

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

“The Catholic Context in Bonhoeffer’s Lifetime”

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1. Introduction: Reasons for Catholic Moral Failure

The failure of the Catholic Church as an institution to live up to its own standards of moral responsibility when faced with the Nazi onslaught was, and indeed still is, a major issue for its current life and witness. Two major explanations have been provided. Some have rightly pointed out that the Nazi regime was a terrorist dictatorship that was unrestrained in the repression of its perceived enemies. The threat of being taken off to a concentration camp operated already in the beginning of 1933, and served to create a pervasive fear and caution sufficient to deter most people from challenging the regime in any significant way. The notorious reputation of the Gestapo along with the cooperation of many ordinary citizens only increased as the Third Reich became even more oppressive. Normal citizens were frequently co-opted into the system for their own personal gain. The clergy in particular were carefully scrutinized. Agents of the Gestapo and informers took notes of weekly sermons.

The already overdeveloped German habit of social control could readily enough be applied to any church member believed to be in any way lacking in loyalty to the regime or its political agenda. Church members who sought to uphold their personal and institutional traditions were indeed intimidated and often paid the price of their defiance of the regime. For example, nearly one third of the Catholic priests in Germany endured some form of reprisal during this timeline year period. The Catholic response was mixed, however, since there were incidents of local resistance. Priests did preach crucial sermons, and Catholic laity and clergy, especially in rural areas, did resist Nazi incursions into their communal life.

Historians have also suggested much less favorable explanations for the lack of resistance and the decline of moral integrity among the clergy and the laity of the Catholic Church. There is overwhelming evidence that in the heady days of 1933, after Hitler had been appointed Chancellor, a very large proportion of Catholics was swept up by their expectations of an increasing potent anti-Communist policy and by their hope for the national renewal and regeneration offered by the Nazi propagandists. The euphoria of the initial months of Nazi governance was unparalleled since the similar enthusiasm of 1914, the beginning of World War I. By 1935, the scales had fallen from the eyes of the bishops and other institutional leaders, but their opposition to the Nazi totalitarian ambitions was bifurcated, since Catholics, 30% of the population, had from the *Kulturkampf* (1870) been fearful that any opposition could be labeled as unpatriotic. Theologically and socially Catholics did offer some dissent from Nazi policies. Simultaneously, however, they usually fervently approved Nazi foreign policy goals and the elimination of the so called Jewish influence in German political, economic, and cultural life. The Vatican concluded a Concordat (Treaty) in 1933; Catholics compromised their moral stance on issues of sterilization and even euthanasia; the church defended only Jews who had

converted to Catholicism. No one in authority defended the Jews as Jews, primarily because of the 2,000 years of religious antisemitism that had become in the 19th and 20th centuries a weapon to be used against political, social and economic “modernity.” Catholics defended their institutional church, but not the victims, except through the fairly abstract and prudent pronouncements of Pius XII.

In a sense, the Catholic Church was caught in a predicament that was facing Europe as a whole during these years. All of the Christian churches were caught up in a series of major crises, both organizationally and spiritually, which profoundly affected the exercise of their authority and influence. In the 20th century, men and women had increasingly shaken off the moral tutelage of ecclesiastical institutions and have rejected the authority of religious dogmas. Instead of adhering to ecclesial admonitions, with an alarming degree of wishful thinking, the belief grew that the individual's ethical guidance could be found in purely secular and subjective terms, regardless of the claims of history or community. At the same time, the modern state, also without any willing reference to transcendental values, has advanced its own demands for supremacy. As Richard Rubenstein has pointed out: “With the collapse of every credible religious or moral restraint on the state, and with the inevitable depersonalizations of relations between the government and citizens, the state's sovereignty can achieve an ultimacy unimpeded by any contending claim.” The history of the 20th century saw an exponential growth of technology on increasing bureaucratization of the state's machinery of control, and an unprecedented readiness to manipulate whole populations for the alleged benefit of the dominant political group. Simultaneously these forces were accompanied by a corrosive decline in the acceptance of a transcendent moral order and of humanitarian ideals.

2. The Catholic Theological Context

Prominent Catholic theologians such as Karl Adam, Joseph Lortz and Michael Schmaus took the opportunity in 1933, and in the case of Karl Adam for the duration of the Third Reich, to publish articles urging a positive relationship between Catholicism and National Socialism. They encouraged Catholics to accept elements of the new regime's ideology and tried to dissipate any mental reservations and scruples that might trouble the Catholic faithful. They also hoped to change the political radicalism of the government by adapting to some elements of the Nazi worldview. They and other Catholics felt comfortable supporting the “nation,” even if not always in its varied political, i.e., state, concretizations. Detesting democracy, Catholic theologians and ecclesial leaders felt more at home in Hitler's state, at least initially, than in the Weimar Republic. Thus, some theologians hoped that display of support might prove that Catholics, even in a Nazi state, could still be good Germans.

These political hopes were rooted in the national pressures that motivated their theological reasoning. These German theologians hoped that the popular power of the Nazi movement with its “romantic” and organic world view would sustain Catholics patriotically and spiritually. When they praised the Nazi movement connected to the state and to Germany's politically organic traditions, they hoped to connect their faith to their renewed political life. When they accepted the religious organic model of romantic racism, they intended that “blood”, i.e., nature, and spirit could be united in their faith, sustaining the connection between the natural and the supernatural. When they spoke about nationalism, they also opposed the Roman, i.e., Vatican, domination of national churches.

