

# Christian Nationalists in Nazi Germany: Are we having déjà vu all over again?

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*Few scholars have better credentials to undertake a comparative analysis of the role that Christian nationalism has played in Germany and in the United States than Michael Grzonka. A German-born and educated self-taught theologian, Dr. Grzonka has also lived and worked for 27 years in the US. He clearly has a finger on the pulse of rapidly changing political and cultural dynamics in the US today.*

*Well aware of the significant differences in the historical context of Germany in the 1930s and the United States in the 2020s, Dr. Grzonka is nevertheless not hesitant to note some of the striking -- and frightening -- similarities.*

*We are pleased to include this hitherto unpublished lecture among our resources. Dr. Grzonka's essay recalls the famous quote from the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana, "Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Unfortunately, the darker side of Dr. Grzonka's warning is being realized in the political and cultural life of the US today. Lay and clergy leaders of Christian congregations are well-advised to listen to his counsel.*

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## Introduction

The 2024 edition of “Freedom in the World” is the latest in this series of annual comparative reports about the global state of democracy that now spans over 50 years.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, global freedom declined for the 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in 2024. And as 2025 will surely continue this trend the situation in America, one of the world’s largest and longest-standing democracies, seems hell-bent to test new lows. One of the most under-acknowledged forces behind America’s dangerous embrace of the idea of autocratic rule is “Christian” Nationalism. In its broadest definition, “Christian” Nationalism is a type of religious nationalism affiliating itself with Christianity. But while this is perhaps a new experience for 21<sup>st</sup> century America, many previous empires colluded with some church, often a Christian church, and employed it to validate and infuse state action with divine authority. A particularly well-researched and -documented example is the relation between the Protestant church and the National Socialist state in 1930s Nazi Germany.

Not only was Hitler’s installation as Chancellor of Germany entirely legal in January 1933. Contrary to common belief, most Germans eagerly and joyfully welcomed Hitler and his party. Instead of recognizing an overture to autocracy, many welcomed Hitler’s chancellorship as the long overdue liberation from the general malaise that befell their country after losing the First World War in November 1918. Finally, a leader with the willpower to push aside that broken Weimar democracy and its splintered, prattling and altogether dysfunctional parliament. Finally, a strongman to pull back the country from the abyss, to rescue it from the claws of rampant Marxism and the Bolsheviks.

With few exceptions, Protestant voters inside and outside church were not only sympathetic but genuinely elated and exuberant in their hope for a better future under National Socialist rule. Their mood was much like that of many American voters who, far from being duped or bamboozled, happily voted for and then enthusiastically welcomed a second Trump presidency. Then, as now, no one dare say their new leadership “was done” or merely happened to citizens. Then as now, the strongman leads a nationwide political movement assisted by a vocal undercurrent of religious nationalism associating itself with some version of supposed “Christianity”. Then as now, the Protestant church faces a cross-denominational “faith movement” validating the political convictions of the strongman and his party as the “will of God” for the country and its people. What, if anything, can we learn from the German experience of the 1930s?

This essay reviews the brief lifespan of the “German Christians”, Germany’s “faith movement” of Protestant “Christian” nationalist. It studies how it colluded with the regime to take over Germany’s Protestant Church body and synchronize the entire organization and its message with the party’s ideology. As we recall the experience of the “German Christians”, this essay will identify some transferrable concepts some of which may apply to contemporary “Christian” Nationalism in America. In the final part of this essay we will consider which of these concepts are in evidence from American Christian nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House. Freedom in the World 2025 Report. “The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights” Accessed December 17, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>

To be clear: There is no claim here that American “Christian” Nationalism is National Socialist, or its proponents are National Socialists (Nazi). But there are striking parallels between both movements in the way they idolizes and posture around political power players, the belief that drives them, and their political demands.

## German “Christian” Nationalism in the 1930s

The “Golden Twenties” of the twentieth century were a time of uneven wealth and prosperity: daily excesses of both luxury and poverty were openly on display. In the eyes of its citizens, “democracy” and its “government” proved feeble and pre-occupied with its own affairs and altogether too alienated from their urgent daily needs. It proved unable to cope with an economy dominated by cartels and monopolies of “big business”. War reparations caused a hyperinflation in 1921-23 and destroyed the German currency.

