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### The Missouri Synod and Hitler's Germany

How should a German-American respond to the Nazi regime in the 1930s? This was a pressing question for Lutherans of the Missouri Synod whose loyalty had been questioned during World War I. Historians have described how most German-Americans, after a few months of ambivalence in 1933, made clear their opposition to Nazi policies and their attachment to American democratic values. Only a small minority was attracted to the *Deutschamerikanischer Volksbund*, a front for Nazi activities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Leaders of the Missouri Synod, like most other German-Americans, did not join Nazi organizations, and they touted their loyalty to America. However, with their strong German identity and conservative political attitudes, some of them expressed not just ambivalence but actual support for Nazi political goals through the 1930s.

Of the large religious denominations containing German-Americans in the 1930s, the Missouri Synod was perhaps the most self-consciously German. German Catholics in the American setting were mixed into an ethnically diverse church dominated by a largely Irish and Italian episcopacy. German Lutherans were divided into three large groups. The American Lutheran Conference, strongest in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas, was a federation of German, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian Lutherans. The United Lutheran Church of America, with its greatest strength on the eastern seaboard, had grown out of the largely eighteenth-century German migration to the English colonies. By the 1930s these Lutherans had by and large entered the American cultural mainstream. The Missouri Synod (officially named the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States) was founded in the mid-1800s by Saxon immigrants in the Midwest and maintained into the twentieth century a strong German identity. With its use of German as the language of worship and instruction in its extensive parochial school system, the Missouri Synod was probably the least assimilated German religious group in the American setting with the exception of smaller groups such as the Amish.<sup>2</sup>

War between the United States and the fatherland had been especially wrenching to the Missouri Synod. Missouri Synod leaders tried valiantly to convince the public in 1917-18 that its "German" identity was a matter of religion and culture, not politics. But the anti-German hysteria overwhelmed the church's self-defense, and the Missouri Synod began quickly to abandon its use of the German language. For example, in early 1917 only one-sixth of Missouri Synod congregations held at least one service a month in English, but by the end of 1918, three-quarters were doing so.<sup>3</sup>

Given the questions about their loyalty in World War I, one might expect the leaders of the Missouri Synod to clearly distance themselves from the politics of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s. In the social context of America in the 1930s it would be more acceptable for Missouri Synod leaders to display sympathy for fellow Lutherans suffering in the church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) which resulted from the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* of 1933. But instead of political estrangement with German policies and theological ties with fellow Lutherans across the Atlantic, the opposite was actually the case. Support for Germany came from political sympathies of Missouri Synod leaders, not from any feelings of theological or religious affinity for German Lutherans. Throughout the 1930s they supported most Nazi policies while they continually criticized developments within the church in Germany.

This essay examines the public statements and commentary about Nazi Germany made by Missouri Synod leaders in four journals published between 1933 and 1945: the *Lutheran Witness*, *Der Lutheraner*, the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, and the *Walther League Messenger*. The *Lutheran Witness* claimed on its masthead to be the official organ of the Missouri Synod. Like the *Concordia Theological Monthly* and *Der Lutheraner*, it was published by Concordia Publishing House and edited by members of the faculty of the Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Most of the editorial commentary in the three journals in particular came from professors Martin Sommer, Theodor Graebner, W. Arndt, Theodor Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and Ludwig Fuerbringer. The *Lutheran Witness* and *Der Lutheraner* were newsy weeklies with similar content for the English or German speaking reader. The *Concordia Theological Monthly*, with articles in both German and English, was a more scholarly theological journal intended for pastors which did, however, contain many news items and editorials about current political and ecclesiastical developments in Germany. The *Walther League Messenger* was not an official organ of the Missouri Synod, even though the Walther League, a Lutheran youth society, was endorsed by the Synod and officially recognized at the 1920 synodical convention. Its editor was Walter A. Maier, a professor at Concordia Seminary and pioneer of radio evangelism. In the 1930s and 1940s, Maier was arguably the most well-known and influential Lutheran in America. His radio program, "The Lutheran Hour," at its peak in the late 1940s, was broadcast to a weekly listening audience of twenty million in fifty-five countries.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines the statements of some influential leaders of the Missouri Synod. I will not attempt to estimate the degree to which these

editors and professors molded church opinion, nor can I determine the degree to which their views reflected those of the members in the pews. One can only assume that the views of church leaders somewhat approximate those of the laity. This is, however, a risky assumption as the recent history of the Missouri Synod indicates. In 1973, increasing attacks from certain quarters that seminary professors were too liberal and inadequately representative of the church at large precipitated a walkout of faculty in St. Louis and the formation of a rival seminary called Seminex. A schism in the church resulted.

In the church press in the 1930s there were no charges of a "liberal" professoriat and little evidence of dissension in the church body on political issues. Missouri Synod leaders publicly endorsed Luther's teaching of the separation of the temporal and spiritual kingdoms. In other words, the church should stay out of politics and vice versa. The journals were highly critical of political preaching in other denominations. They identified political and social activism on the part of the church with the social gospel and theological liberalism. As the *Concordia Theological Monthly* said, it is not the duty of the pastor to tell his people what ticket to vote for.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the pages of the Lutheran journals expressed clear and unmistakable positions on a variety of political issues, one of which was Nazi Germany.

