Religion and Belief
Nazism, Political Religion and ‘Ordinary’ Germans

How did the churches – and their communities – respond to Nazism as a political religion?

Dr Samuel Koehne, Deakin University

The study of Nazism and religious belief has been a vibrant field of historical inquiry in recent years. This topic has been the subject of an ever-increasing number of studies, both ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ There have been arguments (as well as counter-arguments) about whether the Nazis were advocating a particular form of faith called ‘positive Christianity,’ whether there might be a kind of ‘special path’ of development in German religion, whether there may be ‘Catholic roots’ to the Nazi Party, or whether we should understand Nazism fundamentally through a racial-biological Darwinian narrative.1

There has also been a fascinating shift towards revising our understanding of the role of the churches in Germany and their support for or opposition to the Nazi Party in power. In 2010, an exhibition at Berlin’s German Historical Museum on ‘Hitler and the Germans’ had one piece in particular that ‘caused the crowds to stop and stare.’2 It was a 1935 tapestry that combined the Lord’s Prayer, a church and the swastika flag. This was an object made by ordinary people, by Christian women, in genuine belief that these three should be interwoven. What seems to have fascinated visitors was that the expectation of a disjunction between the bounds of Christian faith and National Socialism did not exist for those who had made the tapestry.

Numerous recent works have shown that indeed some Christians saw their faith as entirely consistent with National Socialism. As Manfred Gailus put it in an edited collection, it was generally ‘not a good performance’ for the churches.3 The point that surprised crowds in 2010 had already been noted by James Zabel in 1976: ‘Ideas which today may appear to be essentially unchristian were considered by sincere people in … the 1930s to be at the basis of right belief.’4 Susannah Heschel has pointed out that as historians, and grasp ‘the complexity of how religion functions rather than defining its “essence.”’ Complicated and intertwined relationships clearly existed between ‘ordinary Germans’ and the Nazi State, and this was no less true of Christian communities.5

When it comes to the notion of religious opposition, there are two key problems. First is historical complexity and second is defining ‘resistance.’ This becomes all the more difficult when trying to provide information to a general audience. For example,
important internet resources are beginning to become available, such as the dual language website ‘Protestant Christians under the Nazi Regime.’ As Kyle Jantzen has noted, this is an ‘innovative attempt to present the history of Christian resistance’ during the Nazi period but he also notes that it is incumbent on those producing such resources to deal with ‘all aspects … from the heroic to the disgraceful.’

In his classic work, John Conway gives a good summary of this process away from a hagiography of groups like the ‘Confessing Church,’ which was that they and the Catholic Church were ‘uninterruptedly the opponents of Nazism.’ Several authors have been very important in problematising German church history. For instance, Robert Ericksen, Kevin Spicer, Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel have all dealt extensively with the topic of theologians and Christians who found much to agree with in Nazism.

Their works have considered prominent Protestant theologians, Catholic priests, the ‘Faith Movement of the German Christians’ which sought to establish a specifically ‘German’ Church, and those involved in the establishment of the ‘Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life.’ There have also been recent studies that examine the movement for a neo-pagan ‘German Faith.’ Then there has been a growing field of studies, led by Manfred Gailus and Kyle Jantzen, which examines ‘parish politics’ and the responses of individual congregations in recognition of the fact that we need to understand the full diversity of Christian response. This is particularly important because there has been some assumption in the historiography that ‘national and regional church-political issues … were simply replayed locally.’

For those who wish to quickly gain an understanding of the most recent research, I would recommend the journal Contemporary Church History Quarterly, which not only counts many major authors among its editors but also offers free access to reviews of current literature. In addition there is a forthcoming book (Catholics, Protestants, and Nazis, edited by Mark Ruff) that aims to offer a comprehensive introduction to the debates on this topic and access to some major primary source documents, as much of the material is still only available in German.

