

Christians in Time of War—Hitler's Germany, Today's America

Colleagues,

Art Preisinger's prose has appeared here before. The ThTh postings for May 28 and November 14, 2002 came from his hand. Those two ThTh postings focused on Christians relating to the Muslim World. Art was embedded there at the time, doing a stint in Beirut (Lebanon) teaching Church History at the Near East School of Theology. Today's item from him pick up on his "official" turf in church history, Christians during the time of Hitler's Third Reich. So I asked him to think out loud about "Christians in Time of War: Hitler's Germany, Today's America." Officially retired—well, sortuv—Art and wife Mitzi have their home in Sequin, Texas. Here's what he says. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I imagine that ThTh #252 regarding the war against Iraq may have gotten flack from some of your readers. That happens when Caesar is powerful and appeals not only to the loyalty, but also to the fears of his subjects. I'm not sure we're in a "post-Constantinian" era yet. Not around my neck of the woods anyway. [Note: "Constantinianism" = technical term for welding the State to Christian religion. Implemented by Constantine—A.D. 313ff.—for the Roman Empire. It's supposedly passee nowadays in the secularized Western World, where we are said to live in a "post-Constantinian" age. But not yet in

Texas, Preisinger says.]I was reminded of this last July 4, when our town put on its annual Independence Day parade. We're in the southwestern end of the Bible Belt, so I was not surprised, but rather appalled at the sight of two floats, one sponsored by a church and the other by a civic organization, with large crosses wrapped in American flags. Constantine lives! In hoc signo vinces. [Constantine's motto: In this sign (the cross) you shall conquer.]

We have a Lutheran University here and quite a few Lutheran pastors have retired in the area to take advantage of it. Many of them meet weekly over breakfast at a local restaurant. If they had read #252, I think most of those brothers would have been quite offended by it and would probably question your patriotism. And I have learned that a retired bishop, heretofore a regular attendee, has now quit the breakfast group because he is pretty much out of sync with a majority of the brothers. So it is that Caesar has managed to create a house divided against itself.

There are those who draw parallels between the present administration and Nazism. I am not one of them, although it is difficult not to think of Josef Goebbels when I see Ari Fleischer on TV and hear his spin on the Bush policies and activities.

Nevertheless, I do find similarities between the "Evangelical Church" [= German designation for Protestants, both Lutheran and Reformed] in Hitler's Third Reich and American nationalistic theology. In Germany it was called "political theology."

The main Protestant response to the extreme nationalism which Hitler represented ranged from inactive indifference to overwhelming support. True, the Confessing Church [Protest

movement of Lutheran and Reformed Christians linked to the Barmen Confession of 1934] did display a courageous, though not always consistent, opposition. But at best it never spoke for more than one-tenth of all Protestant Christians. For the predominant number of Lutherans, for major Lutheran church leaders and theologians, National Socialism was a temptation and a crisis which they were not able to meet successfully.

Why would Lutherans give such whole-hearted support to the National Socialists? Not just any government could find such favor; after all, the Lutheran response to the Weimar Republic [German government following WWI] had been less than lukewarm in contrast to the widespread acclaim of Hitler.

There were many reasons for this support, not the least of which was the defeat of World War I and a deep-seated nationalistic frustration. Emmanuel Hirsch, a leading Lutheran church historian, gave expression to this mood in 1925: "We were a nation of rank, a noble people, maybe the most flourishing and best of all. We stand in danger of being destroyed as a people. . . This fate is truly terrible, it contradicts everything we can achieve for humanity."

I hear echoes of this today as the present war, the Gulf War of 10 years ago, the invasion of Panama, and the invasion of Grenada somehow has made up for the demoralizing defeat in Vietnam. We are No. 1 again! One of our newspaper columnists declared, in a fit of great fervor or complete loss of sanity, that a real positive accomplishment of the (Iraqi) war was that it re-established "the truly proud tradition of America's military." This war may not be something we can achieve for humanity, but we are told it will mean great achievement for the Middle East. The trouble is, I hear that kind of talk from good Christian folk who should know better.

As you know, Ed, it was the so-called "Deutsche Christen" (literally, German Christians) who wanted to develop a close working relationship with Hitler since they thought their aims coincided with National Socialism. Hitler used them when it suited him, but he really felt nothing but contempt for the Protestants, mostly because of their theological squabbles. In some ways the Deutsche Christen compare with the ultra-conservative Protestants of the present day – led by the Jerry Falwells, the Pat Robertsons, the Franklin Grahams, et al. The German Christians affirmed the false ideology of the Nazi world view and approved the false theology of Point 24 of the Nazi party program that preached a "positive Christianity."

"Positive Christianity," like a wax nose, could be twisted in various way to mean almost anything "religious." In the twentieth century it meant a religiosity that was vague and undoctrinal, like "practical" Christianity, which meant a focus on love of neighbor, social welfare, etc. It was a favorite "proof text" of Deutsche Christen to substantiate the claim that Nazism was, at bottom, a "Christian" movement.