In 1933 the church press enthusiastically welcomed Hitler's rise to power. Soon after his accession Walter A. Maier praised Hitler as a natural-born leader who understood the true needs of Germany. In his editorial entitled "Hitler Shows the Way," Maier lauded Hitler's rejection of communism, his attacks on immorality, and the intense national feeling he brought back to the German people.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the *Lutheran Witness* welcomed the Nazi regime with an editorial "Germany Teaches Us a Lesson." The lesson learned from the Nazis was the proper method of dealing with communists, noting that after the *Reichstag* fire, toleration of communism in Germany had ended.<sup>7</sup> *Der Lutheraner* defended the infamous book burning in Berlin of April 1933 as a sign of Hitler's opposition to Bolshevism, and as an indication that what was previously tolerated would be no longer.<sup>8</sup> Hans Kirsten, a pastor of the Lutheran Free Churches in Germany who wrote regularly for the *Walther League Messenger*, thanked God for sending Hitler to deliver the German people from Bolshevism. Instead of curbing freedom, Kirsten viewed Hitler as restoring German freedom by destroying Marxism and wresting the country from the terrible clutches of postwar chaos.<sup>9</sup>

Like many conservatives in America and Great Britain, Missouri Synod leaders supported the German repudiation of the Versailles Treaty. Throughout the 1930s Walter A. Maier praised Hitler's denunciation of Versailles and his plan for independent economic development (autarky) for Germany. In 1935 Hans Kirsten lauded the restoration of the Saar region to Germany after its sixteen years of French control. Maier blamed the disintegration of peace in Europe in the later 1930s, not on Hitler's aggressive demands, but instead on the postwar peace settlement which had stripped Germany of her dignity.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the *Lutheran Witness* printed an article by a German Free Church pastor

living in London, W. M. Oesch, who argued that many Englishmen viewed Germany as restoring the balance of Europe which had been destroyed by Versailles. Germany's political tenets, he argued, were well capable of solving the national problems of Europe because of the emphasis on respect for the national identity, the *Volkstum*.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1930s synodical leaders also approved of the campaign for law and order which was associated with Hitler's *Gleichschaltung*. In the *Lutheran Witness*, a layman from Kansas City who had spent three months in Germany in 1936, praised the great changes that had taken place since Hitler had become chancellor, specifically the revived national unity and respect, the orderliness, and rejuvenated economy.<sup>12</sup> The *Concordia Theological Monthly* refuted an anti-Nazi editorial in the *Christian Century* which had emphasized human rights violations in Nazi Germany. The journal labeled the editorial as hateful and untrue. Coming closer to truth were the responses the vicious editorial had elicited, such as one letter which noted: "Every truth seeker returning from Germany is full of praise for the German people and their great courageous leader, the greatest German after Martin Luther." Closest to truth, the journal continued, was another letter which praised the law and order of Germany and the "wonders Hitler has performed there. . . . There are no gangsters and no racketeers. There are no strikes and no lockouts, and the only discontented people are the political parsons and priests."<sup>13</sup> In 1936 the *Walther League Messenger* printed glowing accounts of the experiences of American youth who had returned from German voluntary work camps where they had learned lessons about communal work, sacrifice, and service.<sup>14</sup> Like many observers worldwide, Missouri Synod leaders were impressed with the structure and orderliness Hitler brought to German society.

The Missouri Synod journals described the Nazi regime as a positive moral force for a society which previously was chaotic and decadent. Walter A. Maier lauded Hitler's attack on immorality, pornography, nudism, and Hollywood films. Pastor Kirsten noted Hitler's call for a return to the old faith in God.<sup>15</sup> According to *Der Lutheraner*, the Nazi book burning accomplished what Christian men and women had long desired, namely the cleansing of filthy books (*Bücherschmutz*) from the land.<sup>16</sup> Hitler's speeches of the early 1930s had indeed consistently resounded the theme of a return to traditional morality. He frequently made references to the importance of Christian values as forming one of the bases of the German cultural ethos. He was well-known for his puritanical, ascetic personal habits. In their righteous indignation about the decadence of the Weimar era, Missouri Synod leaders, like many Germans, saw Hitler's restoration of order and public morality as a positive achievement which obviously overshadowed the corresponding loss of civil liberties.

In fact, the editors of Lutheran journals displayed a marked skepticism about the negative news reporting of events in Germany in the 1930s. Repeatedly, articles in *Der Lutheraner* called for skepticism in reading news accounts of anti-Jewish policies and actions by the