So how do we begin to make sense of all these diverse trends? What I would like to do in this paper is examine the topic by taking one of the dominant schools of thought – that Nazism was a ‘political religion’ – and dealing directly with an issue that I have often encountered when teaching the history of the Nazi Party. A common question raised by students is this: what could be known about the Nazis when they came to power? While formulated in different ways and sometimes with a different chronological focus, the core of this question is one of historicism. It may be abundantly clear to us now what the Nazis stood for, how racist and antisemitic they were, but we are looking back to the topic with knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust. So what could be known by people then, and how did they view the Nazis? Given my sense that many teachers encounter this questions, I believe it may be a useful prism through which to view Nazism and religion. Moreover, it offers us an opportunity to deal with some approaches mentioned above.

**The Revival of ‘Political Religion’**

One of the simplest ways we can answer the question ‘what could be known?’ is by examining how people actually understood Nazism on the cusp of the so-called ‘seizure of power’ (Machtergreifung) in 1933. In fact, the idea that Nazism forms a ‘political religion’ is not only a dominant theoretical strand, but also marks a return to ideas expressed at the time. Many of those who argue in favour of ‘political religion’ consciously draw...
on Eric Voegelin’s characterisation of Nazism and Communism in precisely
these terms by 1938, though he was not alone in such views. As Emilio
Gentile notes, ‘the first scholars who used the concept of political religion
(or any of its synonyms, such as secular religion and lay religion) in order
to interpret totalitarian movements, were Protestant and Catholic intellectuals
and theologians.’

Gontier has pointed out that Voegelin himself stated in a 1973 interview that his work ‘conformed to the usage of a literature that interpreted ideological movements as a variety of
religions.’

Much modern work is focused on how Nazism and ceremonies were
comparable to those of ecclesiastical tradition and the ways in which Nazism
(as an ideology) might become a substitute or replacement for religion.
A major proponent for using ‘political religion’ as a ‘heuristic tool’ is Hans
Maier, who has argued that two major methods to examine totalitarianism are the analyses of ‘rituals and celebrations through which a “community of
believers” constitutes itself’ and the consideration of ‘totalitarian political understanding, through which at least a minimal religious dimension shines through.’

Maier also points out that there were those at the time who saw ‘the new despotisms’ of Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler as ‘surrogates for religion.’ He cites Eric Voegelin and the novelist Franz Werfel, who wrote in 1932: ‘Communism and National Socialism are primitive stages in the process of overcoming ego. They are ersatz-religions, or if you prefer, ersatz for religion’; ‘the two most important movements of contemporary times, Communism and National Socialism, are anti-religious, yet they are systems of belief acting as religious surrogates and by no means just political ideologies.’

While certainly not as widely known as Voegelin’s work, there were others in the early 1930s who described Nazism and Communism as ideologies which were ‘ersatz religions’ and their adherents as seeking something akin to ‘secularised churches.’ These were the exact expressions used by the Protestant theologian Hermann Sasse in 1932 in the renowned Church Yearbook. Sasse drew out this comparison even further, arguing that in Nazism or Communism:

there are sacred writings (e.g. Das Kapital by Marx) in which one believes, even if one does not know it precisely. Here there are confessions of faith with all the characteristics of a genuine Credo, for example, with the formulas regarding the rejection of false teachings (Communist Manifesto, Chapter 3) or with the prohibition of modification (“The Programme is unalterable,” Constitution of the NSDAP). In these confessions a doctrine is pronounced, which is so self-evident for the faithful that it needs no proof.”

What is intriguing is that precisely these points are now reappearing in some recent literature, including Rainer Bucher’s fascinating work Hitler’s Theology. Bucher makes the point that Hitler believed ‘two lessons could be learned from dogmatic form for the Nazis’ “political confession”: certainty and intolerance.”

While theologians and intellectuals viewed Nazism as fundamentally racial and as an ‘ersatz religion’ or a ‘political religion,’ what about those who might be termed ‘ordinary Germans’? What is fascinating is that the same conclusions were reached in a minor German Christian community known as the Temple-Society (Tempelgesellschaft) by 1932.