Catholic theological traditions such as the natural-supernatural connection offered sustenance for Catholic theological adaptation. This theological model viewed grace coming to humans through nature, e.g., the state, and thus promoted the desirability of relating the church

to the state. Such Catholic theological traditions seemed to be consonant with the Nazi *Weltanschauung* (world-view). The question must be asked: What does it mean for the validity of theology when a principle could be so misused that it facilitated the adaptation of Catholicism to the totalitarian Nazi State? How can the misuse of theology be avoided?

3. Theologically Uniting Church and State

When theologians want to express their political opinion, not surprisingly they use theological terms and models, which normatively help to determine the flow of their arguments. From the perceived correspondence of common interests (Lortz), to a perceived unity between the church and state in the Reich based on the mystery of the hypostatic union (Grosche), to the unification of word and element in the sacraments (Winzen), almost every union of church and state could become possible and would seem like the unfolding of God's plan. In the case of these adaptationist theologians, it would be difficult to decide which came first, theology or historical reality. Did the choice of the theological schema that was responsible for the final result or did the intention to achieve an acceptable political and theological union ultimately influence the choice of the schema? Each of these theologians had to prove that his nationalist credentials were compatible with his religious ideals. Here was finally, they thought, a regime that epitomized the anti-liberal and anti-democratic perspectives supported by the church since the French revolution.

These adaptationist insights were theologically framed to accommodate Nazism, presumably motivated by political expediency, Catholics seemed determined to make the case that they were as nationalist as their Protestant contemporaries. They accommodated the Christian faith to the realities of politics and illustrate for us how historical theological concepts were doomed to failure when confronting modern political ideologies, since they could not engage in any substantive political critique and certainly not one that highlighted alterity.

Because theology deals with ontological values, it can be a dangerous affair. Errors come easily when theologians lose sight of what authentic reappropriation means. Nature, as it appeared in Catholic traditions, should certainly not have been identified with "blood" and "race" as several theologians tried to do in the first years of the Third Reich. However, some Catholic theologians began to see the dangers of this accommodationist stance.

4. Catholic Theological Criticism of Nazism: Engelbert Krebs

Engelbert Krebs, Romano Guardini and Karl Rahner offered theological insights that conflicted with Nazism. Time prohibits an adequate explication of all the theologians who perceived the dangers posed by Hitler's Germany. Let me briefly offer an overview of Krebs as he critiqued both his church and the Third Reich.

Krebs developed a love of neighbor that sees the church witnessing to the coming of God's kingdom. In essence, the church is an advocate for the well-being of all people and is also a spokesman for the truth. He emphasized the model of church as servant during the Weimar years (1918-1933) by himself aiding the efforts of workers, women, and Jews to gain respect in the public realm and to establish organizations through which they could work to achieve their aspirations in German society. He emphasized the model of church as project during Hitler's timeline years by speaking on behalf of his Jewish colleagues, criticizing the regime's interference in the church, and preaching on the love of one's enemies. Krebs' political actions and theology sprang from the conviction that the church's task is to promote God's reign in the world.

His writings after 1933 suggest that he respected the values of modernity and envisioned the church as taking a more positive stance toward the contemporary world. Krebs stood in a trajectory of Catholicism that eventually generated the Second Vatican Council's document on the Church and the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

A study of Krebs' theology and politics may uncover a clue for understanding the political ideas of Catholic theologians under Hitler. German theologian's views of the Third Reich may have been a function of their notion of the church's relationship to God's kingdom. The more a theologian identified the church with God's reign, the more he tended to stress that the church must safeguard its own existence at all costs and has the primary responsibility of protecting its members, its sacramental life and institutions. Hence, the theologians who saw the church as the embodiment of God's kingdom likely judged that the Vatican's signing of the Concordat in July 1933 was a responsible act of self-preservation, which simultaneously helped sustain the nation. By contrast, the more a theologian distinguished between the church and God's reign, the more he tended to emphasize that the church's first duty is to a transcendent reality of truth, justice, and love.

Such theologians as Krebs held a vision of God's creation that could judge the Nazis' values and actions. Krebs' outspoken, positive view of Judaism stands out in contrast to the covert, religious antisemitism among most German Catholics. He held that Christians must respect Judaism as the home in which they were born and that they must respect Jews as bearers of God's teachings. There is a kinship between the two faiths. To be meaningful, Krebs, like his young contemporary Karl Rahner, felt that theology has to be historically grounded and be open to the world in which it lives.

5. Conclusion

Especially since the French Revolution, Christian theologians have sought for ways to make their reflections and faith relevant. Catholics in the Third Reich, therefore, are really part of an ongoing project that has consumed Christianity for more than two centuries. A historical theological schema that relied on axiomatic theological/philosophical principles and doctrines proved impotent in confronting Hitler's mobilized political power. Such theologians as Krebs and Rahner, who asserted that theology had to be in contact with the real world of marching soldiers, proved more effective in mobilizing a faith tradition that could combat Nazism at its deepest roots of exclusivity. Historically-sensitive theology has proven itself as a resource nurturing alterity and inclusivity. Even in the dark theological days of Hitler's Reich the impulse toward Vatican II was stirring.