Government itself was under constant attack from domestic militant forces from the political left, the right and even its own military. The 1920s saw multiple coups aimed at the federal government in Berlin. Several regional states threatened to split from the federal union. Some state governments were themselves subject to militant coups. For example, in November 1923 Hitler’s “Beerhall Putsch” failed to topple the state government of Bavaria. Street fighting of organized squads of Communists and Nazi were an almost daily occurrence in the late 1920s and federal and local governments were powerless to stop them. The stock market crash of 1929 brought persistent mass unemployment upon Germany that further aggravated an already calamitous situation for ordinary citizens. Let us briefly visit some of the stepping stones religious backing of nationalism took in Germany at the time.

## A Strongman is Enthusiastically Greeted to Start a New, Better Era

By the early 1930s people were no longer *merely considering* to elect a “strongman”—they craved one to ride to the fore and end their daily misery and push aside a government that failed them. Long before the power formally fell into Nazi hands, citizens had abandoned the first democracy in Germany. Weimar became a “democracy without democrats”: None of the political parties, not the trade unions, neither high-ranking military nor diplomats, not even its own civil servants could bring themselves to support the state they all lived in. The general mood of the times—and that is rarely understood in its full significance—was thus openly welcoming, often exuberantly receptive for Nazi and their message. After all: What did people have left to lose? Had Communism not triumphed and improved life in Russia since 1917? And what about National Socialism? Instead of dismissing Nazi out of hand, why not give that experiment its fair chance? Why not see what Nazi’s “many good ideas” would amount to in practice? All else had been tried and failed, so why not try them?<sup>2</sup>

Nazi’s chance finally came in 1932 when voters in a perfectly free and fair election made the NSDAP, the Nazi Party, the largest party in Weimar’s parliament. On January 30, 1933, after months of fruitless

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<sup>2</sup> These sentences paraphrase regional Protestant bishop Hanns Lilje reminiscing at a lecture in Bremen on April 19, 1954. Lilje recognized his error about the intent of Nazism and later helped form the Confessing Church. Author’s paraphrase of a text quoted in Beckmann, Joachim. Gollwitzer, Helmut et al. *Dann werden die Steine schreien: 50 Jahre Theologische Erklärung Barmen*. Bielefeld: Kirche und Mann, 1983. 12. (Hereafter referred to as DWDSS)

negotiations among possible coalition parties, Weimar's President<sup>3</sup> Paul von Hindenburg, did what would still happen today if circumstances were repeated: He named the head of the largest party in parliament "Chancellor" of the Republic and tasked him to form a government. That man was Adolf Hitler.

The public reaction? Few were alarmed. Instead: Widespread, genuine joy that, at last, a strongman had arrived to clean up the mess! Academia, large parts of the Protestant church, writers, artists and many other intellectuals publically welcomed Hitler's appointment. Stocks in Berlin climbed 3-5% on the news<sup>4</sup>. Even the Jewish Review of the following day could not see the end of democracy had arrived:<sup>5</sup>

*"[We believe] ... that within the German nation, too, still the forces are active that would turn against a barbarian anti-Jewish policy."*

## A New State Asserts its Christian Foundation

Most Protestant Church officials as well as a majority of its parishioners believed a "spirit of renewal and rejuvenation" would seize their land under National Socialist rule. And why not? The Nazi Party's program of 1922<sup>6</sup> not only proclaimed freedom of all religion, but indeed called for "positive Christianity" as the underpinning attitude of federal government. Hitler himself was a self-professed Catholic. The day after his installation, now-Chancellor Hitler publically declared "*Christianity as the foundation of our entire morality*". Hitler's announcement, read out in a nationwide radio address, closed with the words:<sup>7</sup>

*"May Almighty God take our work into His grace, shape our will, bless our understanding, and grant us the pleasure of the trust of our people."*

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<sup>3</sup> In many European democracies, unlike the US, the President is not the head of government. Often, his only official duty is to pick a person to form the government if a parliament fails to accomplish this.