German government in 1933.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Walter A. Maier explained that Hitler had been misinterpreted; he recommended that one look instead to German newspapers for a different account. Speaking for the German people in the *Walther League Messenger*, Pastor Kirsten pleaded "with our fellow Lutherans throughout the world not to listen to those who would defame the character of this splendid personality or who would attack his pure motives."<sup>18</sup> In several articles Maier denied the reports of anti-Semitic outbursts as complete exaggeration and systematic propaganda. The titles of his articles in the *Walther League Messenger* make the point well enough: "Jingo Journalism," "Jaundiced Journalism," and "Pogroms or Propaganda?"<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the *Lutheran Witness* in April declared the stories of persecution of Jews in Germany to be propaganda and exaggeration. The *Witness* suggested instead: "Let us be slow to believe evil of the German people." While repudiating the news reports, the journal published as its better authority a letter from a German Jew living in Chemnitz who argued that the stories in the world press were not true.<sup>20</sup> Again in 1936, the layman from Kansas City reported from his visit to Germany that the stories of brutalities against the Jews were grossly exaggerated "or even invented by a pernicious propaganda."<sup>21</sup> The skepticism even survived the war in some quarters. When news reports were appearing in 1944 describing mass killings, the death camps, gas chambers, and human crematories, and the like, the *Concordia Theological Monthly* cautioned readers on the reliability of the reports reminding them that such "rumors" also followed World War I and were proved false.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, the man most responsible for what Americans read in their newspapers about Germany in the 1930s was a devout Missouri Synod Lutheran. Louis Lochner was the Berlin Bureau Chief of the Associated Press from 1928 until 1941 when the declaration of war caused the ouster of American journalists from Germany. For most of these years he was president of the Foreign Press Association of Berlin which represented reporters from twenty-six countries. Lochner's articles were wired to the over 1,400 newspapers affiliated with the Associated Press, and in 1939 he won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Germany. Lochner's father, Friedrich, as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, was one of the founding fathers of the Missouri Synod and a well-known expert on Lutheran liturgics. Lochner's brother, Rev. Martin Lochner, was professor at Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, 1912-45, and his other brother, William, was also a Missouri Synod clergyman. Indeed it was partly because of Lochner's upbringing in Lutheran Milwaukee, where he joked English was a second language, that he had the fluency in German to do the quality reporting for which he was so well-known. While in Berlin he was a member of the Lutheran Free Church of Saxony, which was financially supported by and had close ties with the Missouri Synod.

Lochner argued later that the skepticism about reporting was unwarranted. In fact, he said the picture was much worse in Germany than the one drawn in the press. Reporters knew much more than the German people about what was actually going on in Germany, but they could

not tell all for fear of being forcibly repatriated by German authorities. Thus when the professors bemoaned the systematic anti-German propaganda of the American press, they were speaking about this Lutheran reporter and his associates. Adding to the irony, after the war Lochner served on the editorial board of the *Lutheran Witness* for twenty years.<sup>23</sup>

The discrediting of news reports of Jewish persecutions may be related to a degree of homegrown anti-Semitism among some Missouri Synod leaders. The journals displayed an uncomfortable uncertainty or ambivalence about Jews and their role in society. In the early 1930s several editorial notes informed readers of the world Jewish population and rapid increase in Jewish population in the United States. One editorial expressed concern that American quotas did not specifically restrict Jewish immigration because the immigrants were not designated as Jews but as Germans, Poles, or whatever their country of origin. Another article later in the year reminded readers that the widespread rumor of a decrease in the world Jewish population was incorrect.<sup>24</sup> After the persecutions of Jews began under Hitler, the *Concordia Theological Monthly* spotlighted the Jewish problem in Germany by giving readers the "authoritative" statement about the number of Jews in Germany. The frequently cited figure of 600,000 Jews is wrong, said the journal. This figure came from a 1912 census which only considered adherents of the Jewish faith to be Jews. Actually there were 1.5 million Jews who are of mixed blood and faith, the journal concluded, thereby accepting a racial rather than religious definition of Jewishness.<sup>25</sup>

With this attention on the large Jewish population, the journal editors could easily understand, and sometimes justify, the anti-Semitic outbursts in Germany. Even though Walter A. Maier denied the news reports of Jewish pogroms as complete exaggerations, he nonetheless explained the rationale for German antipathy toward the Jews. According to Maier, the Jews were "unduly prominent in the higher ranks of Russian communism." He noted the postwar communist regime in Hungary where "Bela Kun (actually Cohen), an embezzler and co-editor of *The International Socialist*, instituted a reign of Jewish Red Terror." Maier cataloged a long list of Jewish communist leaders prominent during the revolutionary years, 1918-23. The German people look upon the Jews as disloyal traitors, he said, "because Jews have been pronouncedly anti-national, communistic and international." He blamed Germany's woes during the Great War on Jewish "Communist agitators." He implied that Jews did not have to serve in the front lines of the army because of their smaller stature and inferior physique. After the war, he said, Jews seeking refuge in Germany were "the lowest type of ghetto Jew." On the other hand, Maier then blamed the hyperinflation after the war on "a coterie of Jewish bankers . . . these carpet baggers of post-bellum Germany" who impoverished the German people while they became rich. As if this were not enough, Maier goes on to charge Jews with production of immoral and pornographic art, literature, and entertainment forms.<sup>26</sup> Later in 1933 Kirsten praised Hitler for destroying Marxism, a force instigated by Jews. He also

blamed the poor images of Hitler in Western eyes on the Jewish control of the foreign press.<sup>27</sup>

The explanation of German dislike for Jews of course did not mean for Maier a justification for racism. He spelled out clearly that Christians cannot countenance systematic hatred of any race. However, his use of selective examples and half-truths to characterize the Jewish people would have only reinforced any vague anti-Semitic attitudes of his readers.

