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Fatal Flirting: The Nazi State and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Introduction

It is estimated that a staggering 55 million people perished during WW II, including the six million Jews—men, women, and children—who died in the ethnic extermination camps and ghettos across Europe (US Holocaust Museum:2008). This essay is divided into four sections, beginning with a quick overview of the historical aspects of the Nazi Regime, followed by events in the Christian churches in Germany, then looking at the interactions of the Nazi State and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and concluding with some of the lessons learned from this sad chapter of Adventist history so that hopefully our church will not stumble again over the same issues in the future.

In the history of human achievement it is easy to find much to create wonder and amazement at the potential for good in people. However, the dark pages of humanity's history can also quickly deflate any illusions of perfection and remind us of humanity's ability to inflict pain and suffering. Perhaps by reviewing our sordid past, we can learn not to commit the same mistakes and perhaps in the future write more pages for good than for evil.

The Nazi State

When reflecting on the causes for the Holocaust one must not divorce the incident itself from the many diverse elements that surrounded this phenomenon. This infamous occurrence in history was not the result of an isolated and vacuous in-vitro conception. Saul Friedlander makes a poignant evaluation of this reality when he states that “the ‘History of the Holocaust’ cannot be limited only to a recounting of German policies, decisions, and measurements that led to this most systematic and sustained of genocides; it must include the reactions (and at times the initiatives) of the surrounding world” (2007:xv). Therefore it is valid to state that the Holocaust was just the apex of a series of events, currents of thought, phi-

losophies, laws, and diverse elements that tragically converged to create this horrid story.

One of the elements fueling the fires of the Holocaust was a pervasive anti-Semitic worldview that expressed itself concretely in various policies enacted by the Nazi Government from 1933 to 1939. A careful scrutiny of these policies allows one to divide them into two basic viewpoints: *intentionalist* and *functionalist* (Friedlander 1989:11–18). These viewpoints differentiate themselves in the interpretation they give to the intention behind Nazi rule and its dealing with the Jews, and the ultimate outcome of the policies in the infamous Final Solution.

Functionalists view the Final Solution as an evolving process within the Nazi regime. For them the Nazi government started its ethnic cleansing with non-murderous intentions, however, once the regime ran out of ideas on how to deal with the Jews that they had rounded up, they inevitably arrived at the decision to exterminate them (Friedlander 1989:11-18). Contrary to this approach is a second view that assumes that the final solution was planned and executed masterfully by the Nazi party from the very beginning of its rise to power (1989:11-18). However, considering Hitler's anti-Semitic vitriol openly expressed in his master work *Mein Kampf* years before his ascension to power (Schleunes 1989:58), the second view seems more plausible. Nevertheless, regardless of which viewpoint one might feel inclined to believe, the end result was the same—the extermination of one third of the Jewish population in Europe.

When the Nazi administration came to power in 1933 its legislation reflected its racial worldview. The promulgation of laws such as the Aryan Paragraph that segregated the population based on race and limited the number of Jews in civil and professional services was followed by the Nuremberg Laws that provided the legal framework that allowed the final banishment of Jews from all professional realms. These laws were just the visible results of a long sustained racist ideology that pervaded the country at the time.

What catches one's attention about this particular era is that these policies and restrictions against the Jews were not imposed by the government at gun point, nor were they forced upon the general population; on the contrary, they were approved by the people of Germany in diverse plebiscites, and the overwhelming majority of the people of Germany simply did not see a problem with these laws or with the racial worldview of the state. As long as the Jewish problem was taken care of in an *orderly manner* within the confines of *the law*, the majority of the population was satisfied with the recommended solutions. There was almost no reaction from the population regarding the immoral and unjust nature of the treatment that Jews received. "Popular opinion, largely indifferent and infused with a

latent anti-Jewish feeling further bolstered by propaganda, provided the climate within which spiraling Nazi aggression towards Jews could take place unchallenged" (Kershaw 1983:288). As war broke out in 1939, the rest of the story is all too well known.