<sup>4</sup> The *New York Times* of February 1, 1933 reported a 3-5 % boom at Germany's stock exchange the day after Hitler's appointment. Accessed January 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/1933/02/01/archives/stocks-advance-in-berlin.html>

<sup>5</sup> Jüdische Rundschau (Jewish Review), on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1933

<sup>6</sup> The full text of article 24 reads: "We demand freedom of religion for all religious denominations within the state so long as they do not endanger its existence or oppose the moral senses of the Germanic race. The Party as such advocates the standpoint of a positive Christianity without confessionally binding itself to any one denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and around us and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our nation can only succeed from within on the framework.

<sup>7</sup> Norden, Günther van. *Kirche in der Krise: die Stellung der evangelischen Kirche zum nationalsozialistischen Staat im Jahre 1933*. Düsseldorf: Presseverband der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland, 1963. 42. (Hereafter KIDK)

A snap election of March 5, 1933 further strengthened the governing coalition of NSDAP and DNVP.<sup>8</sup> On March 8, the German Protestant Church greeted these results with satisfaction. General Superintendent of the regional church of the Kurmark, Otto Dibelius, wrote to the pastors under his supervision:<sup>9</sup>

*"There will be few among us who do not enjoy this turn of events with their whole heart."*

On March 16 the official party newspaper of the National Socialist Party NSDAP, the "Völkischer Beobachter", headlined: "Adolf Hitler's Foundation of Government: Christianity".<sup>10</sup> The new German parliament began its work on March 21, 1933 with a worship service at Potsdam's Nikolai Church, with Dibelius preaching at the occasion. Two days later Hitler's governing coalition of NSDAP and DNVP introduced their "Enabling Law".<sup>11</sup> Explaining the proposition, Hitler directly addressed the relationship between the new National Socialist state and the church:

*"By being determined to carry out the political and moral detoxification of our public life, the government is creating and safeguarding the conditions for a truly profound, internal religious life. ... The national government considers the two Christian denominations to be the most important factors in the preservation of our nationality. ... Their rights should not be infringed."*<sup>12</sup>

## A "Faith Movement" of "Christian" Nationalists Co-ascends

When National Socialism emerged, Protestant theologians started to probe their faith for potential support of their ideas. Long before Nazi gained power in 1933, a few hundred Protestant pastors had already joined the Nazi party following personal views. When a strengthening NSDAP party began lobbying for support from the Christian churches they appointed two pastors from this pool of sympathizers to look after the party's interests within the Protestant church: Karl Eckert and Dr. Friedrich Wienke. In the course of 1931 the duo fostered a circle of Protestant national socialists in Berlin who desired to run under the name of "Protestant National Socialists" ("Evangelische Nationalsozialisten") in the 1932 church elections.<sup>13</sup> Hitler himself ordered their name be changed into "Deutsche Christen"—"German Christians". On June 6, 1932 the "Faith Movement German Christians"

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<sup>8</sup> The „German National People's Party“, the DNVP, was a nationalist-conservative and monarchist political party that served as the junior coalition partner when Nazi first came to power. Before the NSDAP overtook them in the polls, the DNVP was the party holding many of the same views on anti-Semitism, nationalism and autocratic rule.

<sup>9</sup> KIDK. 43. However, Dibelius continued to clarify that the church would remain independent from any political party or ideology. In its entirety, Dibelius' letter demonstrates the dilemma for many in the Protestant hierarchy: On the one hand their joy about the end of a shameful era for the German nation, and on the other the clear refusal to bind the Protestant church to any political party or movement. The Nazi reaction to this letter makes clear they recognized the church's refusal to embrace their party and movement: KIDK. 44.

<sup>10</sup> KIDK. 42. Footnote 55.