Besides the political, economic and cultural explanations, the editors provided a theological explanation for Jewish pogroms. The professors reminded readers throughout the Nazi period that Jews were the adversaries of Christianity. A 1939 editorial in *Der Lutheraner* entitled "Das jüdische Lügenbuch, der Talmud" listed the Talmud's anti-Christian statements and recorded its attempt to launch a smear campaign against Christ. Three years later the journal reminded readers that "we don't tolerate their [the Jews'] hatred against Christianity and the Gospel. We remind them: 'He who believes not will be damned.'" <sup>28</sup> Several editors were incensed when in 1938 a Methodist bishop in St. Louis allowed a Jewish rabbi to participate in a church service. In the words of the editor of *Der Lutheraner*, "Here the Jewish cunning has locked foolish Christians in their net." The rabbi obviously wanted recognition that his people were persecuted in Europe, the journal continued, but the Jews wanted more: "they want to destroy the Christian confession, the word of the Cross out of the world."<sup>29</sup>

This Jewish hatred and rejection of Christianity explained the woes of the suffering Jews in Europe. Jewish opposition to the Messiah, said *Der Lutheraner*, "is also the real reason to which this unlucky people must ascribe their suffering." The anti-Semitic outbursts, the journal continued, reminded the Christian of the verses in Matthew 27:25, "Your blood comes over us and our children."<sup>30</sup> According to the *Lutheran Witness*, the problems of this strange people, the Jews—their dislike, hatred, persecution, even the killings—were a testimony to the "wrath of God upon all who reject Christ," in fact even to the severity of God to those who disbelieve.<sup>31</sup> These church leaders thus understood and explained the contemporary and historical situation for Jews in terms of their rejection of Christ. Only this explained why the Jews were the only stateless, governmentless people wandering the earth for two thousand years which remained a separate, distinct nation. As the *Lutheran Witness* summed up the situation: "Again, the Jews are under a curse because they crucified their Messiah."<sup>32</sup>

Although the professors rationalized and, with this theological explanation, even justified the sufferings of the Jews in Europe, they were sympathetic with their problems. They frequently made statements deploring the violence and persecution aimed at Jews. In the later 1930s when discrimination against Jews in Germany became more violent, Walter A. Maier stopped rationalizing anti-Semitism and began criticizing it. By 1939 he accused the Germans of making inane claims about Jews. While in 1933 he had complained that "Jews were pronouncedly anti-national, communistic and international," six years later

he glorified the "patriotic Israelites who fought, bled, and died for Germany's cause . . . who loved the Fatherland with the same fervor as their Aryan comrades."<sup>33</sup> However, many such statements came with qualifiers which muted the criticism. For example, an editorial in the *Lutheran Witness* deplored the atrocities and persecutions of Jews but added, "those who injure the Jews most of all are who speak to them and associate with them as if their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel were excusable."<sup>34</sup>

In fact, these leaders of the Missouri Synod wanted to solve the "Jewish problem," but the only solution they saw possible was conversion of the Jews to Christianity. Lutheran missions aimed specifically at the Jews existed in Chicago and New York. This was the answer.<sup>35</sup> But there was even some ambiguity concerning Christian Jews. The editors made no denunciation of the Aryan paragraph passed by the governing synod of the Prussian church in September 1933 which had defrocked all pastors who were of Jewish descent or married to someone of Jewish ancestry. The *Concordia Theological Monthly* merely reprinted the famous statements responding to the Aryan paragraph drawn up by the theology faculties of Erlangen and Marburg universities. The Erlangen statement, written by Paul Althaus and Werner Elert, defended the Aryan paragraph as legal and justifiable given the commission of the church to be a *Volkskirche* for the German people. The German people, not the church, were to decide the relationship of Germanism and Judaism. According to Elert and Althaus, it was a biological and historical question, not a religious one. The statement from the Marburg theology faculty flatly rejected the Aryan paragraph, calling it irreconcilable with the character of the Christian church. The journal printed these statements without commentary.<sup>36</sup> What was the reader to conclude? One response was framed by Althaus and Elert, authorities widely read and respected in Missouri Synod theological circles who occupied prestigious chairs at Erlangen University, the bastion of confessional Lutheranism in Germany. The other response came from Marburg University, a center of theological liberalism, the home of Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Rade, two of the most famous modernists in Germany, who had been repudiated by name in numerous editorials in synodical journals.

So in general, opinion on the Jewish question ran the gamut from anti-Semitism to theological opposition to vague uncertainty in dealing with the Jews. I do not intend to imply that Missouri Synod Lutherans were unique in this regard. Racial feelings ran deep in America in the 1930s. In fact, the professors were quite progressive in their attitudes toward black Americans. The journals frequently criticized the Ku Klux Klan, cited lynchings in southern states, and discussed the efforts the church was making to minister to Negroes. An editorial in 1938 pointed out: "In the church we don't refuse the hand of any brother because of his skin color." However, probably because of the theological issues involved, the Jew created a more difficult problem for the consciences of these Missouri Synod leaders.<sup>37</sup>

After several years of political sympathy for Germany, skepticism of

the news coming from there, and empathy regarding the anti-Jewish German policies, the Missouri Synod churchmen took a radical turn in their political stance in 1941. After the beginning of war in September 1939 until American entry after Pearl Harbor most editorial statements in the Lutheran journals had recommended a policy of neutrality. Walter A. Maier claimed that United States involvement in the European war could lead to a communist Europe.<sup>38</sup> Again, Maier's titles tell all: "How to Stay Out of War," "Keep Out of War!" "Keep Neutral!" As late as 1941 he was vocally promoting neutrality. If the United States had stayed out of the First World War, Maier argued, Nazism would not exist twenty years later. United States involvement had ruined German morale and required a dynamic leader such as Hitler to restore the former glory.<sup>39</sup> The *Concordia Theological Monthly* criticized clergy who were lobbying for a United States declaration of war in 1940 and 1941. The journal singled out in particular a Methodist bishop who sent a pro-war letter to Secretary of State Hull, and famous churchmen such as Henry Sloane Coffin, John R. Mott, and Reinhold Niebuhr, whose journal, *Christianity and the Crisis*, called for quick and resolute action by the United States to aid the allies.<sup>40</sup> The *Concordia Theological Monthly* deplored the "war hysteria" of the clergy and warned readers: "The clocks are turned back nine hundred years, a crusade is impending, and clergymen are contemplating donning a coat of mail to fight what they consider the battle of the Lord—and all of it under the banner of the Prince of Peace!"<sup>41</sup>

