Nazi Christians
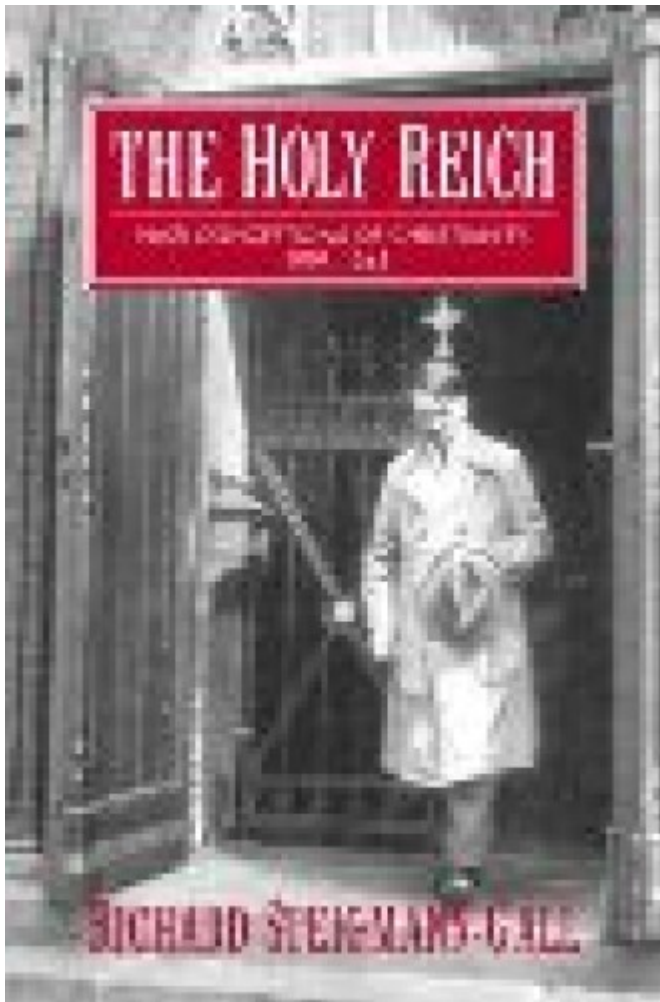
By Tom Aitken in the August 10, 2004 issue

In Review

The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945

Richard Steigmann-Gall
Cambridge University Press

Most of the Nazi leaders considered themselves not merely Christians but instruments of God's will, proclaims Richard Steigmann-Gall, a young Canadian

historian. Many people think that if the Nazis had any religion it was derived from Wagner's operas and Teutonic mythology. Not so: the paganists were a minority, much derided by Hitler and Goebbels, who remained nominal Catholics and paid church taxes to the end.

The impression that Nazis despised Christianity derives from two factors: our revulsion at what the Nazis did, and statements near the end of the war by Nazi leaders, including Hitler, which seem to indicate bitter antipathy toward the church. These statements, however, reflect less an abandonment of what those Nazi leaders considered their own Christian values than disappointment with the Protestants of Germany, whom they believed had badly let them down.

When the Nazis seized power in 1933, the Protestant churches had suffered a decade of steep numerical decline; in that year, however, they began to gain members. For millions of German Protestants the Nazi regime signaled a revival of Christianity after the decadent, morally uncertain years of the Weimar Republic. Many Protestants, including pastors, became keen Nazi party members and officials. When, after 1937, relationships between the Protestant churches and the Nazi state deteriorated and churchmen were dismissed from official posts, there was much disappointed protest.

Catholicism, however, never appealed to the Nazis. (Hitler said on a number of occasions that he was nearer in spirit to Protestantism.) Principally this was because Catholicism was internationalist in outlook, while German Protestants were for the most part fiercely nationalist. But the Nazis's detestation of Rome derived also from their skewed notions about the papacy. The Vatican was, of course, a foreign power, which disqualified it from having any right of influence in insurgent Germany. It was also regarded as the culpable party in a centuries-old perversion of Christianity: materialist, luxurious and, above all, Jewish. (Hitler asserted a belief that all the most notorious Renaissance popes were Jews, the front men for the great Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination.)

Nazi Protestant Christians had two great heroes and role models. The first was Jesus Christ, whom (following the English fascist Houston Stewart Chamberlain) they believed to be the first and greatest Aryan and the first and greatest anti-Semite. Most of the Nazi leaders worked the cleansing of the temple into their discourses at some point, and they were ingenious at giving some of the parables an anti-Semitic slant. The other great hero was Martin Luther, whom they saw as the first and

greatest German. In his translation of the Bible he had virtually invented the German language, and with it the idea of the German nation. He had rebelled against the Jewish domination exerted by Rome. He had made Germany the center of the Christian world.

Better still, in his later years Luther had written a virulently anti-Semitic tract, "On the Jews and Their Lies." Nazi leaders showed a close acquaintance with at least this aspect of his teachings, praising and quoting the tract at every suitable opportunity. Nazi Christian rallies and services often ended with the singing of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Luther, they believed, had merely begun the German Reformation, not completed it. That was up to the Nazis, and one thing many of them saw as essential was the removal of the Jewish Old Testament from the Bible.

Nonetheless, after 1937 the Nazis became disenchanted with the Protestants. In their analysis, the Protestants were engaged in internecine wrangling which made them less and less credible as an aid to German national unity. As war approached and then broke out, unity became increasingly desirable. The Nazis might more accurately have perceived that it was their attempts to manipulate Protestantism for their own ends that lay behind a large part of the disunity.

This is not the place to set down even in summary the twists and turns of what happened within German Protestantism during the Nazi era: suffice to say that some Protestants, in some degree, began to realize what monstrosities they had given themselves to; others, retaining some of the faith of 1933 and continuing to be vigorously anti-Semitic for religious as well as racist reasons, expected that a new, Christian Germany would emerge if Hitler won the war. And, of course, there were personal and doctrinal clashes.

But though there was some persecution of Protestants after 1937, it was never as severe as the treatment meted out to Catholics, and in parts of the Reich it was actually forbidden. The Nazi leaders themselves did not altogether give up on the church. In 1941, in Wartheland, a number of so-called Protestant Churches of German Nationality were brought into being. They were to have no links with any Christian organization outside the district, and were to be financed solely by contributions from members. These churches were perhaps the Nazis' last attempt to create a society both Nazi and Christian.

What conclusions can we draw from this densely argued book? Many Christians probably believe in a "real Christianity" that exists regardless of how believers behave and, indeed, is the benchmark by which their behavior is to be judged. But if we apply that benchmark to Nazi Christians, we must conclude either that they were hypocritically quoting scripture to their own ends (a view Steigmann-Gall considers untenable) or that they did not understand Christianity, since "real Christians" could not possibly commit such crimes.

The Nazi Christians remind us that Christianity in all times and places has been at the mercy of the frailties and fears of its adherents and of the law of unintended consequences. Steigmann-Gall quotes theologian Richard Rubenstein: "'The world of the death camps and the society it engenders reveals the progressively intensifying night side of Judeo-Christian civilization. Civilization means slavery, wars, exploitation and death camps. It also means medical hygiene, elevated religious ideas, beautiful art, and exquisite music.'"

Steigmann-Gall concludes that the story he has to tell is not "an admission that Nazism is somehow redeemable, but rather that it is that much closer to us than we dare allow ourselves to believe. The discovery that so many Nazis considered themselves or their movement to be Christian makes us similarly uncomfortable. But the very unpleasantness of this fact makes it all the more important to look it squarely in the face."