The Christian Churches

There is a sad paradox that must be considered before delving into the second section of this short essay. The enacted racial legislation was supported by the majority of the population and that majority had one particular characteristic in common: "The Germany that Hitler led remained 95 percent Christian and 55 percent Protestant" (Ericksen 1999:22). It is staggering to consider these numbers in the general scheme of things. It was Christians who voted Hitler into power and it was the same Christians who praised his arrival in 1933 to the chancellery as a new beginning and renewal of hope for Christianity in spite of his racial tirades. It was Christians who stood idly by as the rights of the Jewish minority that had contributed so much to German culture were stripped away with very little or no protest by the Christian majority.

In his book *Theologians under Hitler*, Robert Ericksen analyzes the thoughts of three of the most prominent German theologians of that era as examples of the widespread warped Christian ideological support the churches gave to the government initiatives (Ericksen 1985).

Paul Althaus welcomed the rise of Hitler as a miraculous turning point from the hands of God (Althaus 1999:24, 25). Althaus was a pioneer in the concept of *Volk*, referring to a closed community of people united by blood and soul. He tied this notion to the church and its importance in the preservation of the nation, a community preserved by pure bloodlines and biological unity (Althaus 1999:25). This concept was developed mainly as a response to the opposition that some of the Marburg Theological Faculty had with the Aryan Paragraph (Ericksen 1999:25). After 1938, however, Althaus did refrain from making any additional open endorsements of the regime. However, he was never known to be vocal about denouncing the governmental abuses against the Jews (1999:25).

Emanuel Hirsch's stance in favor of the regime was much more aggressive than that of Althaus. He was a supportive member of the Nazi Party, and never once toned down his comments in favor of the Nazi regime even after 1938 or by 1945 (Ericksen 1999:26). His theological views were strongly mixed with a strong nationalism that seemed to be the dangerous cocktail that led Hirsch to adopt the racial theology of the German National Church and allowed him to embrace the Aryan Paragraph. He argued that Christians of Jewish descent had no place in the reconstruction of Germany (1999:28). His beliefs went so far to ascribe and defend

the ludicrous idea that Jesus was not a Jew, but was really Aryan (1999:28). Robert Ericksen summarizes Hirsch's position when he states:

He cannot have been unaware of the brutal anti-Semitic rhetoric of the National Socialism when he gave his enthusiastic support to Hitler. When the Deutsche Christen advocated the Aryan Paragraph and consequently shrugged [off] widespread opposition, he took their side. When *Jewish colleagues were removed at Gottingen University, he raised no protest, at no time before or after 1945 did he indicate convincingly that the anti-Semitism of the Hitler era violated his wishes.* (1999:31, emphasis mine)

Gerhard Kittel is known for being the main editor for the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament in ten volumes. Though he was not as vocal or philosophical as the two aforementioned scholars, he also joined the National Socialist German Workers Party and aided the Nazi cause. Contrary to Althaus or Hirsch, Kittel did not adhere to the view that placed the Old Testament against the New Testament; however, of the three theologians, his rhetoric regarding spiritual anti-Semitism was the most open. In spite of an apparently respectful and even admiring attitude towards the Jews and the Old Testament before 1933, Kittel spent the following decades after 1933 arguing for a difference between the Jews of the Old Testament and the modern day Jews as a way to salvage his personal admiration for the Old Testament while sustaining his stance in favor of the ideology of the State (Ericksen 1999:34).

This cursory observation of the views espoused by the aforementioned theologians, allows us to draw a somewhat accurate picture of the generalized sentiment within Christianity during the pre-war years. Granted, it would be somewhat unfair and almost too simplistic to attribute solely to them the molding and influencing of every single mind in the Christian Church in Germany. However, it is safe to infer that along with other factors contributing to the racial worldview of Germany, these influential men within the sphere of the church contributed in strengthening the prejudices of the nation and the church with the weight of their opinions, and that as seminary professors and as renowned scholarly figures of the German theological world, their thoughts and ideas influenced the clergy and the members of the church, thus giving them responsibility for the connection of Christianity and the Holocaust. By supporting their ideas with a purported scriptural basis they endorsed the state in its actions.

