹⁰³ Phelps’ consideration of the *Beweismaterial gegen Jabwe* was fairly limited: Phelps, “‘Grundlegende’ Rede,” 398.

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were lacking in the Jews: the notion of “work as a duty” for the good of the whole, “physical health” and hence a healthy intelligence, and finally “the deep-inner spiritual life.” These three, Hitler argued, meant that the “Nordic races” were those capable of and responsible for culture as a whole—relying on the völkisch trope that the “Aryan” race was the founder of all great civilisations. He listed the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Persia and Greece as having been brought to their “height of culture” through the immigration of “blond, blue-eyed Aryans.”¹⁰⁴

Turning to the Jews and the Bible, Hitler argued that he “would not vouch that everything that is in [the Bible] is completely correct, because we know that Jewry worked on it very freely.” This was in line with Theodor Fritsch, though Hitler went further: “at least one thing is certain, that no anti-Semite wrote it.” This was a clear attack on the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, though Hitler thought it was also revelatory of “Jewish” character that “no anti-Semite could have written a more terrible work of indictment against the Jewish race than the Bible, the Old Testament.”¹⁰⁵

When he came to the “inner spiritual experience,” Hitler held that this too was lacking in “the Jew,” referring to art, architecture and music. It was here that he cited both Adolf Wahrmund’s ideas on Jews as “nomads” and the concepts of Theodor Fritsch. He believed there was a fundamental “division” between the “northern Israelite tribes” and the “nomadic” Jews “of the tribe of Judah and Caleb.” Hitler held that this division was first bridged by King David through the “cult of the god Yahweh” and that “the Jews” had killed off the “original tribes in Palestine.”¹⁰⁶ These ideas came from Fritsch, who not only argued the division between Jews and Israelites, but also that

¹⁰⁴ Speech, 13 August 1920, Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 185–86. This was in line with Chamberlain.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 187–88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 189.

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David was the first king from the “tribe of Judah” to rule over “Israel and Judah,” supposedly bringing the Israelites under the subjection of an unwanted minority.¹⁰⁷

Hitler described Christianity as having been used by the Jews for their own ends (principally undermining the state): “the Jew used Christianity, not out of love for Christianity, but rather...only from the knowledge, that this new religion above all rejected temporal might and state-power and only acknowledged a higher supernatural Lord, that this religion had to take an axe to the roots of the Roman state...and [the Jew] was the bearer of this new religion, its greatest promoter...”¹⁰⁸ Hitler drew a comparison between early Christianity and twentieth century Socialism, believing that both movements had been subverted by Jews—in his view “the Jew” could never be “a Christian” or “a worker.” He went on to describe Christ’s “new teaching” as “nothing other than a renaissance of the obvious (*Selbstverständlichkeit*)” that “people should not be without rights in a state” and that rights also meant commensurate duties.¹⁰⁹

Hitler then was addressing notions that were akin to others in the völkisch movement, such as the notion of an older and continuing Aryan spirituality revolving around “cults of light” that came to be expressed in a variety of religions, including an “Aryan” Christianity. This speech was both an attack on Christian faith and a vindication of it. Christianity was a tool of the Jews and the Bible was written by Jews, but something might be salvaged from an Aryan Jesus who had preached a “doctrine of the obvious.” This combined aspects of List’s work with that of Fritsch. Though such significant figures as Sesselmann and Hitler expressed these views as individuals, the adherence to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.; Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 18–20, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Speech, 13 August 1920, Hitler *Aufzeichnungen*, 191–92.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Hitler continued to argue that “Christianity was the Proto-Bolshevism, the mobilization of the enslaved masses by the Jews for the purpose of undermining the state” (19 October 1941), as translated in: Richard C. Carrier, “‘Hitler’s Table Talk’: Troubling Finds,” *German Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (2003): 571–72. Carrier queried this statement, but it certainly fits with Hitler’s early ideas.

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esoteric strands of religion could also be found at party events, as is illustrated by the Nazis’ first Christmas.

The First Nazi Christmas

It has to be understood that the Nazi Party’s acquisition of the VB by 18 December 1920 meant that the first Christmas was reported by the Nazis in their own official newspaper—which gives it considerable significance.¹¹⁰ From the point at which they took control the VB served “three clearly defined political functions” for the NSDAP. It was “an instrument of communication between Hitler and the Party rank and file,” provided “news of Party activities” and served as “the official source of Nazi ideology and the Party line.”¹¹¹ The fact that the VB was a propaganda tool only increases its importance. As it was a wholly owned publication of the Nazi Party, they had complete control over the manner in which they chose to portray their movement. So how did the NSDAP depict their understanding of religion in the first public celebration of Christmas in Munich?

As reported in the VB, it was an entirely pagan event. Not only was the Munich “Christmas festival” (*Weihnachtsfeier*) held for winter solstice on December 22, 1920, but the report from the Party in the VB openly and publicly proclaimed itself as linked to the ideas of Guido von List. Though each celebration (in Munich and Rosenheim) was referred to as a *Weihnachtsfeier*, meaning the festival of the “holy” or “sacred” night, they were also referred to as a “Yule festival” (*Julfest*), carrying the connotation of the Germanic pagan festival for winter solstice. More significantly, they were not referred to

¹¹⁰ A notice appeared stating that the NSDAP had taken over the VB as of 18 December: VB-110/111 (25 December 1920).

¹¹¹ Roland V. Layton, “The *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1920–1933: The Nazi Party Newspaper in the Weimar Era,” *Central European History* 3 (1970): 370. The VB has proven to be a fruitful source in understanding other aspects of Nazi ideology: David B. Dennis, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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as the *Christfest* (celebration of Christ).¹¹² In fact, the VB itself had used both “Germanic” and standard nomenclature for the months of the year, and December had always appeared as the “Yule-month” (*Julmond*)—which was also the denotation used by groups like the “Germanic Order.”¹¹³ This was a practice that continued briefly under the Nazis, though the use of the “Germanic” names in the VB was discontinued as of March 1921.

The report itself possibly came from the paper’s editors. While it was not written by Hitler, it had every appearance of his approval, given that his own New Year’s greeting appeared underneath it, ending the column “From the Movement.”¹¹⁴ The theme of the event was “To bring joy to poor children and to honour the Party.” Christ was not mentioned, though the phrase “God bless you” was used to thank all those who participated, and the report noted that its larger purpose was to show “the loyal and worthy core of a Movement to which the German future must belong.”¹¹⁵ The stated reason for this was the disastrous situation in Germany: “All this the *Edda* and the teachings of the Armanen had already prophesied to us from ancient times.”¹¹⁶

¹¹² One critic of the NSDAP noted this on January 18, 1922: “The ancient Germanic tribes called the winter solstice the Yule festival,” contrasting this to the *Christfest* (Christmas). See report in *Donau-Zeitung*, HA-1479. On the distinction between the “pre-Christian” *Weihnachten* and the *Christfest*, see Perry, “Nazifying Christmas,” 576–77. Interestingly, in December 1922 the event was advertised as a *Weihnachtsfest* but was also called a *Christfest*, while Hitler was advertised as the speaker who would give the *Julrede*: VB-98 (9 December 1922); VB-99 (13 December 1922); VB-100 (16 December 1922).

¹¹³ Hence the Germanic Order newsletter of *Julmond* 1918/19, which contained the DSP Program: von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 205. The names used by the VB were: Hartung (January), Hornung (February), Lenzing (March), Ostermond (April), Wonnemonat (May), Brachet (June), Heuert (July), Ernting (August), Scheiding (September), Gilbhard (October), Nebelung (November), Julmond (December).

¹¹⁴ VB 1-2 (6 January 1921); Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 296.

¹¹⁵ VB 1-2 (6 January 1921). Unless otherwise stated, I am relying on the translation in Detlef Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice: The Völkischer Beobachter, 1920–1933*, 2 vols (Oxford: P. Lang, 2004), vol. 1, *Organisation & Development of the Nazi Party*, 83–4.

