

Globethics Repository

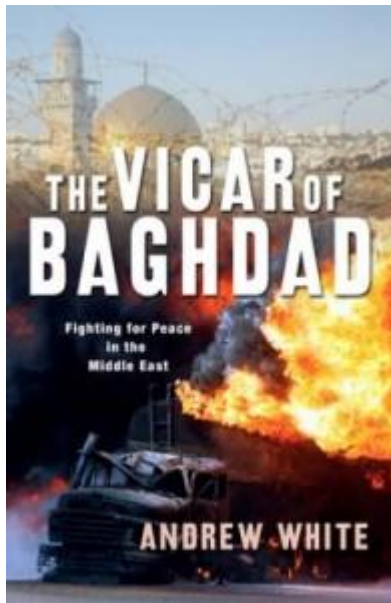
The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

New Research on Nazism and Christianity

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Koehne, Samuel
Publisher	Ambrose University College
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-07-10 12:34:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/202466

between the insurgents who had seized the church, the Christian authorities and the Israeli security forces, taught him many lessons about high-level diplomacy in extreme situations and the church's role in finding solutions. In 2005 he was posted to Baghdad. His church building, as the only Anglican parish in Iraq, had been built in the 1920s when the British Empire still ruled. But under Saddam Hussein it had been shut down. Anglicans were a vanishing breed. But White has successfully rebuilt a congregation of local people with evangelical-style services in Arabic and even Aramaic, though he requires the services of a translator for his sermons.



White's principal task, as his subtitle indicates, is to try and promote peace and reconciliation in the region, for which he obviously has a considerable flair. The politicians, generals and diplomats who have ruled Iraq since Saddam's overthrow have tended to discount or underestimate the importance of religion, but White firmly believes in its centrality, if any discussions with the main actors of Iraqi society are to be successful. In his view, an understanding of, and approach to, the leading figures in the religious sphere, including the militant Muslims, is a vital first step. These are the men who promote conflict in the belief that they are defending their holy traditions and culture. But White seeks to recruit the support of other religious leaders who recognize the need for a more peaceful future. He has therefore energetically sought to enlist the help of both Shia and Sunni clerics to support his Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East. He believes that religious extremists can only be approached by those who address them in religious language, so he has worked tirelessly to maintain communication between the various factions in

the religious establishment both in Iraq and outside in order to promote dialogue and find consensus. But he has no illusions that progress towards a peaceful resolution will be agonizingly slow in an area continually fuelled by religious antagonisms, and may even be overtaken by the forces of violence, as is obvious in Syria today. This is a highly dangerous ministry. White has to have a permanent bodyguard in a city where all foreigners are at risk. Front-line peacemaking can be immensely stressful. At one point in 2007 he was obliged to flee the country, but later was able to return to take up his mission again. Several of his colleagues have been captured and held to ransom. Some have never been seen again. So this account can only be an interim report on a brave attempt to overcome the mutual incomprehension between the Islamic world and the West, which White sees as one of humanity's biggest problems today.

Contemporary Church History Quarterly

Volume 18, Number 4 (December 2012)

New Research on Nazism and Christianity: Samuel Koehne

By Samuel Koehne, Deakin University

Sam Koehne is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute (Deakin University, Australia). He is working on the official Nazi positions on religion and on his first book, Nazi

Germany as a Christian State: Liberal and Conservative Christian Responses from the Great War to the Nazi State.

I would like to outline my research in two fields, one being that of the Christian response to the rise of the Nazi Party and the other being my most recent research into the Nazis' official views on religion. The concern of my doctoral work was to ascertain how 'ordinary' Christian Germans of the Protestant tradition responded to the rise of the Nazis. It was a close study of two German Protestant communities (based near Stuttgart) from 1914-1939 to understand Christians' responses to the Nazis in the context of their experiences of the First World War and the Weimar Republic.

