

# Was Hitler a Christian?

## *Hitler's Christianity*

J.P. Holding

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“My feelings as a Christian point me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter . . . . As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice . . . . And if there is anything which could demonstrate that we are acting rightly it is the distress that daily grows. For as a Christian I have also a duty to my own people” (Kindle Locations (KL) 37–39).

These are not the words of a preacher in a pulpit, but those of Adolf Hitler. “Hitler referred to God, he referred to Providence, he held up Jesus as an example and he alluded to his teachings and to the words of the Bible” (KL 55–56). There are plenty of quotes from Hitler that substantiate this. Does this mean that Adolf Hitler was a Christian? Was Christianity the ideological engine behind Hitler’s atrocities?

Christians have not simply accepted blame for Hitler. Christians have multiplied quotes in the other direction, like: “Our epoch will certainly see the end of the disease of Christianity” (KL 2587–2588). Christians often respond that Hitler was an atheist or an occultist.

Who is right? Was Hitler a Christian (figure 1)? Apologist James Patrick Holding in *Hitler's Christianity* sets out to answer this question.

## Hitler and Positive Christianity

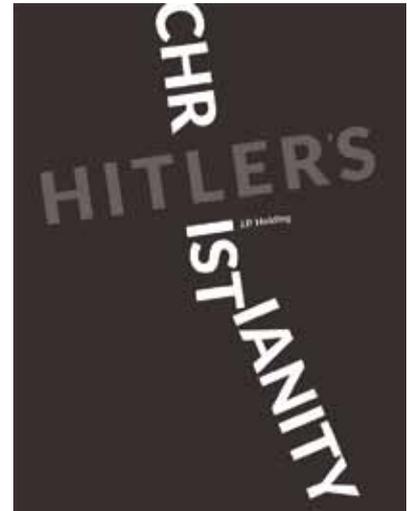
Holding’s basic thesis is that Hitler promoted the core features of an

ideology called ‘Positive Christianity’, which he shows is a *heresy*—a departure from the essentials of historic Christian teaching. In chapter 1, he identifies three key areas where Positive Christianity deviates from orthodox Christianity: a bowdlerized Bible, a dejudaised Jesus, and indifference to doctrine.

First, Positive Christianity rejected at least 80% of the biblical canon—including the whole Old Testament and sometimes even large portions of the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters.<sup>1</sup> As Holding argues, if Marcion, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century heretic, is universally recognized as such because he performed a similar degree of ‘canonical surgery’ (he discarded the entire Old Testament and large portions of the New Testament), then Positive Christianity is also heretical on these grounds alone.

Second, Positive Christianity denied that Jesus was a Jew. Instead, they refashioned him into a Galilean Aryan revolutionary against the Jews. The problem, of course, is that the New Testament is filled with affirmations of Jesus’ Jewishness. Moreover, if Jesus was not Jewish, he was not the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, and Christianity is falsified. Jesus’ Jewishness is essential to His identity as the promised Saviour and Lord, so Positive Christianity denies an essential truth of orthodox Christianity.

Third, Positive Christianity emphasized right practice (orthopraxy) *at the expense of* right doctrine (orthodoxy). The point of this was to unite the historically divided Catholic and Protestant segments of the German population under the Nazi banner. In other words, they emphasized German nationalism and racial purity in place of the historic Christian confessions as the points on which



Germans should be united. Such concerns are completely contradictory to the ethos of ethnic unity (Galatians 3:28) and doctrinal purity in Christ (Galatians 1:6–9) promoted in the New Testament. As such, Positive Christianity de-emphasized Christian doctrine *so it could be supplanted with something contradictory to orthodox Christian teaching.*

In light of these gross distortions of the foundational content of orthodox Christianity, it is hard to attribute the label ‘Christian’ to ‘Positive Christianity’ in any theologically meaningful sense. The term ‘heresy’ is definitely appropriate.

But what about Hitler’s supposed occultism? In chapter 2, Holding notes that while a number of Nazis, including Heinrich Himmler, were indeed occultists, Hitler had no use for it:

“The few credible and documented Hitler comments and actions we have on the subject of the occult clearly indicate that he had no use for it. Hitler’s only close friend as a youth, [August Kubizek], says that the young Hitler was ‘absolutely skeptical of occultism.’ [2] Commenting on Himmler, the Party’s leading occultist, Hitler declared: ‘What nonsense! Here at last we have reached an age that has left all mysticism behind, and now

he wants to start that all over again ...' [3]. This sums up Hitler's view of the occult" (KL 447–452).