¹¹⁶ VB 1-2 (6 January 1921). My translation.

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Indeed, the paradise sought by the party was not Christian, but that of the Norse gods: “one day more happy times will come for the Aryan race—a new Idafeld.”¹¹⁷ The fact that this event was held for solstice also linked to the notions of sun-worship underlying List’s work. It was, after all, part of pagan customs directed towards ending winter and bringing spring. The reference to the *Edda* meant the Ragnarok, or “twilight of the gods.”¹¹⁸ This notion continued in Nazi discourse, and Gottfried Feder’s official commentary on the Nazi Program (first published 1927) referred to apocalyptic passages from the *Edda* when describing the contemporary situation of Germany.¹¹⁹

Joe Perry made the important point that “Germans had already embraced ‘völkisch’ ideas about the Germanic roots of Christmas long before the Nazis adopted them,” tracing such to “clear nineteenth-century precedents.” He is certainly correct as to the broader cultural context of “historicism” that focused on the “unique ‘German-ness’ of Christmas” and detailed “holiday observances [as] holdovers from pre-Christian tribal rituals and popular folk superstitions.”¹²⁰ Yet it is telling that the report on the first Nazi Christmas was specifically linked to völkisch thought and paganism.

Given this open adherence to the “teachings of the Armanen” in the Nazis’ official paper, it could hardly have been surprising to Hitler to have received a book in 1921 from a Dr Babette Steininger, inscribed: “To Adolf Hitler my dear Armanen-brother.” Although this might have simply reflected Steininger’s own fascination, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke is probably correct in arguing that the “use of the esoteric

¹¹⁷ Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 84. On “Idafeld” or “Idavollr”: Simek, *Northern Mythology*. Simek notes it was a “mythical plain” and “part of the home of the gods” where the Norse gods “assemble in the new world” after Ragnarok.

¹¹⁸ For these passages in the *Edda* and a discussion of the poem: Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), vol. 2, 19, 58–61.

¹¹⁹ Gottfried Feder, *Das Programm der N.S.D.A.P. und seine weltanschaulichen Grundgedanken*, Nationalsozialistische Bibliothek, vol. 1 (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1934), 23.

¹²⁰ Perry, “Nazifying Christmas,” 575–76.

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term suggests a shared interest in the work of List.”¹²¹ At the very least, the VB assumed that their readers *commonly* understood List’s notions, Adolf Hitler among them, as there was no further explanation offered of the “teachings of the Armanen.” Given Hitler’s own greeting was published under the Christmas report (and his previous reliance on List’s works) we might assume he was at least as well aware of the significance of the “Armanen” as other NSDAP members.

Though advocating “positive Christianity,” the 1920 Nazi Christmas represented the celebration of pagan solstice, adherence to Norse “prophecy” and to Guido von List’s ideas. As reported in their own newspaper, it was not focused on the prophesied birth of Christ, but the prophesied apocalyptic situation of Germany in the *Edda* and by a supposedly ancient pagan “teaching” of a priesthood caste of Odin.

This event must be considered in the wider context of the VB at the beginning of 1921. There was also advocacy for some form of Christianity, including a pagan-Christian blend. One found an appreciative review of an “old German Christmas play” in the first edition for 1921, a play that depicted the Christmas story of the “birth of the saviour of the world Jesus Christ.” A book review appeared from Franz Schröngamer-Heimdal on *The New Bible* (by Felix Lorenz) which was described as “the eternal old truths” regarding the “god-man” or Gottmensch Jesus that “do not teach *faith* in god, but show the way to *living* in god, as the god-man himself did.”¹²² Schröngamer-Heimdal was so enamoured of the work that he described it as “a new *Heliand*”—referring to an Old Saxon translation of the Gospel in the ninth century.

¹²¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 199. He notes Steininger was “an early Nazi Party member.”

¹²² VB-1 (1 January 1921). The book was: *Die neue Bibel, die Lehre Christi für den Menschen von heute*.

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What this meant was that the work represented a blending of Germanic myth with Christianity. A recent translator of the *Heliand* noted that its “purpose seems to have been to make the Gospel story completely accessible and appealing to the Saxons through a depiction of Christ’s life in the poetry of the North, recasting Jesus himself and his followers as Saxons,” which “created a unique cultural synthesis between Christianity and German warrior society” including a depiction of the Apostles as “warrior-companions.” It also meant the incorporation of aspects of Germanic mythology to the extent that “teach us to pray” became “teach us the secret runes.”¹²³

In terms of runes, there was a consistent and prominent advertisement in the VB throughout January 1921 for Peryt Shou’s book *The Edda as the Key to the Coming World-Epoch*. This was part of a series on the “Esotericism of the Edda.” As advertised it linked “Odin-God-Mercury” and argued runes were “Morse-code for a world-language of spirits.”¹²⁴ Looking to such advertisements at the time, one might well have concluded that the Nazis were pagan. The VB bookshop itself recommended five new publications, three of which dealt with religion and advocated a pagan-Christian blend as well as paganism outright: Döllinger’s *Baldur and the Bible*, Wälsung’s *Was Jesus a Jew?* and Emil Tetzlaff’s *The Sermon on the Mount and the Teaching of the Edda*.¹²⁵

¹²³ See Luke 11:1-4; G. Ronald Murphy, “The Old Saxon *Heliand*,” in *Early Germanic Literature and Culture*, ed. Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), 263, 266-67, 271-75; G. Ronald Murphy, *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel; Translation and Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹²⁴ Advertisements for Peryt Shou, *Die Edda als Schlüssel des kommenden Weltalters*, appeared repeatedly in January 1921; for instance: VB-1/2 (6 January 1921). It was later recommended by the VB bookshop: VB-25 (29 March 1922). On Shou (whose real name was Albert Schultz), see Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 143, 165, 272. “Occultism and the Edda” continued to be a topic of interest for groups like the League of the Friends of the Edda (*Bund der Eddafreunde*): VB-76 (23 September 1922).

¹²⁵ Advertisement of *Deutschvölkische Buchhandlung*: VB-4 (13 January 1921). The other two books were *Deutsches Recht* and Edmund von Wecus’ *Deutsche Vornamen und ihre Deutung* (*German Names and their Meaning*). Edmund von Wecus’ works were generally published by the Guido von List Verlag, and he was apparently a member of the *Eddagesellschaft*: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 169, 254n.14.

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Döllinger and Tetzlaff were still being advertised by the VB bookshop (on much longer lists) in December 1921. By December 1922 none of these three works appeared, although similar books were promoted, such as Pastor Julius Bode’s *Wotan and Jesus* and Theodor Fritsch on *The False God* and *The New Faith* (the latter was published under the pseudonym “Fritz Thor”).¹²⁶ Bode’s book, which was positively reviewed in Meyer’s summary of German Faith writings, concluded that it was necessary to draw equally on Odin and Jesus to gain a truly German religion: “If we wish to again be like our forefathers—and that is what we desire!—then the solution can only be: Let us drink from the crystal-clear sources. They are called: *Wotan and Jesus*.”¹²⁷

It is clear that there was often no neat delineation between “Aryan” Christianity and paganism. Some völkisch writers interested in this question believed that the two systems of religion were one and the same, or that “Aryans” could draw on both paganism (including the pagan gods) and some form of the Christian tradition, or simply on a radically redefined Jesus. Hence Emil Tetzlaff’s work on the *Edda* and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount aimed to illuminate the “high position of the civilisation of our forefathers” in “relation to one another.”¹²⁸

This also means that Alfred Rosenberg was relying on a longer tradition when he caused controversy in his 1930 book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by proposing that the Old Testament should be replaced with Nordic sagas, myths, and fairy-tales and joined to an Aryan Jesus of the New Testament. Rosenberg’s focus was avowedly the

¹²⁶ VB-95 (14 December 1921); VB-97 (6 December 1922). *Der neue Glaube* was summarised in: Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum*, 139–43. It advocated a religion of this world (*Diesseit*) rather than the next. By December 1921 Fritsch, Bode, Döllinger and Tetzlaff kept company with Rudolf John Gorsleben’s *The Edda*, Leopold Weber’s *The Gods of the Edda*, Franz Schröghamer-Heimdal’s *On the Spirit of Love*, Pastor Karl Gerecke’s *Biblical Antisemitism* and Aloys Müller’s *Jesus an Aryan*. Dinter’s works were advertised, as well as books like *Luther and the Jews* and *The Secrets of Amulets and Talismans*.