A Liberal Christian Response: The Temple-Society

One major problem with the notion of ‘ordinary Germans’ is that no such creatures exist, and the Temples are in some ways very much extraordinary. Nonetheless, there are several reasons for examining such a small and theologically liberal Christian community. To begin with, the relative obscurity of the Temple-Society considerably increases its usefulness. Given that this organisation has operated essentially since its foundation as an independent body with a voluntaristic membership, it was largely free of the church-political and strategic concerns in the large German ‘state churches’ (Landeskirchen, funded through taxation).

The study of such a group also answers the call (issued by Gailus and Jantzen) for the consideration of diverse communities of German Christians. Indeed, this was a Christian community...
whose members were both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ when it came to the rise of the Nazis. The emphases of their faith (including millennialism) had led them to establish nine major communities or ‘colonies’ in Palestine under Ottoman rule, but in doing so they still strongly maintained their German identity.23

In contemporary publications, they were listed as ‘overseas Germans’ and by 1938 they were even used in a racial case-study as to whether German ethnic groups could flourish in a foreign land.24 Despite this perception, there has been a German Temple-Society in Stuttgart since 1873. This German community formed a base for Templer activities, including publishing the Temple-Society’s newspaper, Watchtower of the Temple (Die Warte des Tempels) from 1921–1935. The Watchtower was almost the sole means of linking all Templer communities (including some in Russia and the United States).

Another reason to consider the group is their very liberality of faith, as some of those who were most enthusiastically Nazi and Christian adhered to a liberal theological tradition.25 As Heschel notes, the desire of many liberal theologians was to be ‘modern,’ so some theologians gravitated towards racism as a tool to modernize Christianity and to demonstrate that its principles were in accord with those of racial theory. This offered ‘a veneer of sophistication’ because ‘racial theory’ appeared (at the time) ‘intellectually avant-garde.’26 But this does raise the question of the response of those who were simply members of a liberal Christian group.

The Temple-Society actually began with a strict interpretation of scripture, including a very direct reading of prophecy that meant they sought to establish themselves as the ‘people of God’ in ‘the Holy Land’ before the end of the world came. However, their founder (Christoph Hoffmann) quickly moved them away from what might be termed a fundamentalist Christianity. In a series of circulars in the 1870s, he denied the divinity of Christ, declared that baptism and holy communion were not binding as sacramental rites, and that the doctrine of the triune God was false.27 Jesus became a model for living, and one’s ‘conscience’ became the ‘primary source’ for knowledge of God. This removed the authority of the Bible, which was no longer seen as ‘the word of God.’28

This liberality in matters of faith certainly made it difficult to argue against ideas that came to the fore with the German Christian movement, such as purging the Old Testament or creating a ‘German’ Church. By 1938, the President of the Temple-Society found himself having to contend with Elders speaking out ‘publicly from the pulpit against Christianity and the Bible.’29 One of the German leaders, Dietrich Lange, had written of his ‘objections to the Old Testament’ by 1936. A year later he was arguing in favour of ‘new religions’ like Wilhelm Hauer’s neo-pagan ‘German Faith’ and Mathilde Ludendorff’s bizarre beliefs (which were anti-Christian).30

The history of the Templers thus reflects and challenges some conventional narratives of this period. Finally, the group has a direct connection to Australia. During World War II, the Palestine Templers were interned by the British, then many of them were deported to Australia and interned at Tatura. As they became migrants at the end of the war, the centres of the Temple-Society are now Melbourne and Stuttgart.31