Holding explores various attempts to align Hitler with occultism, and traces these claims to a spate of books published around 1960–1975 on Nazi occultism. Holding avers: "In essence, Hitler's occultism has been an urban legend that has been passed on uncritically from one source to the next" (KL 472). These books are rife with basic misunderstandings, historical inaccuracies, undocumented claims, and stories that seem to be completely made up. For instance, one author's main 'first-hand source' was a spirit contacted in a séance! Moreover, the common claim that the Swastika is a symbol of the occult misunderstands the Nazi's use of it (figure 2). Sadly, many Christian authors, even ones acclaimed for publishing excellence, have fallen for these claims by relying on these dubious sources.

But did Hitler advocate Positive Christianity? Chapter 3 explores this crucial question as he explores the spiritual biographies of prominent Nazis. Holding shows from a variety of sources that Hitler publically advocated the three major heresies of



**Figure 1.** Hitler was not an atheist, occultist, or orthodox Christian; he was a heretic.

Positive Christianity. On bowdlerizing the Bible:

"A 1919 manuscript written by Hitler includes an outline of desired results for dealing with the Biblical text: 'Purification of the Bible—that which is consistent with our spirit. Second result: critical examination of the remainder'" (KL 752–754).

At the founding of the Nazi Party office in Rosenheim in 1921, Hitler affirmed Jesus was an Aryan:

"I can imagine Christ as nothing other than blond and with blue eyes, the devil however only with a Jewish grimace" (KL 776–777).

As Nazi Party leader, Hitler's statements emphasizing action more than belief are unsurprisingly more common than statements about the previous heresies. For example,

"In a 1926 Christmas speech, Hitler stated that the Nazi goal was to 'translate the ideals of Christ into deeds' and complete 'the work which Christ had begun but could not finish'" (KL 783–784).

Interestingly, he also advocated Nazism as the true and original Christianity, implying that all others were Jewish corruptions of the Aryan ideal:

"In a closed meeting, Hitler is recorded by Goebbels as saying 'Not party versus Christianity, rather, we must declare ourselves as the only true Christians ...'" (KL 815–816).

The rest of those surveyed (including Josef Goebbels, Herman Goering and Heinrich Himmler) were a mixed bag—Positive Christians, pagans, and agnostics, where there was enough data to discern a worldview. Most had apostatized from Catholic or Protestant Christianity in their youth, and essentially moulded their worldview around Hitler. However, they all had one important thing in common: none of them were orthodox Protestants or Catholics in their maturity.

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany—a Christian nation?

But was Germany a 'Christian nation' complicit in the Nazi atrocities? Chapters 4–7 explore this question.

In chapter 5, Holding discusses the various social factors that facilitated the rise of Nazism. They are well known—an over-ripe German nationalism, wounded national pride from the Treaty of Versailles, and a penchant for scapegoating minorities such as the Jews for German social ills. Germany's dissent into decadence and dissipation and the perceived weakness of the Weimar republic made many Germans yearn for an authoritative moralism associated with the 'old empire'. Nazism was perfectly placed to take advantage of these factors.

But what did Christianity have to do with this social firestorm? Holding explores this question in what is a relatively unique contribution in chapter 4. He identifies a number of theological aberrations common at that time in Germany that served to largely cripple Christianity in Germany and empty it of any power to effect change in the society. The long history of German higher criticism had seriously undermined confidence in the Bible as an objective standard. Moreover, the German church in large part misapplied Romans 13:1–7, believing it was the German church's job to preach the Gospel *but not to question their secular leaders*. This meant they largely refused to criticize the Nazi regime let alone actively subvert it. Finally, Nazism was essentially a replacement religion, complete with a charismatic cult leader (Hitler), which was fuelled by the excessive German nationalism.

