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# The Churches and the Third Reich, V 1: Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions, 1918-1934

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Thomist rainmakers on the late medieval parade. Oberman's protective enthusiasm for his chosen era aside, the quality of scholarship in these essays is formidable, his erudition is obvious, although the prose is somewhat stilted by the intrusion of Latinisms at every conceivable juncture. Less transparent than the learning displayed in these essays is the reason for purchasing them. As a testament to the development of Oberman's research interests they serve admirably; readers desirous of locating the state of current debates will have to look elsewhere.

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### **The Churches and the Third Reich: Volume One: 1918–1934**

Klaus Scholder

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988

This is the first of a massive two-volume history of the German churches under Hitler written by the late church historian Klaus Scholder of Tübingen, who unfortunately died prematurely in 1985 and was unable to complete the work. Both have now been ably translated from the German by John Bowden.

The first volume, almost ten years in the making, was completed and published in Germany in 1977. *Volume Two: The Year of Disillusionment 1934: Barmen and Rome* was virtually finished before his death, except for the final editing done by Scholder's students Gerhard Besier, Dieter Kleinmann, and Jörg Thierfelder. In October, 1984, Scholder handed the work over to his students and asked them to continue the project. They envision three further volumes in the same spirit and method covering the period from November, 1934, to May, 1949.

As Vice-Chair of the German Evangelical Church's commission for contemporary history, Scholder was especially well-qualified to write the definitive history of period from 1918–1949, with access to many previously unknown or inaccessible archival sources. He has published numerous short essays interpreting this epoch in German history. There are a number of factors which make Scholder's history such an important scholarly contribution, especially for an English-speaking public.

This is the first major study which examines the Catholic and Protestant churches' response to National Socialism side by side. This approach throws new light not only on the separate attitudes of the two confessions to the "revolution" occurring in German society, but also on Hitler's own flawed church policy. As a Catholic, Hitler understood the Roman Catholic Church and planned his church strategy accordingly. After almost uniform

Catholic resistance, Hitler quickly achieved what he wanted: the capitulation of the church through the 1933 Vatican-German Concordat. Hitler's ultimate failure with the Protestants grew out of his false assumption that he could deal with them *en bloc* as he had done with the Catholics. The Protestant situation was in fact much more chaotic and splintered. The "German Christian" attempt to unify the church behind Hitler under the *Reichsbischof* and the *Reichskirche* never succeeded. The German Church Struggle which began seriously in the spring and summer of 1933 split the church and eventually produced an alternative Protestant church in the Confessing Church. Both confessions had their heroes during this early period, but it was the Confessing Church which created the most difficulty for Hitler.

North Americans are prone to make ahistorical generalizations and unreflective judgements about Hitler and the German churches during the Third Reich. Scholder's first volume is invaluable in giving the historical background for the rise of National Socialism and the complex ecclesiastical and theological situation leading up to the Third Reich. Part One of the book deals with the Weimar period, 1918-1933. The author shows how one cannot understand 1933 without a knowledge of the First World War, the revolution of 1918, and the Weimar constitution of 1919. The military defeat brought a crisis of spiritual meaning for the church which lasted until the end of the Weimar Republic. The "separation of church and state" which characterized the "secular" Weimar state not only endangered the privileged political, economic, and legal status which the Protestant churches held under the Kaiser, but emptied the state of what most Protestants considered the nation's fundamental moral and spiritual substance. Part Two of the book gives a moment by moment account of the political and religious events of 1933, the year Hitler came to power. "By the end of this year," the author says, "at all events as far as the churches were concerned, practically all the fundamental decisions had been made. Later developments are already prepared for here" (p. xi). Scholder's meticulous treatment of historical details and his interpretive skills help make the enigmatic events of this period understandable and believable.

Scholder manages to shatter simplistic stereotypes about Hitler and his inner circle, the *Deutsche Christen*, the official *Evangelische* church administration, the Confessing Church, and Vatican church politics. He remains faithful to his intention as stated in the forward: "Nowhere have I spared anything, but have named blindness and lies, arrogance, stupidity and opportunism for what they were—even in clerical garb, and speaking the language of the church" (p. x). While he is willing to make harsh judgements, he has little patience for worn-out clichés about fascism, conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. Hitler, while a political opportunist and misguided in his beliefs, is portrayed as someone who emerges from a folk-movement tradition that reaches back into the nineteenth century. He has a deeply felt religious self-consciousness, a sense of divine mission, and perceives "himself to be in tune with the eternal laws of creation"