Antisemitic, Dictatorial, and a ‘New Faith’: Perspectives on Nazism by 1932

The rise of the Nazis, we should remember, was a gradual process and very much contingent on historical context. A number of historians have argued that the Nazi’s ultimate rise to power cannot be understood without considering the impact of Hitler, although Ian Kershaw points out that Hitler’s absolute centrality while at the same time placing the actions of even such a powerful dictator in the context of the forces, internal and external, which shaped the exercise of his power.’ Moreover, he emphasises the desire for ‘national salvation’ as a key motivation.32 Nationalism and the desire for a ‘German Mussolini’ were also a way the Templers were introduced to the Nazis. The first mention of the Nazi Party appeared in an article in 1923.33 In this, Dietrich Lange gave a positive (though brief) assessment of the National Socialist movement, focusing largely on the Nazis as a nationalist movement.
The article was published on 31 May, meaning that the NSDAP was promoted before the attempted Munich Putsch in November and the consequent fame derived from this. Lange argued for the importance of unity in Germany, and included the curious combination of Gandhi and Mussolini as role-models for nationalism. In his opinion, National Socialism represented a key nationalistic movement, symptomatic of a broader trend away from ‘internationalist sentimentality.’ This contradicts the Temple-Society’s stated international perspective but makes some sense in the period after World War I, when Germany appeared to have been treated as a pariah state.

Another Templer (Theodor Fast) questioned the appropriateness of such a discussion in the Warte. He saw Lange’s article as presenting far too simplistic a picture and believed such ideas would eventually only lead to fresh bloodshed. Opposing the closed nature of nationalist views that promoted an ‘us or them’ paradigm, Fast called for empathy instead. He saw the Templers’ mission as encompassing more than just Germany and was astounded that it should be proposed ‘salvation’ should be expected from the ‘Fascists in Italy and National Socialists in Bavaria.’

By 1931, Dietrich Lange returned to the same topic, in what he saw as a time of extreme crisis. He argued Germany’s ‘ship of state’ was ‘in the highest danger on the seas,’ threatened by party confusion and strife. Yet, he cautioned that it remained to be seen whether the ‘Third Reich’ – ‘so desperately looked for and imminently expected’ – would lead to smooth sailing. Otto Rubitschung thought that it was more important for Germans to work together than rely on the ‘vague hope of a powerful revolution or of a German Mussolini.’ Despite these reservations, both statements indicate that the idea of a Nazi revolution was in the German zeitgeist, undoubtedly because of the extraordinary success of the Nazis in 1930, when they moved from holding twelve seats in the German federal parliament to holding 107.

A growing awareness of the Nazis as a significant factor, and as a movement that ‘we here in Germany are daily reminded of’ led the Templers Richard Hoffmann and Alfred Weller to write a series of critical articles on the NSDAP in 1932. This was the Templers’ first detailed introduction to Nazi ideology. They could not help but pay attention to such a detailed and lengthy assessment, which spanned five issues of the Warte. As part of their detailed study, Weller and Hoffmann printed the entire Nazi Programme, giving the Templers the Party’s stated aims. They noted that Hitler had declared this Programme unalterable, but to understand it, they turned to a range of Nazi sources, not least Mein Kampf.

While Hoffmann and Weller wished to examine the Party as a political group, they did note from the outset that the NSDAP was not so easily categorised, blurring the lines between the political and ideological, and spilling into an ideological movement. This is a continuing difficulty in current historiography regarding the Party Programme: that it represented both a political and ideological statement. While Hoffmann and Weller began by stating that there were difficulties in understanding exactly what the Nazis stood for, four definite themes appear: Hitler’s importance; the uncertainty about what the Nazis would do in government (apart from establish a dictatorship); the centrality of race and antisemitism to the Party; and that the movement was more a faith than a political party. This was a point that Richard Hoffmann made outright: ‘National Socialism appears to me largely to be a faith, to which people either adhere or do not.’

32 “The Uniqueness of Nazism” in Kershaw, Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 347.
34 Warte JG-79, 92–3.
36 Warte JG-88, 82.
38 Warte JG-89, Issues 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12.
41 Warte JG-89, 25.
42 Warte JG-89, 81.
The centrality of Hitler was clear. They began with a history of the NSDAP, but included a biography of Hitler, viewing him as the driving force behind National Socialism. Indeed, the NSDAP was referred to as the ‘Hitler Movement.’ The Templers were also made aware that the Nazis were founded on racial antisemitism. Relying on Mein Kampf, Hoffmann and Weller stated unequivocally that while one of the men who inspired Hitler (Karl Lueger) had been antisemitic on religious grounds, ‘Hitlerian antisemitism’ was racial. Much of the rest of Hitler’s biography dealt with the failed 1923 Putsch.