However in all fairness, in spite of an apparent hegemony of opinion in favor of the Reich among Christian churches there were some who

opposed the Nazi government. One of the most renowned is the case of the Confessing Church that stood up to the intrusion of the Nazi State in church matters, particularly in the case of the Aryan Paragraph's racial intent of eliminating Jews from holding clerical office and/or being members of the church. After the German elections of 1933, some pastors formed the 'Pastor's Emergency League' that would come to be the basis of the 'Confessing Church' (Baranowski 1999:96). The Confessing Church's main concern was the government's interference in ecclesiastical matters, and yet it also had a blind side to its protest. Shelly Baranowski accurately describes this situation:

Thus, the efforts of oppositional pastors and theologians to stop the German Christians from 'Aryanizing' the Evangelical Church—that is, expelling pastors, church officers, and parishioners with Jewish blood—could not conceal the instinctive anti-Semitism that continually prevented the Confessing Church from challenging anti-Jewish persecution, both within the church and without. Like most conservative groups the Confessing Church supported the National Socialist Regime as long as it respected the position of the institutions that had traditionally buttressed German politics and culture. (1999:91)

The Confessing Church stood firmly and rightly in the belief that the state could not usurp ecclesiastical prerogatives and dictate what happened inside the confines of the church, nor could it stipulate who could or could not be a pastor or a member of the church. However the problem with the Confessing Church was that it did not take its remonstrations a step further decrying the anti-Semitism undergirding the policies of the Nazi regime. The abuse of power was protested; the overstepping of boundaries was decried; yet the greater issue was left unsolved and unaddressed. It seems that the error of the Confessing Church was similar to that of the Abolitionists in the years of the American anti-slavery movement: their victory got rid of slavery but it did not address the root of slavery, racism. The state's motivations—power, greed, and racial hate—for infringing on the church's prerogatives were blind spots for the Confessing Church. Jews could be baptized into the church; but they were still viewed differently because they were Jews. A popular cartoon of the time summarizes the sentiment in a crass attempt of humor as it portrays a Jewish couple leaving a church with the caption "Baptism can make a Christian but cannot straighten a nose."

Not only did the Confessing Church raise its voice in protest when the State overstepped its boundaries, but the Catholic Church almost single

handedly opposed the 'Mercy Killing' laws of the Nazi Party. In 1939, the laws were put into effect "to get rid of unworthy life." These directives were approved in secret by the government, but somehow became public. It was at this point that Archbishop Van Galen is known to have opposed the policies, denouncing them in a sermon that was distributed across Germany. He was not alone in this crusade, as the Archbishop Worm of Guttenberg also openly denounced euthanasia. The Nazi regime, wanting to keep the peace at all cost, backed off from the policy. The protesters in this case were not executed, they were placed under house arrest; however, when their parish members protested, they were set free and the archbishops were reinstated to their parishes (Ericksen 2007).

Thus we can observe that the population was not forced, obligated, coerced, nor threatened to collaborate with the regime's laws, at least during the pre-war years. The Christian population simply accepted the philosophy of the state, blindly and without questioning it. The church protested when it saw some abuse of power in regards to organizational interference, yet was silent when the anti-Jewish policies were enacted. It is mind boggling to attempt to understand how the hermeneutical contortions of the leading theologians could excuse and even legitimize such actions against any human being; and yet history sadly attests that it happened. The question we need to ask is: In all this, where did the Seventh-day Adventist Church stand?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the State

Following in the footsteps of the Christian majority, the Seventh-day Adventist Church cannot be commended for its actions during the Nazi Regime. Echoing the praises for the rise of Hitler to power, Adolf Minck, President of the Adventist German Church, penned his satisfaction with the election of Adolf Hitler in the August Edition of *Advenbote* (the official periodical of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Germany at that time): "A fresh enlivening, and renewing reformation spirit is blowing through our German lands . . . this is a time of decision, a time of such opportunities for a believing youth as has not been for a long time. . . . The word of God and Christianity shall be restored to a place of honor" (Minck 1994:259). Another example expressing enthusiasm for the Nazi state was Wilhem Mueller who went so far as to label Hitler as "chosen by God" for the office of chancellor and praising his similarity with Adventism's health reform: "As an anti-alcoholic, non-smoker, [and] a vegetarian he is closer to our own view of health reform than anybody else" (Mueller 1994:260).