¹²⁷ VB-102 (25 November 1920); Julius Bode, *Wotan und Jesus: Ein Büchlein von christlichem Deutschtum* (Sontra in Hessen: Frei Deutschland, 1920), 47, his emphasis.

¹²⁸ Emil Tetzlaff, *Bergpredigt und Eddalehre* (Zeit: Sis-Verlag, 1921).

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desire for a “myth of the blood” and religion that would match the “Nordic racial soul.” While arguing that those advocating “Germanic faith” had not developed their religion beyond the theoretical, he also believed that their “researches...in the field of Nordic religious history” would certainly “form the leaven, which will permeate the former Catholic and former Lutheran components of the German Church. Then the Nordic sagas and fairy-tales will take the place of the Old Testament stories of pimps and cattle-dealers.”¹²⁹

More significantly, in January 1921 two prominent articles appeared in the VB on “State, Religion, Church” and “Aryan Faith.”¹³⁰ The first of these, by Alfred Miller, is characterised by Hastings as an article in support of religious Catholicism but against political Catholicism.¹³¹ Certainly Miller dealt principally with Catholicism, although he opened his article with the idea that it was a “great misfortune” and “part of the tragedy of our history, that we are a religiously divided *Volk*” and with the impossibility of the “unification of both confessions on a common basis.”¹³² This is a sharp contrast to Steigmann-Gall’s notion that Christianity was meant to form a cohesive function in the Nazi Party.¹³³ What was proposed was not a new “type” or “form” of Christianity, but that people should remain in their existing religious organisations and dedicated to pre-

¹²⁹ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, 63–66 edn. (Munich: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1935), 613–14. He used “Zuhälter- und Viehhändlergeschichten.” In 1933 the “German Christian” leader Reinhold Krause was working in line with Rosenberg’s efforts when he just as controversially proposed “liberation from all that is un-German in liturgy and confession...from all those stories about cattle-dealers and pimps (*Viehhändler- und Zuhältergeschichten*)”: Peter Matheson, *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A Documentary Account of Christian Resistance and Complicity During the Nazi Era* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 39 (with adjustments).

¹³⁰ Both appeared in the section “Völkische Rundschau”: “Staat, Religion, Kirche,” VB-1/2 (6 January 1921); “Arisches Glaubenstum,” VB-4 (13 January 1921).

¹³¹ Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 396–97.

¹³² VB-1/2 (6 January 1921).

¹³³ Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 49–50, 51. This conclusion comes at the end of a chapter ostensibly dealing with the NSDAP to 1923 (see 13–14).

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existing forms of Christian faith, so long as these did not challenge the state—which, unlike the confessions, was charged with caring for the “good of the whole nation.”

Miller was adamant that what had to be maintained was “religious peace,” because the good of the Volk “stands higher” than any given confession. He portrayed religion as fundamentally divisive and nationalism as cohesive. Miller was far more interested in the extent to which the “national idea” became “flesh and blood” reality “in a confessional group” than in the beliefs of any given religious confession. What had to stand supreme was the welfare of all (*Volkswohl*), and “confessional egoism” had no place in this.

Miller believed it was “the greatest interest of the state” to allow every freedom to church communities “in the observance of its cult.” Relying on the Nazi Program he noted “so long, and this must be particularly emphasised, as it is not hostile to the state.” The state task was to unify; the church task was to produce good citizens. The church was to be a “spiritual force” or power, and not oppose the “Christian spirit” by creeping into the realm of “worldly power.” The article was in essence one of religious tolerance, so long as religious groups did not oppose the state or move beyond their realm. In Miller’s view this was emphatically the spiritual realm and not the material world—except insofar as religion was a “protector and promoter of morality and order”¹³⁴

The article on “Aryan faith” began by noting that this formed a major topic of debate in German-völkisch circles.¹³⁵ The author (listed as Fr. Dietrich) argued for a “pure, Aryan, Christianity,” but simultaneously demonstrated the confusing mish-mash of pagan and esoteric influences that were supposed to form such an “Aryan”

¹³⁴ VB-1/2 (6 January 1921). If this gave a Catholic perspective, then a Protestant position was provided shortly thereafter by Alfred Rosenberg in “1789?–1517!”: VB-16 (22 February 1921).

¹³⁵ VB-4 (13 January 1921).

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Christianity. Dietrich was clearly aware of List and Liebenfels. A year earlier, he argued in his article “The Problem of all Problems” that those in the völkisch movement required a far greater understanding of racial knowledge, and recommended “the racial researcher *Dr. Lanz-Liebenfels*.” In this earlier piece Dietrich wrote of “the sacredness of the blood” and that “Priests and leaders of the people” had to “again preach racial teaching and care for the race,” which he believed was advocated by “holy scripture.”¹³⁶ This was exactly in line with Liebenfels and his views.

In his article on “Aryan Faith” in 1921, Dietrich argued a “degeneration and bestialisation” had occurred due to a lack of concern with racial purity in offspring, using the term “*Tschandalen*,” a prominent term drawn from Liebenfels’ work. This related to an interest in the “Hindu codes of Manu,” and Liebenfels had used “the Sanskrit term *candala* (Tschandale), which denoted the lowest caste of untouchables” to mean “the mongrelized racial inferiors and lower social classes of modern times.”¹³⁷ Dietrich used this term as a matter of course, even in adjectival form, demonstrating an assumption that his readers were also familiar with the work of Liebenfels. Perhaps part of the reason for assuming that those reading the paper were aware of völkisch literature was that it was still speaking to a relatively small group of people. By Mühlberger’s estimates, the VB circulation was about 10,000 until June 1922 and about 17,000 at its highest point to November 1923.¹³⁸

There can be little doubt that Dietrich was a disciple of Liebenfels. He referred to “the saviour Jesus Christ, also called Frauja (Gothic) and Froh.” Jesus was referred to as “Frauja” by Liebenfels, who summarised his own writings thus: “In these works I have

¹³⁶ VB-3 (10 January 1920). His emphases.

¹³⁷ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 100, 242n.36. I have translated this as “mongrelized.”

¹³⁸ Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 21.

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brought the anthropological and archaeological proof, that the gods once actually lived upon this earth...Froh-di, Frauja, Teuto is the god become man, the ‘god-man’ (Gottmensch) and in the ancient ariosophical writings consubstantial with the ‘son’ or ‘Christ.’”¹³⁹ “Froh” referred to the pagan god Freyr, following Richard Wagner’s usage.¹⁴⁰ Dietrich also argued in favour of Liebenfels’ odd views on St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the renowned Cistercian monk, giving a vote of support for St. Bernard as having “again made the German Catholic Church Aryan.”¹⁴¹

Liebenfels, who had been a Cistercian monk himself, had argued that the system of “Ariosophy” had been preserved by the Cistercian Order, seeing “this order and its famous leader St Bernard of Clairvaux as the principal force behind Ariosophy in the Middle Ages.” St. Bernard had also been prominently connected to the Knights Templar, “regarded by Liebenfels as the armed guard of Ariosophy.”¹⁴² This places Dietrich’s article very much within the notion of an “ario-Christian” tradition advocated by Liebenfels, “originally practised by the Aryan god-men and perpetuated by the monastic traditions of the West.”¹⁴³ There was little reason to mention St. Bernard or his making Catholicism “Aryan” outside of Liebenfels’ mystical-racist notions.