Already, there were some elements of the ‘Hitler myth.’ While generally viewed in a negative light, Hitler was credited with an excellent ability to read behaviour and understand psychology, which allowed him not only to characterise those killed in the Putsch as martyrs but also to join the disparate strands of the movement together and rule them ‘with a strong hand.’ In order to define the essence of Nazism, the Party Programme was studied in detail. Weller and Hoffmann were hard pressed to find specific practical measures, but were clear that Hitler wanted a dictatorship, an autocratic state in which the will of the Führer would be paramount. In their view, the Nazis wished to make the state into the image of the Nazi Party itself, to the extent that they believed the term ‘leadership’ (Führung) was in reality a synonym for ‘dictatorship’ (Diktatur) in the Nazi lexicon.

The focus of the Nazi ‘faith’ was very much one of ‘national salvation.’ As Weller and Hoffmann put it, Hitler argued he was going to oust the ‘November criminals’ – those who had ended WWI by signing the armistice – and set in place a regime that would make ‘everything better.’ This was fairly appealing, given the historical circumstances – and Germany’s real economic and political crises were emphasised by Richard Hoffmann in a series of articles on reparations payments that ran parallel to the articles on the NSDAP. What was also appealing to Christians in Germany was the notion of a strong ‘moral’ basis to the NSDAP (including a hard-line attitude to crime and pornography) and Hoffmann and Weller stated that Hitler had sought to ‘march against the Babylon of Sin, Berlin’ in 1923.

While Hoffmann pointed out major problems, he and Weller did not see the Nazis as the solution in any sense, particularly as they expressed doubt about what the Nazis actually intended to do in power. They did not see that the Nazis wished to make the state into the image of the Nazi Party itself, to the extent that they viewed the Party Programme as a blueprint for ‘Hitlerian antisemitism’ in racial terms. Hoffmann stated that the Nazi argument that economic systems were racially defined was ‘simply false.’ It was largely on these grounds that they saw Nazism as having no rational foundation, forming an expression of faith rather than reason. The Nazis themselves played on such concepts and Leni Riefenstahl’s film of the 1933 Nuremberg Nazi Party rally was entitled The Victory of Faith.

The only definite point Hoffmann and Weller could find, the one clear thing that the Party stood for, was antisemitism. They stated ‘antisemitism plays a fundamental role in the Party,’ pointing out that the Nazis believed Jews could not be citizens of Germany (Point 4 of the Nazi Programme), and that they sought to fight the ‘Jewish-materialistic spirit’ (Point 24). Taking the definitions in Mein Kampf of Jews as ‘culture destroyers’ and Aryans as ‘culture creators,’ they demonstrated Hitler’s hatred of the Jews. As they concluded, ‘it comes as no surprise that Hitler is of the opinion that the most important factor in the destruction of Germany is a lack of understanding of Mein Kampf and Theodor Heuss’ book, Hitlers Weg.


Warte JG-89 (1932): 33. This is a fairly accurate assessment.

Warte JG-89, 27.


Warte JG-89, 35.


It is not as famous as Riefenstahl’s later work on the 1934 rally (Triumph of the Will) because Hitler ordered copies of the film destroyed after the Röhm Putsch: Steven Bach, Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl (United Kingdom: Little, Brown, 2007), 121, 131.
‘In the Templers’ view, the rise of the Nazis had to be understood in a societal context where there was a trend towards mysticism, to sects and movements of faith: to the irrational.’

