

## *Nazis and Investiture*

**The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue,** by Ernst Christian Helmreich, *Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979. 616 pp.*

FOR NEARLY TWO MILLENNIA European civilization has taken its form from its engagement with Christianity, and since Christianity, like the golden apple of heaven which the enterprising ghost of C. S. Lewis' *Great Divorce* tried unsuccessfully to carry back to hell, cannot be contained by any civilization, there has always been tension as well as assimilation. Adolf Hitler was a modern Ghibelline, a ruler determined to bend Christianity to his political purposes, original only in his radicalism, and no more able than Constantine to imagine an empire without a cult. But there the similarity ends. For Hitler was cynical, a neo-barbarian, strangely ignorant of the religion of the German people, determined only that belief should be controlled and used. And in that respect the history of church and state in Germany from 1933 to 1945 is but another chapter in the warfare between European rulers, among them greater princes than Hitler, and an idea they have partly loved, partly obeyed, and never been able satisfactorily to dominate.

Ernst Helmreich has told the story as it happened, detailing month by month the encounter of great institutions representing antithetical principles and having as a battlefield neither the debating hall nor university lecture rooms, but rather ministries and courtrooms, that kind of institutional engagement whose tendency it is always to blunt issues, tarring high principle with the brush of pragmatism and lending plausibility to lies. It is an account of institutions with inherently ambivalent and crazily overlapping goals: Protestants and Hitler sharing a desire for Church unity that had roots in such disparate sources as St. John and Hegel; Hitler sharing with Catholics a fear of Bolshevism that seemed to both justify some accommodation; and

Catholics sharing with Protestants, and especially with the Confessing Church, a fundamental disaffection, not for every discrete goal proposed by National Socialism, but for the overriding themes and dominant spirit of a party in which both great churches gradually discerned the shadow of the ancient enemy.

The great strength of this book is the patient craft it displays. Helmreich begins the story of the encounter between Hitler and the churches where it must always begin, with the political settlement of the reformation; tracing meticulously the rise of the concordat as a form of church-state relations, the distinctively social character of German Christianity, and the particular relationships between German states and the churches in the nineteenth century. One-fifth of the book contains notes, which often make available to American scholars documents and periodicals otherwise inaccessible. The author's historiography of the churches is moderately objective, sympathetic but not apologetic.

If the work has any single weakness it is born accidentally of the author's disciplined refusal to pass over into consideration of the theological realities that shaped the relationship of the Christian institutions to the state. In its engagement with any state the Church is always working in the borderlands of its principles; not arguing its truth, but merely its right to exist and to teach unhampered, and in this argument Christian rhetoric is disappointingly thin. By avoiding that depth of experience which moves church history toward hagiography, and which has marked many early treatments of Christendom under Hitler, the book necessarily avoids the depth which gives the church-state conflict its significance. But this is endemic in church history or in the histories of churches.

The kingdom which is the Church is ultimately a hidden kingdom of virtues, intentions, and responsibility, regarding which no satisfactory historical account can be written. We still do not know *why* so many Germans welcomed the German Christian movement, nor do we know why

Cardinal Pacelli worked so tirelessly for the concordat which linked the Roman Catholic Church remotely but officially to the regime of Hitler. We do not really know how the fact of Christianity tempered the judicial tyranny of the early 1940's nor how Christian faith served in the months following the collapse of 1945. But then these realities are probably not objectifiable, and should be mentioned only to emphasize the truth that the conflict and accommodation between Hitler and the churches did not compass the influence of Christianity upon the German people. Indeed, the real purposes of the Church, as the first Christian theologian of history wrote in the twilight of the Augustan empire, may be served as well by catastrophe as by peace. The Church as institution in the world is always reaching out from hidden purposes which she cannot ever hope to represent infallibility in the political arena, toward an inevitable, frustrating engagement with institutions which, whether sympathetic or hostile, seek their own.

Among the many particular reasons the book is worth reading is the careful documentation of the influence of the concept of legality under National Socialism. Legality was the key to the manipulative efforts which Hitler employed to bring the churches under control, and the expropriations of church property and prohibitions of church activity were usually executed under its guise. The great test case was the program for destroying life considered not worth living: "The program of mercy deaths for children with birth defects was continued to the collapse of the regime, and the undertaking to exterminate the Jews was in a way only a radical extension of the euthanasia program." To the credit of the German judiciary, they protested these acts at least to the point that required a special convocation of judges in Berlin, at which time the legality of the relevant decrees emanating from the will of Hitler was established by reiteration. Yet after the gentlest of protests, the traditional defense of the moral value of every life was set aside in favor of positive

law promulgated with technical legality. But has the American judiciary, one wonders, faced with conclusions drawn from similar, merely positive, presuppositions done as much? By raising such questions the book serves an especially important function. It is a cool and placid account of the worst face of the twentieth century, a world in which troublesome principle was managed with the tool Marcuse called "technological reason." The complaints of Christians were often dealt with 'legally,' but laws, protocols, decrees were given a life of their own which reason could not touch. The minds in charge were dominated by the spurious objectivity of the bureaucratic will which, when linked to the violence of which those same minds were capable, produced an irrational climate in which protest seemed simultaneously impossible and inappropriate.

The book also conveys a fine sense of the distinctive character of German Christendom. The state in which the encounter between Hitler and the churches took place was a Germany not yet secularized in a modern sense, a state in which, even forty years after Hitler, the population pays church tax with only polite grumbling and in which the typical citizen still cannot easily imagine an utterly pluralistic and secular state. And each of the great religions seems to persist in its own proper, German character. German Protestantism is still somehow the religion of Luther, and German Catholicism is still marked by Wilhelm von Ketteler's concern for society. Hans Küng's anti-papal theology, Helmreich notes, is a German phenomenon, standing one might add, in succession to Döllinger as well as Luther. This is not remarkable, but it is often forgotten, and the forgetting of it is propaedeutic to forgetting why the German churches emerge as unambiguous champions of the light only in their own historicizing of their past, and then only when that history was told by pious partisans. That the hierarchies of both churches, and an unnumbered multitude of Christians, substantially avoided overt apostasy amid

circumstances in which the regime commanded every human motive, is sufficient testimony that by engaging the churches in a battle for the German soul, Hitler had unwittingly attacked a power he could not reasonably have hoped to defeat.

Reviewed by JAMES PATRICK

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### *Understanding Russian Culture*

**A History of Russian Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism**, by Andrzej Walicki; translated from the Polish by Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1979. xvii + 456 pp. \$25.00.

EVALUATION OF ANDRZEJ WALICKI'S book requires rather more attention to the author's personal circumstances than would ordinarily be the case. He is listed on the dust jacket as professor in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw; he has visited Britain and the United States several times and at length; he wrote the book in Poland, in Polish; he quotes Leszek Kolakowski, the distinguished Polish ex-Communist scholar now resident in England, and is thanked in the introduction to Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*. These and other details testify to Walicki's success in mastering the idiom of both sides of the Iron Curtain and in seeking to meet the requirements of being both a Polish citizen and a scholar conforming to recognized international standards (rather than being treated as an honorary scholar by Westerners who despise, pity, and overlook the politically necessary rubbish in such a person's work).

The scope of the book is indicated in the title; the purpose of the author stems from awareness "that a sympathetic understanding of Russian culture is of vital impor-