After Pearl Harbor the pro-neutrality rhetoric obviously ended. J. W. Behnken, president of the Missouri Synod, sent President Franklin Roosevelt a telegram on 9 December 1941 assuring him of the church's support of the nation's defense, on the basis of Romans 13:1-7.<sup>41</sup> All of the journals devoted much space to patriotic articles and advertisements in the war years which followed. The *Lutheran Witness* in particular promoted the war cause, devoting a special issue each year after 1942 to the war effort filled with splendid examples of war propaganda as an art form.

After several years of touting the benefits of neutrality, the editors voiced their opposition now to pacifism. One editorial, for example, "The Dry Rot of Pacifism" linked pacifism (the kind displayed in the liberal *Christian Century*) to theological modernism which is opposed to God's word.<sup>43</sup> Even before Pearl Harbor one article had argued that all citizens must rally to the support of their government and bear arms when called to do so. Quaker and Mennonite pacifism which regarded all wars as mass murder, it said, "violates plain statements of Scripture."<sup>44</sup>

Now that the United States was at war with Germany, explicit criticisms of Nazism also began to appear in the Lutheran journals. The *Concordia Theological Monthly* quoted a statement by Joseph Goebbels which called for national egoism and hatred for the British people. Such a statement, the journal said, would bring up the question of civil disobedience for German Christians.<sup>45</sup> Another editorial expressed hope that domestic dissatisfaction with Nazism in Germany would soon

topple the government there. Optimistically it argued: "To us it seems that the Nietzschean philosophy which has been ruling the German leaders has almost run its course and will soon be abandoned."<sup>46</sup>

From 1933 to 1945, political attitudes of Missouri Synod leaders, therefore, generally progressed from support of Hitler's regime to neutrality in world war to support of war against Germany and criticism of the Nazi cause. But the Nazi regime was more than a political experiment. Its totalitarian methods meant a challenge to the structure and integrity of the church in Germany. The story of the German church conflict, the *Kirchenkampf*, is extremely complicated, and the literature concerning it is voluminous. Basically, Hitler wished to restructure the existing confederation of independent provincial Protestant churches into one national church, a *Volkskirche*, which would reflect the cultural identity of the German people. This reorganization naturally impinged upon the institutional and theological independence and integrity of the church.

The leaders of the Missouri Synod were much more critical of the ecclesiastical developments than of the political developments in Nazi Germany. A group of Nazi churchmen called *Deutsche Christen* led the assault on the churches with their attempt to amalgamate fascist ideology with German Protestantism. It was the *Deutsche Christen* who articulated the idea of a *Volkskirche* composed only of the Aryan race, excluding Jews and also Slavs, Asians, Negroes and others. The Missouri Synod journals all repudiated the neo-paganism of this nationalistic racist religion. The *Concordia Theological Monthly* responded to the *Deutsche Christen* idea by noting that God's word does not distinguish between Aryan and non-Aryan races.<sup>47</sup> The journal also described the famous speeches made by *Deutsche Christen* leaders at the Berlin Sports Palace Assembly in November 1933 which called for a purging of the Bible of its Jewish content and attacked particularly the Old Testament. The editors called the *Deutsche Christen* the *Deutsche Heiden*, and insisted even this name was too good for them.<sup>48</sup> Walter A. Maier criticized the *Deutsche Christen* (whom he notes were a radical fringe and numerically insignificant minority) for their attack on the Semitic Old Testament as unchaste and immoral. Even the German-language *Der Lutheraner* criticized the *Deutsche Christen* for substituting a national God for the true one.<sup>49</sup> Editorials particularly criticized Alfred Rosenberg, the philosopher of the Nazi movement, who articulated a neo-pagan religion of blood, soil, and race. Like Lutheran churchmen in Germany who opposed the Nazi encroachments on Christianity, the tendency was to blame the *Deutsche Christen* party and Rosenberg rather than Hitler himself, who appeared to stand above the fray.

The Missouri Synod journals expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the church settlement achieved in the summer of 1933 which created the new German Evangelical Church, Hitler's *Volkskirche*. The complaints were primarily twofold. Obviously such a national church violated the "Lutheran" idea of the Two Kingdoms, the separation of church and state. True Lutheranism, said one editor, "would never permit Hitler or anyone else to build up a national Church similar to structures which he

formerly saw in Spain or other Roman Catholic countries."<sup>50</sup> The journals condemned the state shackles which impeded the liberty and purity of the Lutheran confession. In the late 1930s the journals applauded Hitler's actions to disestablish the church, such as the closing of theological faculties in the universities, seeing them as the beginning of a real separation of church and state in Germany.<sup>51</sup> The editors did not realize that Hitler's moves were signalling a shift in the *Kirchenkampf* from being a struggle in the 1930s of the state to control the institutional church to a wartime policy of subtle destruction of the influence of institutional Christianity.