Hoffmann and Weller also addressed the question of ‘positive Christianity,’ which appeared in Point 24 of the Nazi Programme. As I have explained elsewhere, the longer history of this term related to traditional and doctrinal Christian faith (orthodox Christianity) and it was certainly understood in this sense by the Templers.® In 1917, the Templer President, Christian Rohrer, specifically wrote of ‘two religions’ in the Protestant Church: the ‘positive’ and the ‘liberal.’ He viewed ‘positive’ as synonymous with ‘orthodox,’ and described the liberal and positive views as divided according to their ‘positions regarding the traditional dogmatic creed.’®

Hoffmann and Weller were clearly conversant with this understanding, but argued that Point 24 was so vague that nothing could be gleaned from it alone.® They offered brief synopses of some dominant views on Christianity in the Nazi movement, and made points prominent in the historiography in recent years. For instance, they argued that there were those in the Nazi movement who simply accepted it ‘as true’ that ‘Jesus was an Aryan.’ They went on to argue that ‘thereby National Socialists are offered the possibility, that they can retain Christianity as a religious confession’ – which would not be the case if Jesus was Jewish. They also noted that those who could not accept ‘that Jesus was an Aryan’ were driven to ‘a rejection of Christianity’ and returned instead ‘to the Germanic cult of gods (cult of Odin, etc.).’® They noted Alfred Rosenberg’s importance as a Party leader and considered his work *Myth of the Twentieth Century* (Mythus), which they described as based on a racial conception of the world and as intellectually bankrupt. In this regard, they cited the circularity of Rosenberg’s argument that the Nordic race was the most important creative force in world history, so any ‘creative’ historical figure must have been Nordic.®

Having discussed the fact that the movement did not allow any place for women, except as ‘wives and mothers,’ the writers concluded with the important point: ‘We live in a time of crisis.’ Hoffmann and Weller described the Nazis as very much a party of the ‘negative campaign,’ unable to provide (or even indicate) genuine and concrete solutions to Germany’s problems. Instead, they saw the Nazis as hanging out a colourful but uninformative political shingle, pinning their hopes on formulaic slogans.®

The Nazis’ success was attributed to a good use of mass-psychology by Hitler but also to Germany’s crises: ‘The crisis, in which we live, is not only one that applies to the economic field, but also to the intellectual-spiritual.’ In their view, the rise of the Nazis had to be understood in a societal context where there was a trend towards mysticism, to sects and movements of faith: to the irrational. It was in this category that they placed the NSDAP. Ultimately they concluded that Nazism was an ersatz religion, whose members were anchored in a religious understanding of the Party rather than in a rational allegiance to political objectives, and ‘where reason has nothing more to say, one moves to the field where faith reigns.’®

**Conclusion**

Like the Protestant Church leadership, the Templers had a clear perspective on the Nazi Party, its aims and objectives, before the Nazis took power.® It is also important that these come from contemporary observers, and writers who were members of the group itself. Hoffmann and Weller did state that it was unclear how the Nazis would act if they actually achieved power. From their perspective, this was because the Nazi Programme was vague as to practical measures, and the possibility existed...
that the movement would change once it reached a position of power. This possibility offered the disjunction between stated purpose and action that so many Germans clung to, the hope that the Nazis' actions might differ from their stated objectives.

So what could be known about the Nazis? A great deal – but how that knowledge then was either used or ignored is perhaps the more pertinent matter. The Nazi Party was described as seeking to build an antisemitic dictatorship, and Nazism was seen as a substitute faith, yet approximately seventeen per cent of the Templers in Palestine ultimately joined the NSDAP.65 Germans could be very well aware of what the Nazis stood for by 1933. But whether this mattered to ‘ordinary Germans’ is another question entirely, particularly in the ‘revivalist’ atmosphere that characterised the early years of the Nazi regime.66

65 As NSDAP membership did not include children or Hitler Youth members, Balke estimated every third adult was an NSDAP member: NSDAP–Palästina, 69, 190–91.

66 Gailus argues that 1933 formed a kind of ‘Protestant experience’ that contained notions of a national and spiritual revival.
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Koehne, S

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