CHAPTER XXX

The Nazi State to 1938. III, Religious and Cultural

It seems no exaggeration to insist that the greatest challenge the Nazis had to face was their effort to eradicate Christianity in Germany or at least to subjugate it to their general world outlook. Here they were not dealing with economic freedom for which acceptable substitutes could be offered, nor even with political liberties for which a degree of security could be bartered. They were attacking the deeply spiritual, traditional values, ingrained for over a thousand years, of a people which had shown itself profoundly religious and willing to fight for its faith. The French and Russian revolutionists could claim with some justification that the churches which they fought were corruptly allied with an evil old regime. This was not the case in Germany, where the churches had not been intimately affiliated with the Weimar system. Hitler was wise enough to realize that in this area he could not use the overt direct attacks which had been so successful against the Jews, the Communists, the unions, and even the political parties.

Yet there was no way to avoid the conflict. Christianity is itself a total way of life, based on supernatural authority and dedicated to a charitable brotherhood of man which transcends all political and racial frontiers. Nazism also was a total ideology, based on faith in the Führer and geared to a brotherhood of only Germans and “Aryans,” with contempt and violence for all others. There could be no question of coexistence without such dilution that one or the other would lose its whole purpose and function.

During the years before 1933 Hitler did not say much on the subject of religion. It was known that he had been born a Catholic, but there was no record of his ever having taken part in religious observances. One of the twenty-five points of the party program called for “positive Christianity,” but it was anyone’s guess what that meant. Hitler had
associated over the years with a variety of people dedicated to the estab-
ishment in one form or another of neopaganism. Alfred Rosenberg, 
General Ludendorff, Count Ernst von Reventlow, and Wilhelm Hauer 
all wanted to revive the worship of the ancient gods and were prepared 
to offer sacrifice at dawn on mountain tops on strategic dates of the 
year. They and others wrote a great deal of fuzzy mystification in which 
it was not clear whether God was embodied in the memory of Wotan 
or in the actual Hitler. There were some who thought that when the 
Nazis achieved power they would try to push a program of this sort. 

To Hitler, however, the neopagans were extremists, just as Roehm 
and his companions were extremists of another sort. He understood that 
the fight against religion would have to be fought obliquely and gradu-
ally. He also realized that different tactics had to be used with the 
Protestants and the Catholics. The Catholic church was part of a vast 
international society owing spiritual allegiance to an authority outside 
of Germany. It possessed a coherent body of changeless doctrine to 
which it was firmly wedded. Protestantism, however, had been tradi-
tionally affiliated with the state since the days of Luther; also, it was 
divided among many organized groups, both doctrinally, as between 
Lutheran and Calvinist, and territorially, according to the old separate 
state entities. Clearly the two big groups would demand different treat-
ment.

In 1932 a group called the German Christians was founded under 
the leadership of a former Free Corpsman, Pastor Joachim Hossenfelder. 
This group aimed at a sort of Nazified Protestantism, an accommodation 
of Christianity and racism. It wanted to establish the Führerprinzip in 
the church by uniting the twenty-nine Protestant groups into a single 
national church headed by a national bishop (Reichsbischof). It pro-
fessed belief in Christ, but belief in the German manner, and insisted 
that God had granted a specific mission to the pure German race. Ac-
cordingly, it professed its abhorrence of Judaism, Freemasonry, pacifism, 
and other anti-Nazi doctrines.

When Hitler became chancellor, he soon decided to take in hand the 
“problem” of the Protestant church. He planned to use the German 
Christian movement as his agent, and as commander of the attack he 
picked Pastor Ludwig Müller. Müller was a former army chaplain who 
had been the leader of the German Christians in East Prussia. One won-
dered whether he was more soldier or clergyman. It is reported that he 
managed to integrate the Nazi anthem, the Horst Wessel song, into the 
Lutheran liturgy. Hitler appointed him first bishop of Prussia and then 
Reichsbischof, with Hossenfelder as his assistant. When the various 
territorial churches were asked to confirm their union into one national
church under Müller, they replied by electing not Müller but Pastor Bodelschwingh, a devout minister famous for his charitable social work. This gave some warning to the government of what it might expect from the Protestant clergy. By the end of the year, however, the new constitution of the church was imposed, and after an offensive drive of Nazi propaganda Bodelschwingh disappeared from the scene and Müller was in control.