The larger concern of the article on “Aryan Faith” was the “racial soul,” and what did or did not speak to this *Rassenseele* when one looked to Jews and Aryans. Religion was dictated by the “tug of the racial soul,” that is by characteristics possessed (or lacking) by a particular “race.” In essence, this was in line with Chamberlain. Dietrich

¹³⁹ VB-4 (13 January 1921). Lanz-Liebenfels, *Psalmen deutsch*, 1, 13. He argued these were names for the “Tribal-god” (*Stammgott*) of the Aryan race.

¹⁴⁰ See “Froh” and “Freyr” in Simek, *Northern Mythology*. Simek records that Freyr was “the most powerful god of fertility of Germanic mythology” and that it “has been realized for a long time that Fróði and Freyr are identical.” According to Simek, “Teut” was a “god invented by poets in the eighteenth century” that came from “Tuisto.”

¹⁴¹ VB-4 (13 January 1921).

¹⁴² Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 210-11.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 102-3.

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argued that the Aryans had a continuing spiritual inheritance which had become their Christian faith, a faith of “the Goths, the Vandals and many other tribes of the Germanic Volk” which had allowed them to perform heroic deeds. He argued that this faith was also “in the sign of the cross, which...is an ancient Aryan sacred symbol and which derives its origin directly from the swastika.” What had obscured (*verdunkelt*) this faith was supposedly the “dark racial spirit” which had destroyed “the Aryan religion of light (*Lichtreligion*), the faith in the hero of light and Logos, in the saviour Jesus Christ...” This relied on the writings of Guido von List.¹⁴⁴

Christianity itself was then not only a continuation of ancient Aryan belief but one that was in dire straits, and this “obfuscation of the true sense of Christianity” was linked to the rise of “non-Aryan Priests,” who had “shrouded and mongrelized this Aryan-Christian faith, precisely as the mongrelized Rabbis of the judaized Israelites made the Edda written in Hebrew, called the Bible, into a Jewish book” while they “falsified” and “distorted” whatever “did not fit with their racial soul, without however being able to touch the core, which, because it was of a pure Aryan spirit, was incomprehensible to them.”¹⁴⁵

This was a pagan-Christian blend (the *Edda* as the Bible, the swastika as the cross) and fitted solidly within the esoteric völkisch tradition. Dietrich’s view was close to that of Döllinger: that the Bible was “Aryan-Germanic” pagan myth that had been misunderstood and misappropriated by the Jews. Both men clearly relied on Liebenfels

¹⁴⁴ VB-4 (13 January 1921). For instance, List wrote of “Logos” and the idea that the Aryan Lichtreligion and its rites were “obscured” (*verdunkelt*) by the “dark as night Asiatic-Roman demon-faith” in List, *Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 55.

¹⁴⁵ VB-4 (13 January 1921). In German: “*die tschandalischen Rabbiner... [machten] aus der hebräisch geschriebenen Edda, Bibel genannt, ein Judenbuch.*”

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for their views.¹⁴⁶ Once again the Jews were not the Israelites, and in Dietrich’s view there was the implication that the Israelites were “Aryan.”

Dietrich did not want to “fabricate a surrogate [religion]”, but believed they needed to only rediscover “Aryan” Christianity, this continuation of ancient Germanic faith. It meant stripping everything that was viewed as having been added by the “uncircumcised Jew-pack”, removing “lower racial” notions that had accrued over the centuries (including by Tschandalen), having “pure Aryan priests” and taking back “*our* churches, which were mostly nothing other than pure Aryan places of cult-worship (*Kultstätten*), Germanic *Halgadome*.”¹⁴⁷

This last notion referred to a peculiar term linked to List’s ideas of “sacred places” (*Halgadome*, *Heilstätte*) which included “not solely the church, naturally the church of Wotan or the Armanen” but also the locale for schools, community gatherings, the government.¹⁴⁸ Dietrich might well have been reliant on List’s arguments for “a Wotanist background to any Christian institution” based on an early Christian practice of re-consecrating “old pagan shrines.”¹⁴⁹

The “Halgadom” concept was also found in the secret leagues of the Germanic Order and Thule Society, and some leading figures in the Nazi Party had belonged to these groups.¹⁵⁰ Rudolf von Sebottendorff wrote on the “Germanic lodges” of such groups in July 1918, contrasting them to Freemasons’ lodges—which were often disparaged due to conspiracy theories amongst völkisch adherents (and the Nazis) that

¹⁴⁶ Liebenfels’ journal *Ostara* was an acknowledged source for Döllinger, just as it was clearly a primary source for Dietrich.

¹⁴⁷ VB-4 (13 January 1921). I have used the German form (*Halgadom*), given it is a peculiar term.

¹⁴⁸ List, *Die Armanenschaft der Ario-Germanen*, 1, 20. See also Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 57.

¹⁴⁹ For which he cited a letter by Pope Gregory the Great: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 67-8, 237. On this basis, List supposedly re-discovered “an extended network of shrines and sanctuaries dedicated to the gods of the Wotanist religion.”

¹⁵⁰ Phelps, “Before Hitler Came,” 245-61. This included the co-founder of the German Workers’ Party, Karl Harrer: Phelps, “Hitler and the DAP,” 977.

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they were the tool of the Jews.¹⁵¹ Sebottendorff noted that the “Germanic lodges” only recognised a “brotherhood of blood” and sought to use “the iron sword and the iron hammer” to build a mystical “German Halgadam” that was to be the Germanic equivalent of the “Temple of Zion.”¹⁵²

This played a role in the induction of members of the Germanic Order. Having been required to make a “Blood Confession” of racial purity, they were to receive a copy of the advertising brochure for the order which carried the swastika, a picture of Wotan and ended with “*Heil und Sieg*” (Hail and Victory), comparable to the Nazis’ “*Sieg Heil*” (Hail Victory).¹⁵³ Having met the conditions of “racial purity,” the initiate came to a point of acceptance which symbolically represented “the return of the lost Aryan to the German Halgadam.”¹⁵⁴

This early VB article on “Aryan faith” has been fundamentally misconstrued in recent literature. Derek Hastings contended that it was a defence launched by the VB in response to attacks by Augustin Bea which connected the “radical anti-Semitism of the local völkisch milieu, including the NSDAP, to the Germanic racial and religious ideas of both Fritsch and Dinter...” Hastings argued Dietrich was directly “[d]istancing himself (and the NSDAP) from the anti-Christian Germanic religious ideologies with which the Nazis were being linked,” stating that the article “urged völkisch Catholics to stay faithful

¹⁵¹ See for instance the discussion on these lines in Anton Drexler, *Mein politisches Erwachen: Aus dem Tagebuch eines deutschen sozialistischen Arbeiters*, 1st edn. (Munich: Deutscher Volksverlag, 1919), 16-17, 27-29. My thanks to Yale University Library for access to their copy.

¹⁵² von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 24-25. This was by contrast to the Freemasons, who were described as seeking the Temple of Zion.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 42, 190, 202. These can be traced to List’s earlier notions (from 1906) that “Heil und Sieg” was an ancient Aryan “cry of greeting and battle”: List, *Geheimnis der Runen*, 14. “Heil und Sieg” was used as a greeting at some early NSDAP gatherings: Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 75. See also the use of “Heil!” by Georg Ritter von Schönerer in 1902: Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 43.

¹⁵⁴ von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 42.

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to the Catholic ‘faith of their fathers.’”¹⁵⁵ Yet Dietrich was fixed solidly within völkisch traditions, and the notion that the article was “written clearly for a Catholic audience” is incorrect.¹⁵⁶ It was clearly written for a völkisch audience.