Secondly, the greatest ill involved in the new German Evangelical Church was unionism. The national church combined Lutheran and Reformed bodies with the already united church bodies to form the *Volkskirche*. In the eyes of synodical leaders, this only repeated and exaggerated the Prussian Union of Reformed and Lutheran churches of 1817. This forced church union had been one motivation for Saxon immigration to America and the eventual foundation of the Missouri Synod. Memories of the errors of union were strongly felt within the Missouri Synod in the 1930s. In several articles, the *Concordia Theological Monthly* repudiated the plan for the new national church for displaying the worst kind of unionism.<sup>52</sup> In late 1933 the journal quoted the well-known Lutheran theologian, Hermann Sasse of Erlangen University, who bemoaned the creation of the national church as a dark day in the history of Lutheranism which meant the end of the evangelical church of the Augsburg Confession in the provincial churches.<sup>53</sup> The following year the editor described the public outcry that accompanied the Nazification of the German church, but complained that no one was critical of the unionist aspect of the new church.<sup>54</sup>

At first the professors were quite supportive of the clerical resistance to the church reform. After the Aryan paragraph in September 1933, Martin Niemöller, an influential pastor in Berlin-Dahlem, organized the Pastor's Emergency League (*Pfarrernotbund*) ostensibly to aid the distressed clergy of Jewish descent. By the end of the year over six thousand pastors had joined the organization even though the number of defrocked pastors of tainted blood was quite small. In the winter and then spring of 1934 many *Notbund* pastors, including Niemöller, were subject to Gestapo searches and harassment. In May 1934, opposition leaders met in Barmen where they denounced the *Deutsche Christen* church government and declared themselves to be the true Evangelical Church of Germany. A group of theologians, led by Karl Barth, the famous Reformed theologian, drew up the significant Barmen Confession which rejected state control of the church as doctrinally false. After Barmen there were in fact two national churches in Germany, the German Evangelical Church, and this Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*).

Before Barmen the *Concordia Theological Monthly* praised these dissenters, especially Niemöller, for holding tenaciously to truth in the midst of error. The journal criticized the government's treatment of Niemöller and the charges of conspiracy which has been levied against

him. The "crime" he committed, the journal noted, was that he proclaimed to the church government his resistance to heathenism within the church.<sup>55</sup> At first the journal supported the resistance movement because of its opposition to the state-controlled unionist church and its *Deutsche Christen* heresy.

However, after Barmen the Confessing Church came under criticism for many of the same reasons. Because the Confessing Church joined Lutheran, Reformed, and United factions within German Protestantism into one opposition church, in the eyes of synodical leaders it was as guilty of unionism as was the Nazi-controlled church. With its Barmen Confession written primarily by Karl Barth, the Confessing Church became theologically unpalatable to Missouri Synod Lutherans. In fact, Hermann Sasse, who was on the committee with Karl Barth which drafted the Confession, refused to sign the document and broke with the Confessing Church after Barmen, complaining that it really "confessed" nothing since it ignored differences between Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Sasse, who became an influential voice for Missouri Synod theologians for years to come, explained that he went to Barmen viewing it as a meeting of common dissent against developments in the German church. But to his surprise, at Barmen the dissenters became a church.<sup>56</sup> The *Concordia Theological Monthly* reprinted an article by Werner Elert, Sasse's Lutheran colleague at Erlangen University, in which he affirmed Barmen's protest against the leadership of the national church, but denied that the meeting was actually a confessing synod. It did not stand on the strong basis of God's word. With positivists and liberals included in the body, Elert argued, what kind of confession could it make?<sup>57</sup>

The other problem with the Confessing Church was that it claimed to be the Evangelical Church of Germany, the genuine one, but still a state church. The Confessing Church would remain embroiled in political conflict, said one editor, as long as it tried to be a state church. It could only be a true Confessing Church when it separated from the state and became a Free Church.<sup>58</sup> Perceptively, the journals explained that Confessing Church leaders were fearful that they could not survive without the financial support of the state. (During the 1930s most Confessing Church leaders, in fact, did continue to draw their salaries which came from the public purse.) As long as the church received financial support of the state it would never be free. Money was the shackle which bound the freedom of the church. The *Concordia Theological Monthly* assured Confessing Church leaders that their church, even in Germany, could survive without state funds.<sup>59</sup> The obvious hopes were that the *Kirchenkampf* would create a number of confessing Free Churches. Perhaps the Lutherans in the Confessing Church would even join with the Lutheran Free Churches (today united as the *Selbständige Evangelische Lutherische Kirche*), which were subsidized by and in close fellowship with the Missouri Synod. In fact, much of the information Missouri Synod leaders received about the German church struggle came via their contacts with the Free Churches. Its pastors and professors, such as Hans Kirsten, W. M. Oesch, and Martin Willkomm,

head of the Free Church seminary in Berlin-Zehlendorf, were frequent contributors to the Missouri Synod journals. In the views of these Free Church leaders and Missouri Synod leaders, the Free Churches were the working model for future German Protestantism. According to *Der Lutheraner*, the Free Churches could do their work unhindered simply because they were not state churches; the state had no legal basis to intervene.<sup>60</sup> With hindsight we know that legality was not a prerequisite for Nazi intervention in any institution or aspect of society.