From 1933 until 1935 Müller instituted a reign of terror to force German Protestantism into the Nazi mold of blood, race, soil, and Führer. Clergymen were arrested and churches closed; gradually most of the territorial churches, with the exception of those in Bavaria and Würtemberg, toed the line. Yet as they did so, the opposition became strong and vocal. On the doctrinal level it was led by the theologian Karl Barth of the University of Bonn. On the organizational level it was led by the Confessional church (Bekenntniskirche), a group made up of anti-Nazi clergymen and lay people, eventually numbering thousands and including most of the bishops and well-known ministers. It was clear that Müller had failed to make the German Christians the leading force in Protestantism.

In September 1935 Hitler appointed Hans Kerrl as minister for church affairs. Kerrl got rid of Müller and tried to administer the church as a part of the state. He used all the weapons at his disposal. Seminaries were closed, clergymen were forbidden the right to preach, and religious newspapers and schools were shut down. Yet the resistance continued.

By 1937 the resistance of the Protestants crystallized in the person of Pastor Martin Niemöller, whose church was in Dahlem, a wealthy district of Berlin. Niemöller had had a curious career. During World War I he was a naval officer in command of a submarine. After the war he fought the Communists in the Ruhr as a Free Corpsman and then tried farming. In a short time he decided that the ministry was his true vocation and took orders. Politically he was conservative, even monarchist. At first he rather favored the Nazis, who, he thought, would restore Germany to a state of law and order and put down the wicked Communists. Slowly he realized that Hitler was enforcing not the law of God but the law of Hitler. His strong, narrow sense of duty forced him to speak out. His sermons became famous, and the congregations overflowed the church, while government agents took verbatim notes. Niemöller was a serious problem for the government. The last thing Hitler wanted to do was to create a popular anti-Nazi hero, a situation which he had on the whole successfully avoided. However, Niemöller was too outspoken. During 1937 he was arrested several times, released, subjected to an inconclusive trial, and finally simply thrown into a con-
centration camp where he remained until his release by the American army in 1945.

After 1939 the persecution of the Protestants, as of the Catholics, relaxed a great deal. The churches became essential to bolster morale during the war. However, there seems no question that, had Germany been victorious, the attack would have started again on an even larger scale. The important thing is that the Confessional church still existed with large numbers of supporters, that Niemöller was still popular, and that Protestantism was not broken. The Führer's only major domestic failure was his war against religion, both Protestant and Catholic.

Hitler faced a different sort of problem in his effort to subdue the German Catholics. They are part of a far-flung international organization which the Führer respected. The Nazis were already tempting world opinion by their persecution of the Jews and had no desire to solidify Catholic opinion against them. However, there could be no accommodation between Christian brotherhood and Nazi racism. The church had already made this clear when it put Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* on the *Index of Prohibited Books*.

At first Hitler tried the path of conciliation, and the church advanced a distance to meet him. With the disappearance of the Center party as a political force, the Catholics in Germany were left without any defenders and Pope Pius XI was concerned about his responsibility for the souls of his German flock. Thus the church was receptive to Hitler's overtures, and in the summer of 1933 Papen, a Catholic and not a party member, went to the Vatican; there on July 20 he and Cardinal Pacelli, the later Pius XII and at that time secretary of state, signed a concordat between Germany and the Holy See.

The concordat covered the whole extent of the legal relationship between church and state. It protected the church in her rights to her property, the appointment of ecclesiastical officials, Christian education for the young, Christian marriage, etc. On paper it looked as if the Catholics in Germany were going to be secure. The concordat was greeted with glee in Berlin as a sign that the Roman Catholic church, the most conservative and traditional institution in the world, had recognized and blessed the new Nazi state.

It became clear very rapidly that the Nazis had no intention of living up to either the spirit or the letter of the concordat. As might be expected, the first clashes came in the field of education and the youth organizations. Catholic teachers were dismissed; all teachers had to join the National Socialist League of Teachers; crucifixes were removed from classrooms; every kind of pressure was used to force children into the Nazi youth organizations rather than the Catholic ones. Baldur von
Schirach became more and more overt in his attacks on Christianity in his addresses to the youth. Increasing efforts were made to muzzle and eliminate the Catholic press. As early as Christmas 1933 Michael Cardinal Faulhaber, archbishop of Munich, the most articulate anti-Nazi in the Catholic hierarchy, made clear in a sermon the sharp cleavage between Christian teaching and Nazi ideology.