Even what Dietrich understood by “Christianity” is questionable, given his focus on Liebenfels, though his article indicates agreement with the latter’s idea of Christianity as a “racial cult religion.” Dietrich’s article linked the Nazis completely to List, Liebenfels and the entire world of esoteric faith that they represented (described as “non-Christian” by Goodrick-Clarke).¹⁵⁷ If this was a “programmatic article” then the Nazi Party could be considered to adhere to Liebenfels—even more so given the views of Max Sesselmann.¹⁵⁸

Hastings was heavily reliant on the fact that one argument presented was that Christianity was not necessarily “saturated with a semitic spirit,” and hence that it should not be discarded outright (as some German Faith advocates argued).¹⁵⁹ This is certainly correct, but Dietrich also believed the Christian faith was controlled by Jews. In point of fact, Dietrich’s argument was that *both* the German Faith and Christianity could be imbued with a “semitic spirit” if not enough emphasis was placed on “the racial question...the question of the breed and pure-breed of Aryan-heroic people.” This was again in line with Liebenfels.¹⁶⁰ The key issue was racial purity.

This, of itself, included the idea that there was a particular “racial” spirituality (the “racial soul”) which could only be maintained through *physical* racial purity, through Aryans leading and controlling the religious system. Hence, if the “new German Faith”

¹⁵⁵ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 105.

¹⁵⁶ Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 399.

¹⁵⁷ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 105.

¹⁵⁹ VB-4 (13 January 1921). Although a slew of German Faith organisations were advertised as “not requiring” people to leave the church: von Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben*, 44. Only those who were “church-free members” were meant to belong to the “German Faith Community.”

¹⁶⁰ VB-4 (13 January 1921). The term “arisch-heroisch” was one used by Liebenfels: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 110.

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were to become a “religious system” like “Catholicism or Buddhism” without enough emphasis on race, then “also mixed-breeds (*Mischlinge*), uncircumcised and circumcised Jews would soon take over the leading roles in the German faith” and drag it down to their “lower-racial” level so that “in the not too distant future” the German Faith would “find itself in exactly the same situation that Christianity finds itself in today.” The essential notion was one of physical purging, and Jesus driving the money-changers from the Temple was cited as the appropriate example to follow.

A year after they proclaimed themselves to be in support of “positive Christianity” the Nazis were publicly supporting the neo-pagan and esoteric religious views of the völkisch movement, from the “teachings of the Armanen” to Liebenfels. Hastings argued that the Bavarian People’s Party “and its allies in the press” attempted “to label the Nazi movement in Munich as religiously dangerous to Catholics by linking it to the anti-Catholic or overtly anti-Christian sentiments of völkisch organisations elsewhere.”¹⁶¹ It is clear that there was a solid basis for such an argument. In my view, the articles in the VB demonstrate that the Nazis accepted a very diverse range of views, from support for Jesus through to anti-Christian and anti-Catholic sentiments.¹⁶²

The Cross as a Sun-Wheel: Other Solstice Celebrations

Christmas of 1920 was no mere anomaly. The next major celebration of the “positive Christian” Nazi Party was not Easter (which is noticeably absent) but summer solstice. In *The National Socialist*, as the VB was temporarily known, Anton Drexler wrote on the “National Socialist Solstice” in the column “From the Movement.” The main speaker at the event was quoted as arguing “a visible sign of

¹⁶¹ Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 104.

¹⁶² See the anti-Catholic article “Dangerous Nationalism” in VB-12 (8 February 1921), cf. Anton Drexler, “Are Socialists able to be Anti-Semites (*Judengegner*)?”, VB-46 (12 June 1921). Drexler argued Jesus was the “first Socialist” and the “first active anti-Semite.”

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the return to German thought is the resurgence of the wonderful old custom of the festival of solstice.” The speaker (and Drexler) took the solstice as indicative of their own anti-Semitic worldview: the possibility of Germany’s revival from subjugation by the Jews.¹⁶³

Not only was solstice a pagan celebration, but the Nazis’ newspaper reported on others “from the movement” who celebrated it as such. Directly alongside Drexler’s report, there was an extensive consideration of Hunkel’s utopian settlement “Donnershag” and the solstice held by the settlers of this “Germanic Order.”¹⁶⁴ Ernst Hunkel gave the speech, and the VB quoted it at length: “The Summer-solstice is a symbol of the sinking light, of dying life. Its secret is the certainty of rebirth.” Hunkel was speaking largely of the idea that Germany would experience a comparable rebirth.

Hunkel’s sources were the Germanic pagan gods and heroes, specifically mentioning the death of “Baldur, the sun-god,” and the saga of the “sun-hero and son of god Siegfried.” There was the implication of “Siegfried” as a saviour-figure across German history, as Hunkel argued of “Armin” (Hermann).¹⁶⁵ Hunkel concluded: “Siegfried’s birth in us—that is our solstice-prayer!”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ *Der Nationalsozialist* (hereafter NS) 2/3 (3 July 1921). The VB was banned from being published until 22 July 1921. To circumvent this legal requirement, the paper was published as “The National Socialist” from 26 June until 21 July, but was otherwise identical. It regained its old title from VB-58 (24 July 1921). Drexler’s article at least appears to have been the continuation of “Aus der Bewegung.” In the same edition Drexler attacked “the Bible” (specifically the Old Testament) as a Jewish book in an article entitled “Bible and Politics.”

¹⁶⁴ NS-2/3 (3 July 1921).

¹⁶⁵ The battle of Hermann (Arminius) against the Romans in the Teutoburg forest was a significant part of German nationalist tradition: see George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 58-62.

¹⁶⁶ NS-2/3 (3 July 1921). For a consideration of Donnershag and the “German Faith Community,” see *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung”, 1871–1918*, 265, 407; *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*, esp. 19-21, 26; Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum*, 91-100.

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By December 1922, Margart Hunkel’s book *Von deutscher Gottesmutterschaft* was also being recommended as an appropriate “Christmas present” by the VB’s bookshop, though it was the fifth book in a series on “German Faith.”¹⁶⁷ While much of the content promoted the same kind of notions as the Nazis themselves, such as women’s role principally being motherhood, it was openly pagan. Margart Hunkel advised her readers that Christmas was the “night of the winter solstice” and a “great mother-night of the light,” bearing “the divine sun-hero” so that “sacred runes” were hung on a Christmas tree to symbolise “rebirth.”¹⁶⁸

Another recommended Christmas present was Ludwig Neuner’s work, which argued in favour of a “German-scientific nature religion” that incorporated pagan mythology.¹⁶⁹ Paganism was by no means omitted by the Nazis from their paper. Quite the contrary, in 1921 it was promoted as a part of the same movement that the Nazi Party itself belonged to. This could hardly be missed when news of the NSDAP solstice and that of Donnershag appeared alongside one another in *The National Socialist*.

The Nazi Christmas for 1921 (actually held on January 9, 1922) was advertised openly as a celebration of pagan solstice:

The celebration of Christmas represents the most German of all celebrations. Through it our people have since time immemorial celebrated the great turning point in the annual cycle, the day on which the sun begins once more to constantly expand the height of its orbit in

¹⁶⁷ VB-100 (16 December 1922); Margart Hunkel, *Von deutscher Gottesmutterschaft*, *Deutscher Glaube: Beiträge zur religiösen Erneuerung unseres Volkes* 5 (Sontra in Hessen: Verlag Jungborn, 1919). The title is difficult to translate, meaning literally *On German Mother-of-God-hood*. It was advertised alongside such staples as Dinter’s *Sin against the Blood*. Margart was Hunkel’s wife.

¹⁶⁸ Hunkel, *Von deutscher Gottesmutterschaft*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ VB-100 (16 December 1922). Neuner’s book (*Gott-Natur-Kunde*) had been advertised and positively reviewed in earlier issues: VB-25 (29 March 1922), VB-27 (5 April 1922).