Recent research by Manfred Roensch, a professor at the Free Church seminary at Oberursel, indicates that Hitler left the Free Churches alone because of their unqualified support of the Nazi regime. He concludes that the Free Churches' views of strict separation of church and state led to a peculiar personal narrowing of ethical views and absolute loyalty to the state on such questions as racial laws and the euthanasia program. He describes a publicly proclaimed anti-Semitism and support for Hitler's political program. Free Church leaders praised Hitler as a hero sent by God to rescue the church from the Bolshevik flood. The Enabling Act of 23 March 1933, which made Hitler a dictator and destroyed German democracy, and the creation of a one-party state the following summer were welcomed and hailed as a guarantee of existence for Christian churches. As one local Free Church paper exclaimed: "One sees in these new developments the graceful hand of God who called Adolf Hitler in timely fashion to save Germany from full destruction."<sup>61</sup>

Just one extended quote will suffice to illustrate the support of Free Church leaders for Hitler's government. During the same week when opposition church leaders drafted the Barmen Confession which included a denunciation of state totalitarianism, a synodical meeting of the Free Churches in Berlin drafted the following statement which they sent to the government:

The Evangelical Lutheran Free Churches of Saxony and other states at their fifty-second synodical gathering from 23 to 28 May in Berlin, feel bound before God to say thanks to the state government for everything it has done and is doing for the re-establishment of our *Volk* and state and the recreation of its moral foundations. They thank the government for its devoted work for the reconstruction of public security and protection of life through use of state disciplinary power against lawbreakers and evildoers—for the cleansing of our administration and economy of corruption and exploitation—for the purification of the streets, the press, libraries, schools, and so forth of sexual and bolshevist corruption—for the securing of marriage and the family especially through the rebuilding of true honor and worth of women in their calling as housewife and mother—for the reconstruction of respect for all honorable work—for the removal of unemployment—for the securing of property—for the reconstruction of a true national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] by overcoming the divisions which split the nation. We ask God that He bless all the work of our government and crown it with rich success.<sup>62</sup>

These Free Churches which were closely linked to the Missouri Synod, whose professors had studied and taught at Missouri Synod seminaries, differed from Missouri Synod leaders primarily by degree in their positions regarding developments in the Third Reich. Of course, they too opposed the idea of a state church and the unionist tendencies of the Evangelical Church of Germany and the Confessing Christians. They, too, strongly argued for a strict separation of church and state as a solution for the ecclesiastical problems. In fact, writing in the *Lutheran Witness*, Free Church Pastor Oesch blamed the problems of the *Kirchenkampf* on pastors who wished to be political and interfere with matters of state. Historians today note the narrow ecclesiastical nature of the Confessing Church resistance and the marked absence of meaningful political criticism by those who heroically stood up to Hitler on church matters.<sup>63</sup>

In 1945 an editorial in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* strongly refuted the commonly held view that the German churches, owing to their Lutheran background "were too passive and docile in political matters, and thus Hitler had no difficulty in achieving that absolute control which he sought."<sup>64</sup> This study has demonstrated that some Missouri Synod leaders had gone to the opposite extreme by publicly endorsing many political goals of the Nazi movement in the 1930s. It was not Lutheran theology that made these Missouri Synod leaders sympathetic to German political policies. In fact, they were quite critical of the German church establishment for its wrong-headed theological positions, its liberalism, its unionism, its state-churchism. Their agreement with Lutherans in Nazi Germany in the 1930s did not come on religious grounds, but rested upon some very common conservative political attitudes of the 1930s.

Virulent anti-communism was perhaps the overriding concern which colored the political attitudes of Missouri Synod leaders. The anti-communism was based on knowledge of an atheistic Marxist ideology, very real attacks against Christianity in Bolshevik Russia, and genuine crimes committed by Stalin's regime. Missouri Synod periodicals frequently castigated Russian communism in editorials and even focused criticism on the pro-socialist stance of organized labor in the United States. This sincere anti-communism of Missouri Synod churchmen could easily blind them to some of the inconsistencies of their positions. For example, while the *Concordia Theological Monthly* in one editorial, "Politics in the Pulpit," affirmed the Lutheran position that the church or clergy does not make political statements, another editorial entitled, "The Lutheran Church and Subversive Tendencies in America," accused the CIO of harboring communist organizers and condemned communism as "at present the greatest enemy threatening our liberty and security."<sup>65</sup> With a headline, "Reds on the March," the *Lutheran Witness* condemned Soviet aggression in the heavily Lutheran Baltic Republics in 1939. But the *Witness* could then make no comment on the Nazi invasions of Poland and Czechoslovakia that same year. The forced unification of Germany and Austria in March 1938 could be applauded

as a bold stroke of policy restoring a breach made in the Reformation, moreover a move that would weaken the pope's influence in Europe.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps these Missouri Synod leaders used their Lutheran theology to support or deny particular political opinions. For violating the principle of the Two Kingdoms, they criticized liberals who spoke out against Hitler and advocated war against Germany or political policies of a socialist nature.<sup>67</sup> In other words, they used theological arguments to disallow "political preaching" by those with whom they disagreed. However, without seeming to recognize it, the editors themselves proceeded to make many unavoidably political statements. They apparently did not feel the need to justify their support of Nazi policies, of neutrality in 1939, or their attacks on communism, organized labor, and pacifism. They made these comments on political issues evidently because moral concerns and perhaps even theological issues were involved. They did not seem to understand that opposition to Nazism, as the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, could also have a moral inspiration.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the chapter on reactions to Nazism in La Vern J. Rippley, *The German-Americans* (Boston, 1976), 196-213; Richard O'Connor, *The German-Americans* (Boston, 1968), 436-52; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Germans," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 422-23; and Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, NY, 1974).