(87). The *Deutsche Christen* ("German Christians") are shown in their full diversity, from the radical anti-Semitic wing responsible for the *Sportpalast* rally of November, 1933, to the hopelessly opportunistic and deceitful *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller, to the important nationalist "political theologians" such as Protestants Emanuel Hirsch, Paul Althaus, and Wilhelm Stapel and Catholics Karl Eschweiler, Karl Adam, Michael Schmaus, and Josef Lortz. Even the "heroes" of the period, those involved in the "Confessional Front in Germany"—"the joint church-political front of all those church leaders, *Landeskirchen* and communities which did not belong to the German Christians" (563)—are not spared criticism for their indecisive political maneuverings. Vatican politics, too, are shown as self-serving and concerned with self-preservation. The reason early Catholic resistance to Hitler crumbled so easily was that the Vatican, through its representative Pacelli, was preoccupied with reaching an agreement that would safeguard its canonical rights in Germany.

Only Karl Barth and Dialectical Theology come off relatively unscathed. It is quite clear where Scholder's biases lie. He is highly critical of all twentieth century political theology of whatever stripe, and he portrays Barth's theology as the only genuine alternative to the various theo-political fronts vying with each other in the 1920's and 30's. From the first pages Scholder's suspicions of political theologies is evident: "If the history of this era contains a warning for the Protestant church, then it lies above all in guarding against political enthusiasm, which then as now found its enthusiastic followers in Protestant theology and church" (p. x). For most, the Weimar period offered four theological possibilities: the Liberal Protestantism of Harnack, the Religious Socialism of Tillich, the National Protestantism of Emanuel Hirsch, and the Dialectical Theology of Barth. The first three of these may have differed in their concepts of God, Christ, and the church, but they shared a common "religious-ethical worldview of the German Reformation" in which the task of the church was seen primarily in moral-ethical terms. The three primary areas of moral action were the family, the cultural community, and the state (37ff.).

It is this identification of the Christian church with the cultural-ethical task that gets carried over into the "political theologies" of the left and right in the early 1930's and that makes the Protestant churches so susceptible to National Socialism and the German Christian agenda. Scholder uses the term "political theology" specifically to describe the nationalist theology of Althaus, Hirsch, Stapel, and Friedrich Gogarten, for whom the *Volk* (nation/people) became the starting point for all of theology. According to Scholder, what emerged was a "new, modern type of theology: political theology" (103). He adds:

Of course every theology is political. In modern political theology, however, political ethics becomes the key question in theological understanding and church action. That is its general hallmark and characteristic (104).

Scholder shows how the political theology of the left, as represented by Tillich's Religious Socialism, was ineffective against the political theology

of the right because the two were formally too similar, a hypothesis at least partially borne out by my own research into Tillich and Hirsch. According to Scholder, it is only Barth's theology, which saw theology not as unpolitical or apolitical but as in some sense pre-political, that was able to rally elements of the churches against the German Christian forces. Ironically, Barth's attempt to develop independent theological criteria for Christian faith and action in the world was the most effective politically.

Scholder does admit that Barth's theology had its shortcomings. His most incisive critique is:

... Barth's objections to any political theology remain theologically valid, as does his assertion of the theological clarification needed "first of all" before the church expressed itself on political questions. But for the church there is certainly not only the preaching of reconciliation but also the act of reconciliation, which expresses itself in a helping and compassionate solidarity with the victims of this and every age. Perhaps the fact that Barth did not perceive and did not ponder this possibility was the only real weakness in his position (435).

Barth's theology and that of the Confessing Church in general was too concerned with theological orthodoxy and not concerned enough with the atrocities outside the boundaries of the church. The challenge for the church today, as then, is to combine sound theological thinking with astute political analysis in which it declares itself unambiguously for the victims of all political ideologies, whether of the left, centre, or right.

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## **Universe: God, Science and the Human Person**

Adam Ford

Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987

228 pp. U.S. \$9.95 paper

I have heard that, when the first nuclear device was exploded over the New Mexico desert, Albert Einstein said, "Now everything is different, except the way people think." This volume by Adam Ford, chaplain to St. Paul's Girls' School, London, England, priest in Ordinary to the Queen at London's Chapel Royal, *and* an avid amateur astronomer, is a fine attempt at enabling women and men of faith to think differently in a technological, nuclear age, informed by scientific inquiry into the structure of the whole of the universe.

The prevailing mood of the book is wonder. In the spirit of the Psalmist, Ford sees the whole of the creation bearing witness to the glory of God. Scientific investigation into microscopic *minutae* and vast cosmic reaches is