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the sky, the day on which, in the midst of winter, the soul of the people is

awakened once more by the yearning for a new spring.¹⁷⁰

Like the Nazis’ summer solstice celebration of 1921 (and 1922), part of the point was that the changing seasons stood as a metaphor for the “resurrection of our people” that the Nazis sought: “This breakthrough will come roaring in like spring and destroy everything that stands in its way.”¹⁷¹

The mood of the entire evening was set by the fact that a march was played, followed by the recitation of a poem that focused specifically on “Germany.” Indeed, Germany was the focus of the whole event. This was an event held only in the most nominal way for “Christmas” (as the birth of Christ). Unsurprisingly, music and songs were performed from Richard Wagner’s works, including the bridal chorus from *Lohengrin*, and both the “magic thunderstorm” (*Genetterzäuber*) and the “entrance of the gods into Valhalla” from *Rheingold*. This fitted with the pagan solstice, but hardly seemed to link to Christmas.¹⁷²

At the event itself, Hitler presented a “Yule speech” and an interpretation of an “Aryan” Jesus that contrasted German “idealism” and Jewish “materialism”: “[Hitler] outlined for us Germans the sense of the German Christmas festival (Weihnachtsfest): in the birth of the solitary spiritual colossus in a stable two world-views collided with one another, between which there can never be a reconciliation, a ‘compromise’...the mammonistic-materialist world-view and idealism.” The VB reported he went on to

¹⁷⁰ Mühlberger, *Hitler's Voice*, 1, 84–85.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 85. The advertisement for Christmas 1921 appeared next to the column “From the Movement” which advertised the League for the Edda (*Eddabund*): VB-2 (7 January 1922): 3. See also the large front-page advertisement and report on the “*Deutsche Sonnenwendfeier*” for summer 1922: VB-50 (24 June 1922), VB-51 (28 June 1922). Dietrich Eckart delivered the solstice speech.

¹⁷² There were also musical pieces from Beethoven, Schubert and Handel: VB-3 (11 January 1922); VB-4 (14 January 1922).

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argue that if “idealism” died out, so too did the Volk. “Idealism” had built up “peoples and states”: “Where however the spirit of materialism, brought in through the Jewish race, spreads itself widely, there began the descent and downfall.”

Hitler argued it appeared as if Germany had already fallen due to this materialist spirit: “But there is *one* festival in the year, the *Yule festival*, the *German* festival, that proves to us nonetheless in our shame and disgrace, that the spark of idealism lives, that it lives in millions of Germans...and it will again become a flame which ignites all German hearts, so that they do away with the plague of egoism, with the Jewish-mammonistic spirit of usury and with this race itself, in that [the Jews] will be thrown out of the country.” The report concluded Hitler had “planted the banner of *faith* in Germany’s revival.”¹⁷³

By 1922 the Christmas celebration was being publicly described as both a pagan and Christian event. At the event itself (according to the police report) Hitler essentially took Jesus as an example and model for the Nazis of how one could start small and make it big. The VB report emphasised that Hitler began with the idea that perhaps Germany’s servitude was “necessary for an inner moral rebirth,” going on to argue:

The man, whose birthday we celebrate today, allowed that one should render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, that appeared less important to him, but he took up the relentless struggle against the domination of evil that erodes us. It is not throwing off the outer force that will make us free, but rather first of all the inner purging....Money rules the world it is said. But

¹⁷³ VB-3 (11 January 1922). In the völkisch movement, there was a prevailing notion that the “German spirit” was “idealistic” while the “Jewish spirit” was “materialistic”: Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 50. On earlier debates about Jews and materialism, see Todd Weir, “The Specter of ‘Godless Jewry’: Secularism and the ‘Jewish Question’ in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Central European History* 46 (2013): 815–49.

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a hero was born poor and demolished an entire world.

Hitler’s point was the same “heroic spirit” of those who died in World War I was required for the youth in order to achieve “the cleansing of our Volk within.” He ended: “We do not wish to be Christians only by word but Christians of deed, of the sword. Battle the materialistic plague, fight for ideals.” This reference to the “materialistic plague” meant the Jews, according to police reports: “Already 1900 years ago the world was infected by the Jews and the Jewish spirit exactly like today, and when Christ rebelled against the huckster spirit, they nailed him to the cross.”¹⁷⁴

In the months prior to this, Hitler had made statements that have some bearing on his speech. In November, he argued that if “Christ went through the world today” he would say: “You should not *learn* from the Jews, you should *deny* them.” Relying on Jesus driving the money-changers from the Temple (Matthew 21) he expressed his “Christian attitude” toward the Jews: “The means change over the course of time. What today is a black-jack, was earlier a whip.” On December 4 he had apparently argued a perspective akin to Liebenfels or Dinter, that Christianity was racially specific: “The Christian religion is only created for the Aryans, for other peoples it is absurd.” Only shortly thereafter he argued that “positive Christianity” meant “the sword with its grip in the shape of a cross” not the religion that “asked one to turn the other cheek.”¹⁷⁵

Concurrent with reports on the Yule festival of December 17, 1922 was an article written at length by Alfred Rosenberg in response to an attack by Cardinal Faulhaber:

Soon we will celebrate Christmas, also a unification of the ancient and the
new: the Yule-tide of our ancestors who lived in tune with nature, who

¹⁷⁴ See the various reports in Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 769–70. I am mostly relying on VB-101 (20 December 1922).

¹⁷⁵ Speeches of 2 November, 4 December, 8 December 1922 in Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 720, 754, 756.

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greeted the coming light out of the night [of winter], and the day of remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ, as a day that signifies religious fulfilment for millions of our forefathers and current Volk-comrades. In this spirit we National Socialists celebrate Christmas: In the sign of the interconnection (*Verbundensein*) of the cross with the swastika.

This openly portrayed the swastika as a pagan symbol linked to Germanic “Yule” traditions. Rosenberg went on to argue that the cross did not represent the crucifix upon which Christ died—which he argued was a T shape—but was instead a simplification of the swastika. Therefore “the cross as such” was “an ancient symbol of salvation and of the sun (*Heils- und Sonnensymbol*).”

His explanation was that the “sun-wheel” had been simplified into the form of the cross and adopted by early Christians. What this meant was that Christians were supposedly still using the cross/swastika as a sun-wheel, which on the one hand conflated Christian belief and Nazism (cross and swastika), and on the other hand undercut Christianity as a religion. Christianity was not seen as a unique faith system, but a part of (and a continuation of) older “Aryan” concepts of sun-worship, to the extent that Rosenberg argued the Chi-rho was “originally the sign of the Egyptian son of god Horus.”¹⁷⁶

This consistency of a pagan aspect to the Nazi Christmas helps to explain why Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen was a prominent participant on December 17, 1922,

¹⁷⁶ VB-101 (20 December 1922). In this last argument, Rosenberg was following his hero Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who himself followed Flinders Petrie: Chamberlain, *Foundations* 2, 28-29; W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Religion and Conscience in Ancient Egypt: Lectures delivered at University College* (London: Methuen, 1898), 45-47. Rosenberg’s other argument was that the swastika appeared on older Christian churches and monuments, so it should not be rejected as pagan. He borrowed directly from Jörg Lechler, following him point for point: Jörg Lechler, *Vom Hakenkreuz: Die Geschichte eines Symbols*, Vorzeit: vol. 1 (Leipzig: Curt Kabitzsch, 1921), 25-26. Cf. Lorenz Pieper’s speech on this same topic in July 1923: Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 127-28.