In this sense, it fits with the recent trend in scholarship (as in works like those of Manfred Gailus and Kyle Jantzen) towards examining the complex and heterogeneous nature of German Protestantism and the question of the particularity of response. My aim was to examine the response at a local community level and provide the contrast between theologically liberal and theologically conservative Christian communities. Given this, my central questions were threefold: How did Christians at opposite ends of the theological spectrum respond to National Socialism and the changes engendered by it when the Nazis came to power? Why did they respond as they did? What difference (if any) did their faith position make?

The two groups that were chosen as case-studies represented fairly neatly one of the major sections of society that were likely to vote for the Nazis: nationalist and politically conservative Protestants. However, they were also both 'free church' communities located near Stuttgart whose origins lay in Württemberg Pietism: the conservative Christian Brethren in Korntal (*Evangelische Brüdergemeinde Korntal*) and the liberal Christian Temple-Society in Degerloch (*Tempelgesellschaft*). The Temple-Society had actually split from the Brethren in the nineteenth century and established further communities in Russia and Palestine (under Turkish rule and the British Mandate).[1]

Such communities formed fixed points of reference for their members. As micro-societies that were already self-defined and focused inward, they constitute particularly interesting subjects in their responses to wider changes, especially as spheres of the public and private became blurred in the Third Reich. Their Christian faith was integral to their identity and their members' lives were dictated by religious belief, as they were meant to demonstrate an 'active' or lived Christianity in everyday life. This included a direct concern with politics, given a chiliastic focus on reading current events through a 'religious lens.'

Some of the most interesting discoveries were precisely how aware both communities were of the Nazi agenda before 1933, and how little this mattered in 1933 itself, which they tended to call a 'year of wonder.' There are some interesting links to recent work that has been reviewed in the *ACCH Quarterly*. By 1932 the perception of Nazism in both groups was very similar to that of the [Kulturkampf bulletin](#) during the Nazi regime itself (*ACCH Quarterly* Vol.16, no.4, December 2010): that Nazism was 'totalitarian...an ideologically conceived religion or substitute for religion' and fundamentally antisemitic.

Those living in Korntal were advised by 1930 that Nazism was built 'upon an anti-Christian glorification and absolutism of race,' that its ideology was inherently violent, revolutionary, and formed an 'ersatz religion.' One prominent Korntaler even called it a 'blasphemy' for the 'hate-filled' Nazis to claim they

adhered to 'positive Christianity.' The Templers reached similar conclusions by 1932: that the Nazis were fundamentally antisemitic and adhered to a racial ideology, that Nazism itself was a new faith, that Hitler sought to establish a dictatorship and was relying on mass-psychology and a time of crisis in order to rise to power. Yet both communities embraced the rise of a 'new Germany' under Hitler in 1933. Although they first believed they were supporting a DNVP-NSDAP coalition government, a fascination with Hitler quickly developed and he was described consistently as having been 'given by God.'

There is also a link to the recent work by [Robert P. Ericksen on the question of complicity](#) (*ACCH Quarterly* 18, no.2, June 2012). There were certainly instances of antisemitism in both groups, although the best characterization of the response to the Nazis' violence and antisemitism in 1933 itself was an 'active' passivity. The most enthusiastic support was for the perceived national and spiritual rebirth of Germany, a perspective deriving very much from pre-1933 experiences. From this initial enthusiasm, the two groups gradually moved in opposite directions, to a point where those in the Korntal Brethren were saying 'No' to the Nazi state at the same time that leading Templers were just as emphatically saying 'Yes.' Generally the dominant trends in the Temple-Society by 1939 were at least in line with the German Christian Movement although some leaders were going so far as to link the community to the neo-pagan German Faith Movement. The Brethren position became one of retreat in the face of what was increasingly seen to be an 'anti-Christian' state. The situation was complex, but these final positions were largely dictated by the theological stance of the two communities.

My most recent research has considered the question of the official Nazi position on religion. While there are many excellent studies regarding church responses to the Nazis, or leading Nazis' religious beliefs, there exists somewhat of a gap as to what the Nazis themselves chose to represent with respect to religion in their official publications. Given this, my current project is driven by the query: how did the Nazi Party present its official position on religion and what was promoted in those texts that were viewed (both within and outside the Nazi movement) as representing the official stance? This clearly carries the burden of ascertaining what was considered 'official.' A necessary second component of such research is to examine the reception of such official texts and how they were interpreted, though this will form the next stage of my work.