It would take many pages to catalog the studied insults and attacks which the Nazis launched against the Catholic church. Some of them were petty and some grievous. Churches were not closed; millions attended them, but the faithful were made to feel that they were not good Germans and that their spiritual leaders were both treasonable and despicable. All sorts of indirect methods were used, no less dangerous for being indirect. Two in particular should be singled out.

The first was an attack on the clergy as traitors because they broke the regulations against exporting currency from Germany. German Catholics had of course for many years helped to support missionary and other religious endeavors outside Germany. The German church authorities were conscious of the problem involved and ordered that such support cease and that no money be sent abroad. In spite of this, some clergymen, nuns, and lay people, out of misguided zeal, did smuggle funds out of the country. This resulted in trials and imprisonment, and more important, a barrage of publicity implying that all Catholics were breaking the law, that the church was treasonable, and that the main characteristic of priests was an unholy lust for gold.

Even more sinister were the morals trials. Some clergymen and employees of Catholic schools were accused and convicted of illicit and perverse sexual activities. Needless to say, the stories were exaggerated out of all perspective and context. The German people were given to believe that the Catholic clergy was made up only of sexual criminals. Accounts and cartoons of unbelievable obscenity were published wholesale. Among the most active journals in this disgusting campaign were the Schlarze Korps, an organ of the S.S., and the pornographic Stürmer, edited by the notorious Jew-baiter, Julius Streicher, Gauleiter of Franconia.

The Catholic leaders were quick to try to refute these calumnies, but their work was difficult because the media of communications were closed to them. Cardinal Faulhaber, Clemens von Galen, bishop of Münster, and Konrad von Preysing, bishop of Berlin (the latter two eventually named cardinals by Pius XII), were the best known and most courageous leaders of the hierarchy. They were helped by many anonymous parish priests, a great number of whom were sent to suffer in concentration camps.
The anti-Catholic campaign reached its heights in 1935 and 1936. By 1937 Pius XI felt called upon to make his position clear and public. On March 14 his encyclical letter, *Mit brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Anxiety"), was smuggled into Germany and read aloud in most of the parish churches at great risk to their respective priests. The letter was impassioned and moving; it made Catholic doctrine clear and also the evil devices of the Nazis in trying to eradicate Christianity. This was a direct and unmistakable challenge. The following year when Hitler visited Mussolini in Rome, the pope made his attitude once more obvious. He ostentatiously left Rome for Castel Gandolfo while Hitler was in the city, closed the Vatican museums, and commented that the cross which was decorating the streets, the swastika, was not the cross of Christ.

The whole situation became more intense in March 1938 when Germany occupied Catholic Austria. At first, Theodor Cardinal Innitzer, archbishop of Vienna, welcomed the Germans and even flew the swastika flag from the spire of St. Stephan’s Cathedral. He was soon called to Rome and cautioned by the pope. Later he suffered the fate of his brothers in München and Würzburg; mobs in the street attacked his home and threatened personal violence.

As in the case of the Protestants, the attack on the Catholics died down with the coming of the war; in 1941 there was even an effort to enlist the sympathy of the Catholic church in a crusade against Bolshevism. Again, as in the case of the Protestants, there is not the slightest doubt that if Germany had won the war, the onslaught would have resumed in an even more violent manner.

It is almost too heart-rending to tell again the tragic story of the Jews in Nazi Germany, surely one of the sorriest pages in the annals of humanity. In 1933 the Jews were less than 1 per cent of the population, but they had high places in society out of proportion to their numbers. It was possible to focus unreleased hatreds upon them, to make them a scapegoat for all ills in a way that would have been impossible against the millions of Catholics and Protestants. Everyone knew from Hitler’s frank and virulent statements that when the Nazis came to power, the Jews would suffer; few could have guessed the almost endless extent of their suffering.