I wish to thank Eric Brofford whose paper for a history class at Concordia College provided the idea for this article. Translations from the German are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the founding of the Missouri Synod see Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi: The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri, 1839-1841* (St. Louis, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> Conzen, 423.

<sup>4</sup> *The Walther League Manual* (Chicago, 1935), 21. For a readable if not objective account of Maier's life, see the biography written by his son, Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke, A World Listened: The Story of Walter A. Maier* (St. Louis, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1932, 946-47.

<sup>6</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, April 1933, 461.

<sup>7</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 14 March 1933, 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 8 August 1933, 267-68.

<sup>9</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, July 1933, 692-93.

<sup>10</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, April 1933, 461, and March 1935, 398-99.

<sup>11</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 8 February 1938, 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 6 October 1936, 334-35.

<sup>13</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1935, 947-48.

<sup>14</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, June 1936, 594, and November 1936, 156-57.

<sup>15</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, April 1933, 461, and July 1933, 693.

<sup>16</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 8 August 1933, 267-68.

<sup>17</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 18 April 1933, 137-38, and 16 May 1933, 168.

<sup>18</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, July 1933, 693, and April 1933, 461.

<sup>19</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, October 1934, January 1936, and May 1933, respectively.

<sup>20</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 25 April 1933, 152-53.

<sup>21</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 20 October 1936, 346–47. Robert W. Ross argues that this skepticism was common in the US religious press. See his *So It Was True* (Minneapolis, 1980), 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1944, 786–87.

<sup>23</sup> See Lochner's autobiography, *Always the Unexpected* (New York, 1956), and his book written upon repatriation to the US in 1942, *What About Germany?* (New York, 1942). The author also gained information about Louis Lochner through correspondence with his daughter, Mrs. William Sailer of Washington, DC, and an interview with his nephew, Fred Lochner, of River Forest, Illinois.

<sup>24</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, March 1933, 229, and November 1933, 856.

<sup>25</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1935, 949.

<sup>26</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, May 1933, 522–23, 562–63.

<sup>27</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, July 1933, 662.

<sup>28</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 5 December 1939, 408–9, and 6 October 1942, 331.

<sup>29</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 2 August 1938, 265–66.

<sup>30</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 3 October 1933, 331.

<sup>31</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 8 March 1938, 71–72.

<sup>32</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 12 May 1942, 168.

<sup>33</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, May 1933, 562, and February 1939, 358–59.

<sup>34</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 29 October 1940, 371–72.

<sup>35</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 5 May 1942, 156.

<sup>36</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1933, 948–49.

<sup>37</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1938, 824. There is, however, evidence for the 1960s to suggest that Missouri Synod Lutherans were more likely to hold anti-Semitic attitudes than members of most other denominations. The sociologists Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark found in 1965 that whereas 32 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans agreed that Jewish troubles were God's punishment for their rejection of Jesus, only 13 percent of ALC or LCA members agreed with such a statement. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was topped only by the Southern Baptists in their anti-Semitic index of major denominations (see Glock and Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* [New York, 1966], 64).

<sup>38</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, October 1939, 104.

<sup>39</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, January 1941, 305.

<sup>40</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, September 1940, 709–10.

<sup>41</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, April 1941, 310.

<sup>42</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 16 December 1941, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, June 1942, 471.

<sup>44</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, May 1941, 328.

<sup>45</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1942, 874–75.

<sup>46</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, January 1943, 66–67.

<sup>47</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, August 1933, 630–31.

<sup>48</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, February 1934, 144–45, and February 1938, 146.

<sup>49</sup> *Walther League Messenger*, May 1935, 522; and *Der Lutheraner*, 3 September 1935, 298.

<sup>50</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, June 1933, 465.

<sup>51</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1938, 868–69; and *Concordia Theological Monthly*, October 1939, 707–8.

<sup>52</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, June 1933, 462–63.

<sup>53</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1933, 935.

<sup>54</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1934, 885–86.

<sup>55</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, May 1934, 405.

<sup>56</sup> See Sasse's explanation in *Here We Stand* (Minneapolis, 1938), Theodore Tappert's translation of the German original of 1934 entitled *Was heißt lutherisch?*

<sup>57</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1934, 888.

<sup>58</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, May 1934, 407, and December 1934, 964.

<sup>59</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, February 1935, 147–48, and April 1937, 310.

<sup>60</sup> *Der Lutheraner*, 15 February 1938, 55–56.

<sup>61</sup> Manfred Roensch, ed., *Geschichte der Lutherischen Freikirchen im Dritten Reich, mit Dokumentation* (Hannover, 1987), 13, 58.

<sup>62</sup> Roensch, 16–17.

<sup>63</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 3 November 1936, 373–74. For comments by historians on this issue

see Shelley Baranowski, *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elites, and the Nazi State* (Lewiston, NY, 1986); and the concluding chapter of Richard Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb!: The German Evangelical Church and the Jews 1879-1950* (Oxford, 1976).

<sup>64</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1945, 868-69.

<sup>65</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1940, 533-35.

<sup>66</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, 12 December 1939, 425, and 22 March 1938, 93.

<sup>67</sup> For just a sample of such critical commentary, see *Concordia Theological Monthly*, May 1935, 382-83, August 1940, 633, 709-10, and April 1941, 310.