Given the very vigorous debates of recent years on the Nazi Program, especially Point 24 and 'positive Christianity,' the first stage of this research has been to consider the origins of the Nazi Program (undertaken through detailed research into the *Hauptarchiv der NSDAP*) as well as examining the two official commentaries (by Alfred Rosenberg in 1922 and Gottfried Feder in 1927) and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The commentaries have sometimes been overlooked, even though they were official statements and aimed to describe to both the Party faithful and a broader public what "Nazism" was (and was not). Though also clearly serving a promotional or propaganda purpose, these were statements that people at the time could turn to in understanding the Nazi Party.

The initial results of this research are that Point 24 appears to have been designed principally to serve an antisemitic function, illustrated by the fact that there is consistency from the first 'Foundational Principles' or *Grundsätze* of the German Workers' Party through the 25 Point Program of the National Socialist German Workers' Party to the commentaries and also *Mein Kampf* on this major point: religious teachings or doctrines (*Religionslehren, Glaubenslehren*) would be opposed if they failed to satisfy

German 'laws of morality and ethics,' (*Grundsätze*) or the 'ethical and moral feelings of the Germanic race' (Program).

There does not seem to have been any comprehensive sense to 'positive Christianity.' The first commentary certainly argued more in favor of the idea that both religion and class would act to splinter rather than cohere Nazism as a movement, which seems to have been maintained in official statements. For instance the 'Fundamental Regulations for the Re-Formation of the NSDAP' that were issued when the Nazi Party was formed again in 1925 stated: 'Religious or class conflicts will not be tolerated in the Movement.' This was reconfirmed at the Bamberg Conference of 1926, as reported in the *Völkischer Beobachter*: 'Religious problems have no role to play in the National Socialist Movement and are only suitable for undermining its political effectiveness. It is incumbent on every individual to sort out such problems for themselves.'^[2] What this means is that when Rudolf Hess caused controversy in October of 1933 by arguing that the Nazi Party adhered to 'freedom of conscience' in religion, it was not a new concept.

What was essential (at least in official statements) was that religion meet racial requirements. The official position on religion was not principally about the form of faith, but the actual content of faith. Further research is required, yet this appears to help towards explaining the great disparity that was to be found amongst the Nazi leaders, from those advocating a 'Germanized' Christianity through to the 'pagans' or 'paganists.' Rosenberg's commentary was explicit that 'Morality is completely racially conditioned, and not abstract Catholic, Protestant or Muslim.' It has been fascinating to find (as indicated by Rosenberg's statement) that there was opposition to the notion of revealed religions in favor of the view that what was repugnant or acceptable in religious teaching would be 'revealed' through the response of one's moral conscience, itself supposedly conditioned by race.

To use the example of Christianity and such a conception of 'Germanic' morality: depending upon how one measured the cloth of religious belief against such a racial yardstick, it was possible to cut out sections (the Old Testament, parts of the New Testament), create a patchwork (joining fairy-tales or the Nordic sagas to the story of Christ), or throw it away and sew a new garment altogether (neo-paganism, German Faith). 'Germanizing and dejudaising' religious teachings was a major concern--as it was in movements amongst the German Christians (see the [reviews of Susannah Heschel's work](#) in *ACCH Quarterly* Vol.16, no.4, December 2010).

This perhaps takes us beyond current discussions, which have tended to focus on the promotion of 'German Christianity' or an 'Aryan' Christianity, or alternatively on the 'new faiths' of neo-pagan organizations, both of which topics have a number of studies examining such questions 'from below' or 'from above.' The official position may provide us with insight into what was meant to be common to all Nazis, regardless of the faith they professed.

[1] Some of my previous research considered the internment of many members of the Temple-Society under the British Mandate of Palestine in WWII and their subsequent deportation to and internment in Australia. The major history is Paul Sauer, *The Holy Land Called: The Story of the Temple Society*, trans. Gunhild Henley (Melbourne: Temple Society Australia, 1991). I have dealt with the literature on the