Another important aspect of this kind of Christianity was the concept of "Volk," the German "people." State and church belong together as the two great ordering powers of a Volk. (God bless America.) Sometimes radical Deutsche Christen substituted "Volk" for the N.T. term "logos." So instead of race or Volk being the object of God's creative activity, they become the instruments of it. A theological candidate named Kunze said, unchallenged, in the presence of Bishop Coch of Saxony: "In the beginning was the Volk, and the Volk was with God, and the Volk was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through it, and without it was not anything made that was made."

The Confessing Church fought the Deutsche Christen on

theological and ecclesial grounds. [Ed: this has gone down in history as the "Kirchenkampf" (Church-fight). Not the church's fight against Hitler, but the conflict within the church. The issue: Was Hitler in synch with the Christian faith, or was he not? Consequently the technical language of the 16th century Reformation, "status-confessionis" (roughly: we're on the witness-stand) and "tempus confessionis" (it's time to confess) was used. Not primarily confessing contra Hitler, but contra other Christians who said: "Hitler is in synch with the Christian faith."] Thereby the "Confessing" Church indirectly fought against Hitler, although most confessing churchmen denied it.

I would hope that, like the Confessing Church, Christians today would reject the false theology of the religious right, with its uncritical acceptance of American adventurism, its equating America with Christianity, its misguided millennialism, and its arrogant certitude.

Still it was not only the Deutsche Christen who fell under the spell of Nazism. The great majority of Protestants succumbed to the false promises of Hitler and National Socialism. "Destiny," "turning point," "Germany's hour," "hour of the people," "hour of the present" – this kind of terminology was common among the theologians and leaders of the Evangelical Church, including the non-German Christians. A member of the central committee of the Lutheran World Convention [founded in 1923, predecessor to the Lutheran World Federation of 1947ff.], said that the church's course should be clear and unambiguous in relation to the political situation. This meant that Christ was to be identified with the political right, anti-Christ with the left.

The identification of Christ with the right and anti-Christ with the left was prevalent in the period just before the Nazi seizure of power. There were counter-voices, but they were few

and lonely. One such was the author of "Tagebuch eines Grossstadtpfarrers" [Journal of an Urban Pastor]: "Where has the church proclaimed God's wrath on the breaking of the treaty against the Belgians? Treaty-breaking always brings God's wrath, God's judgment after it. . . . What do we do with the cross these days? We wear its wood as a brooch on the chest, hang it as a flag out of the window, use it as a bookmark. Jesus Christ broke under the weight of the cross. . . . The worst insolence is this, that the Stahlhelm [=Steel Helmet, a paramilitary group] leaders hand out the cross as an award to their members. . . . that a political, purely secular club awards crosses, that testifies not only to unbelieving arrogance, but also to a full misunderstanding of Christianity."

Crosses wrapped in flags. "God bless America." We need to beware of the easy identification of our Christian faith with national policies and goals. But I hear it all around me. We need to disabuse ourselves of the fear that makes us willing to believe that, like those in the Third Reich, a leader, a Fuehrer, and armed might can protect us from the terrors of the world – instead of the Lord Christ. We need to concentrate on the cross, instead of the false promise of political and ecclesial glory.

"O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works proceed, give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and also that we, being defended by you from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and rules with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end."

Art Preisinger

Postscript. Two recent Letters to the Editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. [#1 from Mike Hoy, #2 from yours truly.]

- 1. Here's a thought-provoking quote from Hermann Goering (Hitler's right hand man) in Gustav Gilbert's NUREMBERG DIARY (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1947) pp. 278-9. "Naturally the common people don't want war. But after all it is the leaders who determine the policy. And it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country."*
- 2. "Preemptive strike" is the root meaning for the word "murder" in the Bible. In the first recorded event outside of Eden (Genesis 4) Cain murders Abel. It's a preemptive strike to eliminate someone Cain perceives as a threat to his own existence. God diagnoses Cain's strike against Abel as symptom of Cain's even deeper dilemma, his own un-faith, the same malady that got his parents evicted from Eden. God "curses" Cain for his lethal preemptive strike. Though Abel is now dead, Cain gets no peace. The threat-factor in his life soars. It's now threat with a capital T. Under God's curse his life is a living hell. Preemptive strike is now the official policy of our country. We should not expect our national life to improve. We're in trouble. In the "don't murder" commandment, God makes it perfectly clear.*

A "Non Sequitur" cartoon published recently in your newspaper said the same thing. It hit like a 2-by-4. A military officer appears before the divine bench holding up his sign "God is on our side." The deity responds: "Um . . . Which part of 'Thou shalt not kill' didn't you understand?"

God "bless" America? The verb in the Genesis text for God's response to Cain is the grim opposite of "bless" for preemptive strikers. And if that is true, the deeper diagnosis of the trouble facing our nation these days comes with a capital T. Curse is not God's last word for preemptive strikers, Cain included. But it doesn't just fade away on its own.