The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A Documentary Account of the Christian Resistance and Complicity during the Nazi Era Peter Matheson, ed.

Douglas F. Tobler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons, and the Religious Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol22/iss2/13

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Reviewed by Douglas F. Tobler, professor of history, Brigham Young University.

In *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, Peter Matheson has presented us with the first collection of documents in English on the complex relationship between the Christian churches and the Hitler regime. Even the subtitle, *A Documentary Account of the Christian Resistance and Complicity* (I would have exchanged the order of these last two nouns) *during the Nazi Era*, accurately reflects the difficult and problematic nature of that relationship from the very beginning. Even though some excellent English monographs (John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*; Gunter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*; and, more recently, Ernst C. Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler*) with extensive use of documentary material have been available for some time, teachers, students, and aficionados generally will, I think, welcome an opportunity to read this kind of a cross section of documents for themselves.

252
Reviewers are justly warned to beware of being too critical of what the author, or, in this case, editor, did not intend to do. Certainly in the choice of what to include and what to leave out, there is considerable room for differences of opinion and taste. Nevertheless, a suggestion or two may not be out of place.

Matheson’s spectrum of representative documents for the two major churches—Evangelical and Catholic, together comprising over ninety percent of the German population—and for the specific twelve-year period seems adequate enough. I cite the following excellent and informative selections: (1) the Central Office of the Federation of Protestant churches June 1933 memorandum which vividly portrays the prevalent negative Protestant opinion about life and church life during the Weimar years; (2) the Roman Catholic Conference meeting with Hitler, 25–26 April 1933, where he mesmerized Catholic prelates while reaching for their jugular vein on the Jewish question. (Hitler complained to the prelates that “he had frequently been reproached with opposition to Christianity, and the reproach had hurt him deeply! For he was absolutely convinced that neither personal life nor the state could be built up without Christianity; . . . He [Hitler] had been attacked because of the handling of the Jewish question. The Catholic Church had regarded the Jews as parasites for 1500 years. . . . At that time the Jews had been seen for what they really were. In the era of Liberalism this danger had no longer been seen. I return to the previous period, to what was done for 1500 years” [p. 20].) Here one is reminded of Israel Zangwill’s sardonic comment that “the Jews are a frightened people. Nineteen centuries of Christian love have broken down their nerves”1; (3) Rudolf Hess’s Silencing of the Churches, 12 September 1938, where much of Hitler’s real attitude toward religion and the churches is finally expressed semipublicly to the Gauleiters. Other documents—there are sixty-eight in all—of equal significance could be cited.

But the collection is not quite complete. It does not include Hitler’s early frank evaluations of Christianity and the churches in Mein Kampf or his Table Talk and conversations with Danzig Mayor Hermann Rauschning. (“Neither of the denominations—Catholic or Protestant, they are both the same—has any future left. At least not for the Germans. Fascism [Italian] may perhaps make its peace with the Church in God’s name. I will do it too. Why not?” But that

---

won't stop me [from] stamping out Christianity in Germany, root and branch. One is either a Christian or a German. You can't be both.'" 2) Another possible inclusion is the infamous "Ordinance on Religious Associations and Societies in the Reichsgau Wartheland, 13 September 1941," widely reviewed as the prototype for the Nazi–church relationship of the future after World War II was successfully over, which would have effectively destroyed the traditional churches as they had existed up to that time. Finally, such a collection hardly seems complete without the Stuttgart Confession of October 1945 where Protestants did public penance for their complicity ("We accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently""). The struggle was over; the evil had been destroyed—but the guilt remained.

One improvement in this collection over comparable German-speaking anthologies is the inclusion of two documents concerning the brutal treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses by the Nazis. But, perhaps a document or two on Christian Science, the Salvation Army, the New Apostolic Church, or even the Mormons—all like the Witnesses, viewed as "dangerous" in Gestapo reports but treated less harshly—would illuminate the manner in which the different sects were perceived, while at the same time rounding out the larger church–state question.

More important than this representation of the sects, however, is the need for an introductory essay to aid students and laymen—the presumed audience—in understanding the larger setting of which the documents are an integral part and for a brief, synthetic, analytical epilogue where some of the important political and moral issues that have been raised would be discussed. The introduction, for example, might well call the reader's attention to the unhappy relationship of the churches with the Weimar Republic. To Protestants, many of the Republic's strongest supporters were godless liberals, internationalists, Bolsheviks or worse; Catholics had similar concerns and particularly lamented the failure of the Vatican to achieve a Concordat with Weimar Germany similar to the 1929 agreement with Mussolini as a protection for their own believers and institutions. Both Catholics and Protestants decried the German national humiliation since Versailles, the political weakness of the government and moral decadence symbolized in Berlin's loose cabaret life. Against

---

3 Ibid., p 332.

254
this background, the seductiveness of Hitler’s "national renewal" and "positive Christianity" is more understandable. Such additional information, it seems to me, would enhance the reader's appreciation of the documentary content and the actual historical circumstances at the time and would preclude the ever-tempting "rush to judgment."

Finally, this historical episode raises some of life’s big questions, especially for Christians. What responsibilities do we and our churches have in the political realm? Why did all the German Christian churches do so little for the Jews? Does this experience provide us—individual Christians—with any guidance for the moral and political issues of our own time? Can today’s Christian churches continue their traditional fratricidal war in the face of secular challenges potentially more destructive than Hitler? At what point may accommodation with earthly powers constitute betrayal of the duty to be a witness for Christ? Matheson has undoubtedly thought about these and other questions; I would like to see a brief epilogue exploring some of them. Neither facts nor documents ever speak completely for themselves and being able to read his insights would not destroy our own independence of mind.

Mormon readers will, I believe, find this collection of more than usual interest. The lessons for individual Christians most certainly apply to us, but the experiences of the larger churches have taken on a new meaning as the LDS church has become significant enough, at least in part of the world, to exert an influence on some political/moral issues of our own day.