So what did popular German 'Christianity' look like in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? In chapter 6, Holding outlines the three major religious groups present in that society at that time to provide a general gauge on popular German 'Christianity'. The *German Christians*



**Figure 2.** The swastika was not a symbol used by the Nazis to illustrate their link with the occult; they used it as a symbol of the superiority of the Aryan race. As Hitler said in *Mein Kampf*: “And the swastika signified the mission allotted to us—the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind and at the same time the triumph of the ideal of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Semitic.”

were essentially the institutional face of Positive Christianity in the Protestant churches (figure 3), and they were able to dominate most of the theological schools in Germany by the mid-1930s. *German Catholicism* showed some meagre opposition to the Nazis, mostly in the early years of Nazi rule. The response from non-German Catholics was in general more strident, and

“Catholics in other nations, such as Holland, America, England, and Poland, joined a chorus condemning German Catholics for their inaction, and this in spite of the fact that some of these nations were Nazi-occupied territory at the time.”

The third major body, the *Confessing Church*, were Protestants who broke from the state churches when they became infected with Positive Christianity. However, their overall response was little better than the German Catholics. For most, their main concern was the autonomy of the churches in doctrinal affairs, not stamping out the scourge of anti-Semitism. Holding concludes quite aptly: “much of what passed for Christianity in Nazi Germany was badly corrupt, and what remained was

weakened to the point of being nearly useless” (KL 2031–2032).

Chapter 7 provides more spiritual biographies of Germans of the period, though this chapter focuses on the major religious groups in Nazi Germany. Holding examines leading figures in the Positive Christian movement (Walter Grundmann and Gerhard Kittel) as well as some Protestants and Catholics in the German resistance (Hans and Sophie Scholl, Helmuth James von Moltke, Deidrich Bonhoeffer, and Fr Alfred Delp). I found the story of Hans and Sophie Scholl particularly interesting—born of parents skeptical of Hitler, indoctrinated in the Hitler Youth, but turned away and became Christians (by studying the Bible and the Church Fathers), ultimately to be executed for distributing leaflets critical of the Nazis. They were very young when they were killed—Hans was 24 and Sophie was 21—but they died with honour.

How did the Nazi regime engage the church? In chapter 8, Holding shows the data is widespread and clear that the Nazis considered the church an ideological enemy. However, the churches were also a chief source of nationalism the Nazis could exploit. As such, the Nazis could not persecute the churches like they did the Jews—people with some sort of professed Christianity made up 90% of the population, which the Nazis needed the support of for their wars. As such, the Nazi program for the churches consisted of two main factors—opportunistic use and subversion. Positive Christianity served as a tool for both, though it was not entirely successful at either. Many Germans seemed happy to live with *both* Christianity and Nazism, generally because most Germans separated their Christianity from their politics (as per the problematic interpretation of Romans 13 discussed in chapter 4). In subverting the churches, the Nazis attacked the character of the pastors, they provided replacement rituals

that promoted their own ideology but largely mirrored those in the church, and they sometimes resorted to coercion and violence to repress the churches. Moreover, the indications were that if Hitler had won the war, the churches would have been in for harsher persecution. The leading Nazis were clear—the orthodox Christian churches would have no part in the Nazi utopia. If Hitler or the Nazi leaders were historic orthodox Christians by confession, these actions would make no sense.

### Doubtful sources and dubious objections

In chapters 9–12, Holding addresses a number of associated concerns and objections to his main thesis. In chapter 9 he identifies and discusses a number of sources for Hitler’s religious beliefs that historians have for various reasons deemed questionable. Much of what he discusses is used as ‘smoking gun’ proof of Hitler’s hostility to Christianity. Different sources pose different concerns—some have questionable objectivity, reliability, or even accessibility to Hitler. However, they paint a picture little different from what can be gleaned from sources



**Figure 3.** The flag of the ‘German Christians’ (Deutsche Christen) movement. It was the institutional face of the Positive Christian heresy which Hitler advocated—it rejected most of the biblical canon, it denied Jesus’ Jewishness, and it emphasized ethics at the expense of doctrine.

without question marks over them and the public actions of the Nazis toward the churches. I found this discussion helpful because it provides a case study on responsible research methodology and source criticism. This is crucial to address in an emotion-charged topic like Hitler where the sources vary widely in reliability, but it also has application beyond the question the book addresses. For the layman looking to responsibly research any issue, this chapter is a helpful example to follow.