Not only did the Seventh-day Adventist leadership sing praises to the Nazi government, it even went so far as "strongly recommending" how its members were to vote in every plebiscite of the Nazi Regime. Notice the

case of Georg Durolf, president of the Rhenish Conference. In connection with the November 12, 1933 plebiscite that proposed the removal of Germany from the League of Nations, Durolf wrote in a circular sent out to all churches of the Rhenish Conference saying it was necessary to view things not as a party issue but as the right attitude toward government, thus it was the duty of the minister to “give appropriate guidance in the matter” (Durolf 1994:261). Sadly, in spite of all the praise and official stance that the church took in favor of the government, the Nazi state decided to ban the Adventist Church on November 26, 1933. This ban lasted until December 6, 1933 (Blaich 1994:262).

The Adventist Church’s pro-government PR campaign became much more aggressive after the ban. It went on to support the notion of the *Volkisch* state, ascribing validity to that idea and saying it was in accordance with biblical principles. In the December 1933 edition of *Gegenwartsfragen*, one of the Adventist periodicals, it proudly proclaimed that “we are part of this revolution as well—as individual Christians and also as a corporate denominational body” (Blaich 1994:264). This type of enthusiastic approval of the state was not an isolated incident. The acceptance of the *Volk* concept with its racial undertones, its ideology of ethnic purity, and its implicit proscription of the Jews due to their racial heritage was accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church as part of the gospel proclamation. A church writer stated: “The Volk when organized . . . forms a Volksgemeinschaft or ethnic community, and Adventists should be among the very best members of such a community (Sinz 1977:17).

The adoption of this viewpoint as part of Seventh-day Adventist thought was mixed with the church’s characteristic health message as a means to court the state and to gain favor with it. “While continuing the traditional emphasis on healthful living, Adventist publications soon adopted elements of the Nazi racial agenda. . . . A curious path led from *caritas*, the caring for the less fortunate and weak, to elimination of the weak, as the work of God” (Blaich 2002:180). The “positive” result of these changes was the “mainstreaming” of Adventism as the State promoted healthy living and family values through church publications. Nevertheless slowly but surely the Adventist health message adopted the *volk* undertones, giving it a twist and changing the original intent of health reform, morphing it into what the state dictated and not what Scripture taught. The church leadership was aware of this twisting of terms and meanings. G. W. Schubert, vice-president of the German Adventist Church, shared his “faint hope” with a fellow vice-President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists that “perhaps this might be the way of the Lord to get the same freedom later on for the distribution of our religious literature” (Blaich 2002:182). That freedom never came and time proved that the

compromise was not to be “the way of the Lord.”

The church’s guidance in voting increased in the years following the ban. For the plebiscite of April 10, 1938, which validated the annexation of Austria and the later invasions of the Rhineland, the church leadership decided that it would be good to illuminate the decisions of the Adventist voters. In a circular passed around on April 4, 1938, the German Union recommended that Adventists hand the Fuhrer “a thankful ‘yes’” (Blaich 1994:265).

Furthering its compromise the Adventist Church also agreed with the forced sterilization policy, also known as the Eugenics Laws (Blaich 2002:176). At first the opposition to such policies was open and general among the church members and leadership as it was viewed to be a violation of Christian principles. However in response to this resistance the government responded with an educational campaign that used Adventist journals to defend the new eugenics laws. Again, hermeneutical acrobatics were used to defend the government’s position that was based on principles that were completely antagonistic to Adventist beliefs. The farfetched explanation suggested the notion that Christians should “not [be] interfering with nature’s process of cleansing the nation’s racial pool” (Blaich 2002:177).

As the eugenics policies became law the opposition to such concepts and legislation was silenced from Adventist publications. Sterilization was only a first step in this racial attack; the next step involved the elimination of those who were deemed to be hazardous elements to the German gene pool. Those who opposed euthanasia were Catholics and Lutherans, while Adventists remained silent (Blaich 2002:180).