<sup>11</sup> Despite common belief "Enabling Laws" were nothing new or uncommon in Weimar: numerous governments in the short history of the Weimar Republic required a partial suspension of the state's checks and balances to become able to conduct the daily business of governing at all. Without parliamentary majorities in support of necessary legislation and to keep government going, parliaments frequently granted (limited) emergency powers to the head of state to keep the state afloat while bitter debates in parliament continued to paralyze legislation.

<sup>12</sup> KIDK. 44.

<sup>13</sup> KIDK. 22. For American Readers: "Evangelisch" in German does not translate to "Evangelical" but "Protestant". "Evangelisch" to be sure, lacks any of the fundamentalist connotations often attributed to "Evangelical".

published their first party program for the upcoming church elections. Led by Berlin Pastor Joachim Hossenfelder they demanded that the church leave behind its neutrality regarding party politics:<sup>14</sup>

*"We want to bring the reawakened German attitude to bear meaning in our church and make our church vigorous again. In the fateful struggle for Germany's freedom and future, the Church and its leadership have proven to be too weak. So far, the Church has not called for a decisive struggle against the unholy Marxism ... We want our Church to be at the forefront of the decisive, existential battle of our people. She must not stand aside or even distance itself from the liberation fighters".*

### **At the Core of the Faith Movement: False Prophecy**

The theological origin of Germany's "Christian" nationalists can be summed up as: *"God is a living and acting one. He spoke to Israel through Moses and the Prophets by revealing His will to them. The entire world heard His will through the birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the "Lord over History", God continues to determine the development of all peoples and their nations. He spoke to them in the actual events in their history and revealed His divine will through these events. And God continues to do that today."*<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, many Protestants believed to see God in action when the National Socialist movement and its NSDAP party gained in every election. Hitler's appointment in January 1933 further confirmed what many already "knew": now-Chancellor Hitler is the agent of God's will, especially created and sent by God to lead their nation into a brighter future. Some 10 weeks after Hitler's installation, the Evangelical High Church Council of Germany's largest regional church<sup>16</sup> wrote in their Easter message:

*"This year we deliver this Easter message of the risen Christ to a people to whom God has spoken through a profound turnaround. ... Convinced that the renewal of the people and the Reich can only be supported and secured by these forces, the Church recognizes itself gratefully united with the leadership of the new Germany. It is joyfully prepared to collaborate in the national and moral renewal of our people."*<sup>17</sup>

Hitler's assertions assured many in the Protestant church that the Nazi state acknowledged and supported the Protestant church in its rights and its mission as the nation set out into a whole new era. After decades in which the general population slowly left the churches, many believed Hitler's "Christian" government now would help turn the tide. Indeed, some church folks believed they were witnessing this soon after Hitler took office: *"In Württemberg in 1933, reports from across the state described overflowing church-services on new days of national celebration like Labor Day (May 1) and Thanksgiving (October 1)." Reports included one from the Stuttgart-suburb of Degerloch, where "a*

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<sup>14</sup> Point 5 in Hossenfelder's "Guidelines of the German Christians": Hossenfelder, Joachim. *Die Richtlinien der deutschen Christen*. Berlin: Kranzverlag-Druckerei, 1932. Quoted from DWDSS. 155.

<sup>15</sup> KIDK. 103.

<sup>16</sup> The „Altpreuussische Union“, Old Prussian Union, is one of the 28 Protestant „Landeskirchen“, independent regional church bodies across Germany.

<sup>17</sup> Published April 16, 1933. Quoted from KIDK. 46-47.



*loudspeaker needed to be set up in front of the church so that 'two thousand people could take part' in the service.*"<sup>18</sup>

## Corroding the Boundary between Church and State

In the months after January 1933 the regime had not yet shown its ugly face in ways most people would recognize. Rather, in these early months, a genuine, broad and renewed hope gripped German Protestantism. During this time not only the "German Christians" believed their prayers had been answered. For decades, many considered German Protestantism to be splintered into too many independent factions. Unifying these groups into a single nation-wide organization they hoped would cure this disease. Consequently, in their nation-wide convention on April 3-5, 1933 the "German Christians" openly demanded the consolidation of institutional powers ("Gleichschaltung")<sup>19</sup> of state and church institutions:

*"Only the consolidation of institutional powers of state and church can bring about the unprecedented increase in strength which the nation needs in order to achieve its goals. The state needs the Church, for it is the strongest means of a moral and proper education of the people. The national uprising will only be durable if it is rooted in the deeply internal forces of our Christianity."*

The resolution continues to grant all believers a right of resistance against any church leadership deemed lazy, complacent or not radical enough, unwilling or unable to join the epic battle of the ensuing "national uprising":<sup>20</sup>

*"God created me as a German. German national traditions ('Deutschtum') are God's gift. God wants me to fight for my German traditions ... For a German the church is the community of believers that is committed to fighting for a Christian Germany. The goal of the faith movement of German Christians is a Protestant German Reich Church. Adolf Hitler's state is calling for the church, the church heard the call."*

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<sup>18</sup> Koehne, Samuel. "Nazi Germany as a Christian State: The 'Protestant Experience' of 1933 in Württemberg." *Central European History* 46, no. 1 (March 2013): 97–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938913000046>.

<sup>19</sup> "Gleichschaltung" is as difficult to translate as it is consequential. It begins with reorganizing an organization from the top-down by installing a hierarchy of yes-men acting without any checks and balances. In the resulting structure the "leader" above always has absolute say over all his sub-leaders. These sub-leaders likewise rule absolute in their own domains as long as they execute orders without question or delay. Complaints from the bottom up about hardships are ignored when they question orders from the top. Such organization makes organizational resistance against orders from the top as difficult as possible and almost impossible in practice. This is known as the "Leader Principle" – "Führerprinzip". "Gleichschaltung" refers to the harmonizing of messages and execution of orders across organizations. In the interplay between governmental institutions, those supposed to check each other to prevent overreach become part of the hierarchically in the layers above. Beyond governmental structures "Gleichschaltung" seeks to include all societal institutions including the press, media and publishing institutions in all their variety, churches, universities, the arts and ultimately company managements. All are influenced, persuaded, patronized, coerced or forced to restructure until they act in lock-step with the will and orders of the country's top political leadership. Resisting and dissenting institutions are criminalized and closed down, bought up or otherwise pushed out of existence. Translating "Gleichschaltung" as "consolidation of institutional powers" is a compromise: it captures well the method, but utterly fails to even hint at the transformative consequences for society as a whole.

<sup>20</sup> From the resolution of the nation-wide conference of the "German Christians" April 3-5, 1933. KIDK. 50.



"German Christians" demanded folding all the 28 regional church bodies into one unified "Reichskirche" under the leadership of a single, state-appointed official. They did not consider this a sacrifice of the church's independence, but rather a matter of course because "Adolf Hitler's" new state, just like the church, is rooted in positive Christianity: both are jointly fighting the same fight.

In 1931, "German Christians" did not yet exist. When first running for office in summer 1932 they got dismal results. But from late 1932 the Nazi party and then government threw its full weight, resources and propaganda apparatus behind the "German Christians". It used this movement's short existence to bring Germany's Protestant church under Nazi control from within. On the eve of the church elections in 1933, Chancellor Adolf Hitler himself took to the radio in a nationwide broadcast. As head of government he made known his wish that the "German Christians" with their clear commitment to National Socialism would win. On church Election Day, July 23, 1933, seven out of every ten Protestant believers voted for the "German Christians": 156 "German Christian" delegates were elected against 71 opposing.<sup>21</sup>

It is hard to overestimate how deeply the nation was in the intoxicating grip of experiencing an honestly-felt national awakening. That summer, even those opposing the "German Christians" in the church elections were friendly, not: critical or hostile, to Nazi government. The Protestant weekly "*Licht und Leben*" voiced the "opposition's" view in its "Election Edition".<sup>22</sup>

*"We hope that the government we have today will succeed in achieving its goal, and we want to support it in the pursuit of this goal: peace in the country! Peace with all peoples! Freedom from the shackles of Versailles! Work for everyone! Combating class hatred! Subordination of partisan thinking to thinking toward the people! Building a state based on the rule of law...! Keeping away from all acts of violence! Legal certainty! For an authority pursuing such goals we will stand up with our praying intercession."*

In the same edition, the editor of the Protestant-Lutheran Church Newspaper<sup>23</sup> could claim that the estrangement of the people from their church was caused by demonic liberalism and Marxism "*whose power was only broken by Adolf Hitler.*"<sup>24</sup> In these early days of Nazism most of the official Protestant Church believed they needed the government's help and was happy and confident to get it. If that meant to blur or erase the line between Church and State that was alright for many and it was the express goal of the "German Christians".