Chapter 10 deals with miscellaneous objections trying to establish Hitler's link with orthodox Christianity. However, most are pretty easy to dismiss. I particularly enjoyed Holding's dismissal of Hitler's childhood church activities as supposed proof of his Christianity:

"This is a most peculiar objection, especially when it comes from atheist critics who were formerly professing Christians, and were themselves baptized or participated in church programs as children. Does that mean they are still Christians as adults who profess to be atheists?" (KL 2727–2729).

Perhaps the most difficult questions revolve around Hitler's continued membership in the Roman Catholic Church as an adult. But as Holding points out, in the light of Hitler's professed beliefs and public actions towards this church, his continued membership in it was nothing more than keeping up appearances—something he also told other Nazi leaders to do.

Chapter 11 marks Holding's first in-depth treatment of Nazi anti-Semitism, though with a particular focus. He addresses the particular concern of whether the New Testament supports anti-Semitism. He shows that the notion has no exegetical basis. All but (possibly) one of the identified authors of the New Testament were Jews. Most of the 'anti-Semitic' language of the New Testament comes *from* Jews

(such as Paul) and merely reflects typical *internal* Jewish polemic against other Jewish sects (e.g. Christians vs Pharisees) or geographical locales (e.g. Galileans vs Judeans) of the day.

Even the infamous words of the Jewish crowd "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25) were meant as an oath of *innocence*—they were not intending to curse themselves. And there is plenty of evidence that God never considered it an irrevocable curse no Jew could escape—He would not keep making Christians out of Jews if it was (this includes the apostles Peter, James, and Paul, all of whom rejected Jesus at some point). In any case, this was an *uninspired* utterance merely *reported* by Scripture, so has no *normative* value. Not everything *recorded* in Scripture is *endorsed* by Scripture, e.g. Job's wife, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). The New Testament is not anti-Semitic.

Chapter 12 addresses the question of defining the term 'Christian' with reference to Hitler's beliefs. Many skeptics (including otherwise reputable sources on Hitler) define Christianity so nebulously that the term has practically no content. Holding shows that they make the mistake of conflating anthropological and theological designations of 'Christian'. In order to demonstrate the moral culpability of Christianity for Hitler, he must be defined as a *theologically orthodox* Christian, not an *anthropologically nominal* Christian. In the light of his advocacy of Positive Christianity (and the Nazi subversion and persecution of the churches), Hitler was clearly no more 'Christian' in the *theologically meaningful* sense than Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons (or 'Christian atheists') are.

Hitler's public actions clearly show that he was an enemy of the orthodox church in both word and deed, and was only a 'Christian' if that term is emptied of all theologically meaningful content. Hitler was no Christian; he

was a *heretic*, and it was his heresy that fuelled his atrocities.

### Hitler the heretic

*Hitler's Christianity* is a well-argued and informative look into Hitler's worldview. The logic of the argument is simple to follow. It provides a helpful analysis of sources on a man who is the subject of wildly contradictory accounts, and it presents a coherent picture of Hitler in his historical context. Holding also remains on topic; he studiously keeps his eye on the relevance of the various factors he explores for the main question he tries to answer—was Hitler a Christian? This includes not weighing in on if or how Darwinism may have influenced Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> This is not a biography of Hitler, or a history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century German religion. Rather, it *uses* biography and history *as applicable* to address certain issues in *apologetics*. Holding sets out to answer specific questions in *Hitler's Christianity*, and he accomplishes what he set out to do very well.

### References

1. Grigg, R., Did the Nazis rewrite the Bible? *J. Creation* 26(2):110–115, 2012.
2. I think briefly addressing this topic could have been helpful: the Nazis championed eugenics—a Darwin-inspired idea that contradicts Christian orthopraxy—which shows that Positive Christianity had a far more Darwinian than truly Christian ethic. And since Christians often seek to show that Hitler was a Darwinian to refute the notion that Hitler was a Christian, it has some relevance for Holding's topic. Richard Weikart, professor of modern European history at California State University, Stanislaus, has extensively documented this, e.g. The role of Darwinism in Nazi racial thought, *German Studies Review* 36(3):537–556, 2013. Nevertheless, Holding amply establishes his thesis without addressing this.