From the moment of the Nazi accession to power, the persecution of the Jews began. Jews were dismissed from all governmental or teaching posts and gradually from the learned professions and important business positions. Jewish-owned firms were seized and “Aryanized.” On April 1, 1933, there was a one-day boycott of all Jewish firms. The concentration camps, hurriedly constructed, started to fill; synagogues were
burned and plate-glass windows broken. Elderly Jews were exposed to all sorts of indignities, such as being forced to clean the streets with their tongues while gangs of "Aryan" hoodlums jeered at them. Placards and signs made it clear that there would be little or no punishment for attacks on Jews. The visitor to Germany became woefully used to signs on park benches stating that Jews might not sit there, to anti-Semitic exhibitions of pornographic hideousness, and to slogans painted on fences saying "The Jew is the enemy of the world" or "Who kills a Jew does a good deed."

The legal plight of the Jews was established by the Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935. A Jew was defined as anyone with even one Jewish grandparent. He was no longer a German citizen, could not vote, had no civil rights, might not marry an Aryan, could not fly the German flag nor teach nor take part in the arts, and did not even have the rights of a serf, but was the plaything and victim of his venomous masters. The police knocked at Jewish doors in the dead of night and removed the inhabitants. The entire period from 1933 to 1945 was a long passion for the Jewish people, a pogrom without relaxation. The only fortunate Jews were those who managed to escape from the country with help from abroad and only the clothes on their backs.

The orgy of violence reached its prewar height in November 1938 when a young official in the German embassy in Paris was murdered by a Jew. In retaliation, the worst of the pogroms was unleashed. A fine of one billion marks was levied on the Jewish community, and the beatings and the sadism knew no bounds.

Germany was a police state. The degree of control by terror achieved by the Nazis probably exceeded anything ever before known in history. The infamous Gestapo (Geheime Staats-Polizei, "secret state police") was only a small part of the huge police organization led by Himmler. Since he was in charge of the police and the S.S., Himmler integrated the two into a fearsome complex, some men detailed to ordinary criminal police, some to political police, and some to the management of concentration camps. The pitiful accounts of inmates of the camps have made the words Dachau, Buchenwald, Belsen, and the rest synonymous with torture, murder, sadism, and sordid cruelty. The world still had to learn the uttermost reaches of horror in the extermination camps of the war period where the "final settlement of the Jewish question" was to be carried out.

As Himmler and his police represented the negative or deterrent aspect of Nazi culture, Goebbels in his capacity as minister of propaganda and public enlightenment represented the positive. All media of communications, as well as the fine arts, fell under the authority of this
ministry. Goebbels immediately set up a strict censorship and forbade the printing of any material not completely in accord with the Nazis. All Jewish-controlled agencies of news or entertainment were seized, and very quickly the newspapers, radio, and motion pictures gave the public only what Goebbels prescribed. Even such a famous liberal newspaper as the Frankfurter Zeitung published only the handouts of the press section of the propaganda ministry; to read one paper was to read them all. It became a serious punishable offense to listen to broadcasts from a foreign country over short-wave radio. Germans lived in a sealed cocoon to the extent that a powerful government was able to enforce its will.

Hitler considered himself an authority in the fine arts, and Goebbels was quick to implement his master’s wishes. The Führer’s taste ran to the conventional and banal. He disapproved of almost everything that had happened in the world of art since Manet, labeling modern art degenerate. In fact, he organized an exhibit of “degenerate” art in Munich as a warning to the people, but had to close it prematurely when it drew far larger crowds than the nearby showing of orthodox German art.

The Nazis undertook great projects of public works, building government offices, stadiums, art galleries, housing developments, etc. Hitler concerned himself personally in the architectural designs for these, picking Albert Speer as his favorite assistant. Typical were the enormous stadiums and meeting halls built on the outskirts of Nuremberg for the annual party congresses. They are massive, plain, and dull. Munich, the “capital city of the movement,” received undorned buildings to house the party offices and archives and two simple but awkward temples for the coffins of the men who were killed in the beer hall Putsch in 1923. Berlin was fated to become a suitable capital for the new Germany with monumental buildings and wide, straight thoroughfares driven through its center. Fortunately for the Berliners most of these plans either were not carried out or were destroyed in the war.

One looks in vain for important creation in literature, art, or music during the Nazi period. Most of the creative minds of the Weimar years fled abroad or lived in quiet obscurity. Artistic and spiritual Germany went under cover and waited for release. It was a dull, drab, and sterile time.