Few documents better demonstrate the exuberant mindset of many Protestant theologians in those early days of Nazism than a homage telegram voluntarily sent to Hitler. On October 15, 1933 Pastor Martin Niemöller sent an expression of loyalty on behalf of those in the Protestant Church who refused to embrace the "German Christians" in the church elections the previous July:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> KIDK. 88 and 96.

<sup>22</sup> Licht und Leben, 45 (No. 30), July 23, 1933. Quoted from KIDK. 85.

<sup>23</sup> The paper's German name was "Evangelisch-lutherische Kirchenzeitung".

<sup>24</sup> Licht und Leben, 45 (No. 30), July 23, 1933. Quoted from KIDK. 86.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from DWDSS. 14. Niemöller, like Dibelius, would later actively help form the "Confessing Church". Niemöller was imprisoned by Nazi from 1938 to 1945.

*"In this crucial hour for people and fatherland, we greet our Führer. We thank you for your manly actions and clear words that protect Germany's honor. On behalf of more than 2,500 Protestant pastors who do not belong to the faith movement of German Christians, we pledge loyal allegiance and intercessory remembrance."*

In these early months of Nazi Rule, hardly anyone in Germany's Protestant church recognized the dangers from Germany's flavor of Christian Nationalism. Prominently among the few Protestant theologians who clearly saw the threat were Paul Tillich<sup>26</sup>, Karl Barth<sup>27</sup>, Joachim Beckmann<sup>28</sup>, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>29</sup>. But they remained isolated. In a 1936 lecture Karl Barth could later say:<sup>30</sup>

*"Anyone who did not believe in Hitler's mission in 1933 was an ostracized man, even in the ranks of the Confessing Church. It was a slow, laborious struggle in which these people (within the Confessing Church M.G.) slowly liberated themselves and awakened to clear realizations."*

Whatever else we may learn from the historic developments in 1930s Germany: The Nazification of German Protestantism was not "done to" the German Protestants. Rather than being hapless victims of state coercion most of the Protestant church clergy and the vast majority of its parishioners could not wait to throw themselves into the arms of the new regime.

That said, after the take-over by "German Christians" German Protestantism left outside the *Reichskirche* mounted a powerful and enabling response that is still highly relevant to this day. Their

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<sup>26</sup> Especially his concept of "original" and "dependent" revelation is useful here. By distinguishing message and situation, Tillich refuses and warns against taking eager reception of the message in a given situation as a criterion of its theological validity: *"Fundamentalists in America and orthodox theologians in Europe can point to the fact that their theology is eagerly received and held by many people just because of the historical or biographical situation in which men find themselves today. The fact is obvious, but the interpretation is wrong. "Situation," as one pole of all theological work, does not refer to the psychological or sociological state in which individuals or groups live. It refers to the scientific and artistic, the economic, political, and ethical forms in which they express their interpretation of existence. The "situation" to which theology must speak relevantly is not the situation of the individual as individual and not the situation of the group as group. Theology is neither preaching nor counseling; therefore, the success of a theology when it is applied to preaching or to the care of souls is not necessarily a criterion of its truth. The fact that fundamentalist ideas are eagerly grasped in a period of personal or communal disintegration does not prove their theological validity, just as the success of a liberal theology in periods of personal or communal integration is no certification of its truth."* Paul Tillich. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. 5th US edition. University of Chicago Press, 1956. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Especially important here is his *"Theological Existence To-Day!"*, originally published in 1933 already. Barth, Karl. *Theological Existence To-Day!: A Plea for Theological Freedom*. Translated by R. Birch Hoyle. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Representing many similar expressions is the response of the Rhinish Brotherhood of Pastors to the "Rengsdorf Theses" published by "German Christians" after they took over the Rhinish regional church. Its title "Species-appropriate Christianity or Scriptural Faith" summarizes the gist of the response: The core Christian message is *precisely not* customizable for different nations, their peoples or the historic situations they happen to experience. Reprinted in: Beckmann, Joachim. *So schwach waren wir: der Kampf um den rechten Glauben in der evangelischen Kirche des 20. Jahrhunderts : Aufsätze und Vorträge von 1933 bis 1984*. Düsseldorf: Presseverband der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland e.V., 1985. 11-37.