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reading out “German poems” and a *Hakenkreuzlermarsch* (March for those who bear the swastika).¹⁷⁷ He was very well known as an advocate for a pagan “German Faith” and as an opponent of Christianity; Puschner lists him as one of the most important of those involved in the “non-Christian wing” of the “völkisch-religious movement,” on par with Ludwig Fahrenkrog, Guido von List and Otto Sigfrid Reuter.¹⁷⁸

As he declared in the Foreword to his *Guide to German Faith*, von Wolzogen had changed his original title “Small Catechism of German Faith” because he wished to ensure that “we adherents of the German Faith” were not connected to the church in any way. He believed Christianity was one of the “Asiatic religions” and that “Christianity and Germanness are eternally irreconcilable opposites” both because the Christian faith focused on the hereafter (*Jenseit*) rather than this world (*Diesseit*), and because Christianity sought to defend the weak and ill, which he believed was contrary to true German Faith. He argued in favor of people actively leaving the churches.¹⁷⁹

Yet when he came to describe annual festivals for the neo-pagans, he began with Christmas (Weihnacht oder Julfest) and Easter (Osterfest). These were described as pagan, with Weihnacht representing “The highest festival of joy of the rebirth of the light out of the long winter-night” and arguing one should hold events in commemoration “of the nights of the spirits of the Wild Hunt” and the “battles of Thor” with the ice-giants.¹⁸⁰ The “Wild Hunt” was a pagan myth referring to “the ghostly riders who ride through the storms at the head of a ghostly army during the Twelve Nights of

¹⁷⁷ VB-101 (20 December 1922). The *Hakenkreuzlermarsch* was published in the same issue. Both Ernst and Hans Freiherr von Wolzogen (prominently connected to Bayreuth and Richard Wagner) openly declared their support for Hitler when he ran for President: VB-101/102 (10/11 April 1932).

¹⁷⁸ Uwe Puschner, “Weltanschauung und Religion, Religion und Weltanschauung”: 24.

¹⁷⁹ von Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben*, 16, 29.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 33. Wolzogen was in favour of Donner, Baldur and Ostara as “the goddess of youth and the first Spring” (34): hence his support for Easter. He used “Donner” (thunder) following Richard Wagner, who used this as his “version of the Germanic god Donar/Thor in the opera *Das Rheingold*”: “Donner” and “Donar” in Simek, *Northern Mythology*.

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Yuletide.”¹⁸¹ What this means is that the celebration of Christmas as Weihnacht is no indication as to the faith position of those involved in the völkisch movement.

The other point is that when we have such a prominent advocate for neo-pagan German Faith participating in Nazi events, then we need to reconsider the extent to which we can call the early Nazi movement “Christian.” Granted, we have no evidence he spoke on paganism at the Nazi Christmas, but to have even invited him to participate was tantamount to a public declaration, in the world of völkisch Munich, that paganism was accepted in the Nazi Party. I would argue that at the very least it further demonstrates the Nazis were not dissociating themselves from the pagans in the völkisch movement.

Even though there was a systematic push to appeal to Christians (especially Catholics) in 1923, the call to battle issued in the VB for the Munich Putsch on November 9 still ranged from “Germanic” Christianity to paganism and used concepts that derived from Madame Blavatsky but that had been popularized by Theodor Fritsch: “The horrific Marxist episode, this devilish product, the result of the crossing of Talmudic spirit and materialistic insanity, vanishes before the Christian-Germanic world-view, which in one quick movement breaks the chains which had been forged when darkness ruled. The eternal struggle between Ormuzd and Ahriman, between light and darkness, has once again ended in the victory of the sun, whose symbol is the ancient Aryan sign of salvation, the swastika!”¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ “Wild Hunt,” Simek, *Northern Mythology*.

¹⁸² Mühlberger, *Hitler's Voice*, 1, 90. This was a special edition of the VB. Döllinger had expressed remarkably similar sentiments about World War I: Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel*, 182.

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Conclusion

There are three major conclusions that we reach from examining the Nazi Christmas celebrations, and early views on religion in the NSDAP. The first is that there was no cohesive meaning to “positive Christianity.” If it did not exclude paganism or the esoteric views of List and Liebenfels, then it did not seem to have meant much at all in the early party. There were undoubtedly leading Nazis who considered themselves Christians, and Christians who were wholeheartedly Nazis.¹⁸³ Yet it is equally clear that the Nazi Party embraced views from the outset that ranged from paganism to some kind of “Aryan” Christian belief. For a “positive Christian” party to promote and report its own Christmas celebrations as the pagan solstice in the first two years of its existence is very revealing. It shows a lack of concern as to exactly how “Christian” the Nazis appeared, and demonstrates the spectrum of religious views.

Despite having nominally declared themselves for “a positive Christianity,” Nazi Party members in practice were adherents of a wide range of beliefs, views which were expressed publicly and prominently—including in the VB under Nazi control. The concept of an “Aryan” Jesus intermingled with the ideas of Guido von List and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, Theodor Fritsch and Artur Dinter. Not even the German Faith advocates were excluded from the NSDAP. The Nazis’ official newspaper reported their ideas, recommended their books, reported their ceremonies and carried notices of their meetings.

Given this, the second conclusion is that the Nazi Party at its foundation was immersed in the völkisch movement, including its pagan trends. As I have demonstrated

¹⁸³ See for instance: Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Spicer, *Hitler's Priests*; Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

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in this essay, Liebenfels, List, Dinter and Fritsch were all promoted. This leads to the need for a greater consideration of the manner in which major writers and concepts from this movement were blended in Nazi ideology. This is especially the case given the third major conclusion: that we cannot assume an inherent dichotomy between those adhering to paganism and those adhering to “Aryan” Christianity in the Nazi Party. Nor can we assume that references to Jesus Christ, Christianity or the Bible necessarily excluded paganism.

As I have shown, the distinctive interpretations offered in the völkisch milieu (including by Nazi advocates) meant that the god of Jesus Christ could become Baldur or a “light-god” of some form, that the Bible might be seen as a corrupted version of the *Edda*, and that the cross could be believed to be a sun-wheel. Simply put, when the Nazi Party was founded it was a völkisch party, and the range of religious views is indicative of this. If we begin to lose sight of this, and fail to locate the Nazi Party within the völkisch movement as a whole, then a real danger arises that we will remain ignorant of some of the most significant influences on the NSDAP at its very foundation. I believe that one of the largest problems still facing historians in this field is the identification of dominant trends from the earlier völkisch movement that fed into the Nazi movement. It appears to me that one major point of continuity was the notion that race ultimately defined religiosity, dictating one’s capacity for religion.¹⁸⁴

Given the specific focus of this paper, it is difficult to consider in any depth the wider impact of such a heterogenous approach. Yet I would suggest some significant implications for the longer history of the Nazi Party. Chief amongst these is that

¹⁸⁴ This was not limited by religious form, but relied on a broader assumption that Aryans were “spiritual” or “moral” while Jews were not. This certainly fits with some of the early völkisch writers like Chamberlain or Dinter.

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“positive Christianity” appears to have been included in the Nazi Program for political ends, rather than as a declaration of support for a particular form of faith. It was politically useful to argue that the Nazi Party “as such” supported “a positive Christianity,” but this lacked cohesion as a concept and embraced an extremely diverse range of views at the very moment when it was proclaimed.

Another important implication is that of continuity.¹⁸⁵ The use of religion to political or strategic ends was one such point of continuity, and it has recently been established that during the Second World War the Nazis sought “to instrumentalize Islam” in the “Soviet borderlands.”¹⁸⁶ The heterogenous approach taken in the early Nazi Party did not vanish after 1923, and Nazi leaders in fact continued to adhere to a wide range of religious views. The Nazis certainly did not change their notions regarding Christmas. Solstice was revived as a celebration when the Nazis came to power (particularly within the Hitler Youth) and Christmas was increasingly portrayed as a “Germanic” festival. In conjunction with this, the Nazis established their own rites and myths in what has been characterised as a “political religion.”¹⁸⁷

Richard Steigmann-Gall argued a dichotomy between “positive Christians” and “paganists” which moved from the ascendancy of an “Aryanised” Christianity in the

¹⁸⁵ Though it should be noted that the NSDAP was not loathe to attack other völkisch groups, and that there was undoubtedly tension between the Nazi regime and völkisch organisations: Puschner and Vollnhals, *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*. Staudenmaier has completed excellent research on this topic and offers a nuanced approach, arguing that the Nazis saw “the esoteric as both threat and allure, both fascination and menace”: Peter Staudenmaier, “Nazi Perceptions of Esotericism: The Occult as Fascination and Menace,” in *The Threat and Allure of the Magical: Selected Papers from the 17th Annual Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference, University of California, Berkeley*, ed. Ashwin Manthripragada, Emina Mušanovi and Dagmar Theison (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 24–58.