The church’s public endorsement of the Nazi regime continued as late as 1941 when Adolf Minck wrote, in a June 24 letter to the *Gauleiter* (District Leader of Nazi Germany who served as a provincial governor) of Danzig-Westpreussen: “At this occasion I may once again assure you that the members of our denomination stand loyally by the Fuhrer and the Reich. They are continually encouraged and supported in their basic attitude. The leadership of the denomination considers this as one of its most noble duties” (Minck 1994:264). These demonstrations of loyalty however did not satisfy the state, and its pressure grew even greater on the church especially in the issue of Sabbath keeping. The church appealed to its long championed principle of religious freedom to no avail. In the Rhineland members were pressured to work on Sabbath, especially in industries pertaining to the war. Adolf Minck was called to the central Gestapo offices, and was persuaded to address the issue. As a result the leadership of the Adventist Church recommended that their members should submit to the authorities and not bring any problems among themselves or the church

(Blaich 1994:270). As the state regulations against religion increased year after year, the church obeyed them closely in order to avoid a second banishment at the hands of the regime (Pratt 1977:4).

An assessment of the situation during those years is difficult. The support and obedience given to the regime allowed the church to function in some areas and to maintain some sort of structural simile at a time when many organizations were not permitted to operate unless they conformed to the regime. The Seventh-day Adventist sanitariums were still operational during the pre-war years and even during the war. There was a constant tension with fulfilling the mission of the church, complying with the state, and maintaining the structural organization of the church. Ronald Blaich describes the tension accurately stating: "While the church had little choice but to conform to Nazi standards if it wanted to publish . . . it is also clear that German Adventist leaders eagerly courted Nazi goodwill by accommodating to the new order" (2002:181).

After the war, the Adventist German leadership reacted by closing ranks and resisted all outside pressures from the General Conference to denounce or proscribe their perceived errors. It appears that the actions taken were wholly justified by the German leadership. In a letter to the General Conference President, J. L. McElhany, Adolf Minck expressed this sentiment of self-defense by rationalizing that they had followed church policy, they had maintained the structure of the church, and also that they had had to adapt to living the commandments according to the times they lived in, times of war, and not peace, nonetheless maintaining in their minds the holiness of the Decalogue (Minck 1994:277).

Lessons Learned

It seems clear that during this sinister and sordid period of history, the Christian church as a whole cannot claim to be completely blameless for the "blood of the innocent." To illustrate the situation an analogy will be used of a young woman, virtuous, beautiful, and prized. This young lady one day decided to flirt with a man other than her fiancé; a man who seemed strong and powerful, and who promised to make her distressful situation better. The flirting increased, and soon the young lady found herself asking for favors from this man and in gratified payment she slowly but surely gave away her chastity and virtue. One day she found herself lying naked and withered, used and abandoned by the man who promised her the world but who only used her for his own selfish gain. The imagery might be a little harsh; however, it is the same imagery that the Scriptures use to portray deviation from principle and the compromising of God's people throughout history with surrounding political currents.

Christians in general viewed Hitler as a leader and the Nazi Party as

a solution to the ongoing liberalism that had characterized the Weimar Republic. Nevertheless there were a few voices that disagreed with this hopeful view of the Nazi regime. According to Doris Bergen, "Most Christians in Germany did not share Bonhoeffer's conviction about the fundamental opposition between those two worldviews, but hard-core Nazi leaders did. Martin Bormann and Heinrich Himmler; as well as Adolf Hitler himself, considered Nazism and Christianity irreconcilable antagonists" (Bergen 1996:1). And this is the deep irony in this particular story, a sad lampoon in which the churches compromised their virtue with the most antagonistic and anti-Christian power they could have compromised with. God's bride danced with the Devil.