¹⁸⁶ David Motadel, “Islam and Germany’s War in the Soviet Borderlands, 1941–5,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (2013): 820.

¹⁸⁷ Gajek, “Christmas Under the Third Reich”; Perry, “Nazifying Christmas.” Gajek especially notes the role that folklorists played in reinterpreting Christmas as a “Yule festival” or an especially “German” festival. On the creation of new myths and a “political religion” see for example: Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945* (Vierow: SH-Verlag, 1996); Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarianism and Political Religions* (London: Routledge, 2004).

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early 1930s to the dominance of “paganists” and “anti-Christians” by 1939. Hastings, by contrast, argued that there was a “Catholic inflection” up to 1923, with an increasingly anti-Catholic and anti-Christian orientation after the Munich Putsch.¹⁸⁸ But I would argue that from the very start the Nazi Party included those who advocated paganism, “Aryanised” Christianity, and a full range of views between the two. Certainly neo-paganism and the advocates for a Germanic religion were not excluded from the early party. Such pagan völkisch ideas and anti-Christian views then also continued to be a part of Nazi thought until 1945, as is evidenced by prominent leaders like Heinrich Himmler, Martin Bormann and Adolf Hitler.¹⁸⁹ The fact that such ideas were present from the foundational years may help to explain their endurance.

In effect, religion remained an open question. It could be argued that Hitler closed this question in *Mein Kampf* when he wrote against “German-völkisch wandering scholars.” Yet his larger point was disunity and a sole focus on esotericism as the Nazi Party’s purpose. He feared that this would mean it remained a “tea club” rather than becoming a combative movement.¹⁹⁰ Some of his declared views on religion in the same work were very bizarre, but he was concerned that too strong a focus on religious issues might also mean that the Nazis failed as a political movement.¹⁹¹

Völkisch views on religion were explicitly promoted in works like Alfred Rosenberg’s *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (*Mythus*). There have been recent debates about Rosenberg’s place in the Nazi hierarchy, as well as the influence of this specific

¹⁸⁸ Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 259-60; Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 155-76.

¹⁸⁹ Hastings argues that there was “little or no room within the Nazi ideological universe for any ‘genuine’...Catholic or Christian substance during Hitler’s tenure in power”: Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 182.

¹⁹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Pimlico, 2004), 326-28.

¹⁹¹ Koehne, “Reassessing *The Holy Reich*,” 434-36. Hitler had undoubtedly learned political lessons from previous anti-Catholic movements. When the Nazi Party was refounded, he attacked “attempts to drag religious quarrels into the movement” or to “use the völkisch movement in a religious conflict”: Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 123.

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text. Yet when the Nazis came to power it was believed to be: “Next to *Mein Kampf*, the leading book on National Socialist philosophy.”¹⁹² This was partly because it was prescribed as a school text by April 1933.¹⁹³ *Mythus* caused enormous controversy, and was attacked by the major churches. But Rosenberg’s book—and these attacks—gain an increased significance through the fact that *Mythus* embodied the völkisch trends from the early years of the NSDAP.

Rosenberg advocated the “racial soul,” the blending of “Germanic” faith with Christianity, and even that “Aryans” may have come from the fabled lost continent of Atlantis.¹⁹⁴ He was at least amenable to the concept of a Nordic centre, an “Atlantis,” from which later civilisations derived. This argument was prominent in works like Karl Georg Zschaetzsch’s *Origins and History of the Aryan Race*, which was advertised in the VB in 1921.¹⁹⁵ If Rosenberg’s book embodied the völkisch-religious roots of Nazism, then the churches under the Nazi regime were also engaged in a battle of “world-views.”¹⁹⁶

That said, there is also a great deal of continuity between the early religious views in the NSDAP and the German Christians, which by 1932 were seen as the party of the

¹⁹² H. Holborn, “National Socialism in Germany: A Short Bibliography,” *International Affairs* 13 (1934): 96. Regarding the status of the work: Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 92; Ernst Piper, “Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007): 57.

¹⁹³ Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (London: Batsford, 1972), 82–104, here 103.

¹⁹⁴ Rosenberg, *Mythus*, 24–28 (Atlantis), 21–144 (“Race and the Racial Soul”). The anti-Nazi British organization “Friends of Europe” provided useful contemporary pamphlets on the controversy, including German church responses. See for example: German Catholic Scholars of the Archdiocese of Cologne, *Rosenberg’s Positive Christianity: Rosenberg and the Bible*, translated Richard Downey (London: Friends of Europe, 1935); Heinrich Hüffmeier, *Rosenberg’s German “Mythus”: An Evangelical Answer*, with an introduction by Sidney M. Berry (London: Friends of Europe, 1935). The Vatican placed *Mythus* on the Index of Forbidden Books.

¹⁹⁵ VB-95 (14 December 1921). Meyer had reviewed *Herkunft und Geschichte des arischen Stammes* and praised it for its use of the *Edda* and exploration of the idea that the Aryans sprang from Atlantis: VB-101 (21 November 1920). In 1922 Zschaetzsch published *Atlantis, the Original Home of the Aryans (Atlantis, die Urheimat der Arier)*. Both he and Weinländer/Wieland came to influence Liebenfels: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 209, 262n.1

¹⁹⁶ Raimund Baumgärtner, *Weltanschauungskampf im Dritten Reich: Die Auseinandersetzung der Kirchen mit Alfred Rosenberg* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1977).

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National Socialists in the Protestant Church.¹⁹⁷ Miller’s argument in 1921 that the “national idea” was to be realised in the existing confessions was also the goal of the German Christian Movement. As scholars like Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel have argued, members of this movement were willing to embrace völkisch ideas and freely blend them with Christian beliefs.¹⁹⁸

One final consequence of my argument is the need for specificity. A heterogenous approach to religion problematises the longer history of the Nazi movement. Given this, I believe it is necessary for further studies to consider leading Nazis’ views in greater detail, and to reexamine the relationship between the Nazi state and the churches. The views in the early Nazi Party demonstrate that there were some good reasons for church leaders to be concerned by the rise of the NSDAP.

As I have shown, it is not sufficient to talk of Nazism and religion or Nazism and Christianity without asking the additional question: where did such views fall on the spectrum of belief? Did they consciously rely on existing strands of liberal Christian theology (as with some German Christians) or on strands of esoteric völkisch thought? Did they believe the Israelites were Jews or Aryans? Was their Jesus seen as Baldur or as the Christ of established Christian doctrine?¹⁹⁹ In short, this paper is a call for the adoption of a heterogenous approach in order to understand the full complexity of the historical situation. There was only one thing that all leading Nazis appear to have agreed about: that religion had to measure up to their hyper-racialised and antisemitic ideology.

¹⁹⁷ VB-316/321 (16 November 1932). The group was forced to reconsider this view after Rudolf Hess publicly dissociated the NSDAP from any confessional group in 1933: Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 2 vols (London: SCM Press, 1987), vol. 1, 525, 673.

¹⁹⁸ Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*. See also John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 45ff.

¹⁹⁹ There are already trends in this direction. See for instance: Olav Hammer, ed., *Alternative Christs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially 212–39.