There are a few other lessons for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to learn from these dark pages of our history. It seemed that the church found itself being pulled from three different directions: the desire to carry out its mission, the need to please the state and avoid its demise, and the wish to keep its organizational structure intact. At some point, between the notion of announcing the Kingdom of God and rendering to Caesar that which was Hitler's, it saw a third important element so decided that the best way to serve God was to maintain its organizational structure. In order to maintain the structure it compromised its principles, and this series of concessions grew out of a malady that can be labeled "organizationalism" that has as its main purpose and focus a compulsion to save the organized structure at all costs. It was this urge that drove church leadership to sell out and ignore the reality of the atrocities that the state was perpetrating under the cloak of national reform. "The leadership of the Adventist church in Germany though possibly unaware of the full dimension of the mass murder of millions of Jews, kept not only silent in view of the persecution of Jews but even agreed to propagate anti-Semitic thoughts and ideas in their official publications. This strategy was in line with the church leaders' deliberate pursuit of adopting a plan to ensure the survival of the church organization" (Heinz 2002:193). Some would rationalize that this strategy did pay off. After the war was over the Adventist Church had indeed kept its administrative organization intact and was able to recover quite quickly (Blaich 1994:280). The question is what good is it to save the structure if the organization saves it to the detriment of its soul?

Not only did the church suffer from an organizationalism malady, it also became infatuated with Hitler. Hitler stood for conservative family values, was against pornography and prostitution, did not drink or smoke, and was even a vegetarian. He was an Adventist dream come true; what a catch from our young virtuous lady. The church made the mistake of looking at the appearance, while being blinded to the signs of foul play

that were visible early on in the fascist regime and by Hitler himself. It disregarded reality and was so dazzled by the prospect of becoming part of the mainstream that it ignored and forgot that even though both entities might apparently be standing for one common purpose (i.e., health reform), at the end of the day both institutions had diametrically different and antagonistic motives that propelled the so called common shared purpose. Both worldviews were completely incompatible, and in spite of this the church thought that in complying with the state, it would be preserved. The Nazi government never cared for the church or its well-being and neither did it care for the preservation of the church's organization. Sicher paints a somber picture when he says that "the presses that had praised the government were stopped, and the paper that had printed them was confiscated; all raw material was needed for the war" (Sicher 1977:19).

The deadly cocktail of national reform combined with a message of patriotism along with a government that espoused family values was too much to say no to; the racist tirades became an acceptable part of the package. It seemed wise to comply with this type of state, in order to obtain strength; a compromise sown in the hopes of preservation. The problem is that the church forgot that its strength comes from God and not from the state; it comes from her bridegroom, Christ. The church forgot that it does not exist in its organizational structure but in its people. It forgot that the mission is to announce the Kingdom of God, or the hour of God's judgment in accordance with Revelation 14. It should have had no part in echoing the ideologies of a fascist state.

It seemed easier to seek power from the state to carry out the proclamation entrusted to the church, especially when it seems that the church was incapable of achieving its purposes solely on its own power. The problem was that when that transaction occurred, it was the state that grew in power and not the church. The age old principle suggests that when the church and state unite, it is to the detriment of the church rather than the betterment of the state. This has been a somber and sad reality throughout the pages of human history.

I do not wish to vilify the leadership of the church from the comfort and safety of seventy years of hindsight. It is true, those were trying times and the leadership perhaps was taking the best course they could come up with to save the organization. However time, even immediate time, proved the path taken to be a road to perdition rather than a road to salvation, a road that gave the church a raw deal in the end. The Adventist Church would do well never to forget that it should not depend on its structures for its survival, but on its Founder and Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The church would do well today to be aware and stay vigilant to

the permanent snare of flirting with the state, to understand the lure of seeking protection from governments, to avoid the temptation of enforcing religious principles with the state's aid and power, rather than proclaiming its standards with the power of God.

The mission and existence of the church does not require the power or the protection of the state; God's mission only needs the power of God. It is pivotal to remember that it is only to God that the church owes allegiance. At what cost should the church preserve the organization? At what cost should the church join in any way with the state? At the cost of losing its integrity? What is more valuable to the church, its structures or its soul?

The institution should not be about looking good but about being good and keeping its integrity. The reality is that when the church decides to flirt with the state and seeks protection in the arms of government rather than under the wings of the Almighty, it trades the position of the exalted bride of Christ for the role of subservient mistress of the state. The church has no need of the state, it never did, and it never will in order to preach and fulfill the mission given by Christ himself. The church would do well in remembering its history, because only in its past can it find the answers to avoid the same blunders in the future.

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