<sup>29</sup> On February 1, 1933, two days after Hitler's installation as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address in the "Berliner Funkstunde" titled "The Younger Generation's Altered View of the Concept of Führer", questioning the idea of a leader to be followed blindly. At the time Bonhoeffer was a student chaplain at the Technical College in Charlottenburg.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted from KIDK. 57.

response culminated in the Confessional Synod held in Barmen, a suburb of the industrial city of Wuppertal. From May 29 through 31, 1934 over 200 delegates from Lutheran, Reformed and Union churches met at Barmen's Gemark Church. Because "German Christians" and state representatives expected a falling out among the different factions at the Barmen Synod, the meeting was allowed to proceed unmolested by the Gestapo (Nazism's secret police) and was neither shut down nor disrupted like was, by then, customary for similar events.

But there was no falling out. Instead, the delegates created one of the most powerful documents in post-Reformation: the "Barmen Theological Declaration". Following the format of the Book of Concord and introduced by Bible quotes, each of the Declaration's six theses details the church's view on one aspect of what was happening in German Protestantism at the time. In its first thesis, the Declaration confronts the heresy of continued revelation head-on:

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."  
(John 14:6)*

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber... I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved."  
(John 10:1, 9)*

*Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.*

*We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.<sup>31</sup>*

## Amalgamating Church and State

Only hindsight makes it easy to see: Of course, a state in the process of implementing autocratic rule is not in the business of furthering the goals or mission of churches—be they of Catholic, Protestant or any other persuasion. Rather, it cannot resist the lure to instrumentalize organized religion for its own goals. At the same time, organized religion is content, perhaps even delighted, to validate the new government in return for seeing legislation that implements its own morals and convictions as federal law.

For centuries organized religion, like perhaps no other human institution, legitimized rulers. Without much distinction, Church declared kings as well as tyrants to be "ordained by" God. In a few cases the ruling humans were declared to actually be Gods. And once religion validates rulers as acting on God's orders every believer is obligated not only to accept without resistance or exception *everything* government does, but also to help with this effort. What religious nationalism of any shade offers to

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<sup>31</sup> Busch, Eberhard, and Daniel Migliore. *The Barmen Theses Then and Now: The 2004 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary*. Translated by Darrell Guder and Judith Guder. Eerdmans, 2010. 19-33.

wannabe rulers in modern democracies is this dual benefit of validating their aspirations for power, paired with large numbers of voters obligated to aid their election.

The implicit, often naïve assumption is that projection of power would work exclusively from church to state. But this is a two-sided deal. As the term “Christian” Nationalism itself suggests, Church and State are also jointly fighting in the larger battle for the nation’s future. And in this view it follows that whatever control government should chose to exercise over the church institutions is required as a matter of course and should thus be opposed neither by parishioners nor clergy.

In the end the question is which party retains the upper hand: Does state degenerate into theocracy with a religious establishment in ultimate control, or does state usurp the church and modify religious teaching to serve its own needs? In the case of Germany, the Nazi state continued to fully assimilate and dissolve the Protestant church organization and supplant its already compromised beliefs by a neo-paganism tailor-made to fit its own National Socialist ideology.

### **Perverting Christianity to Match Government Ideology**

After "German Christians" won a landslide victory in July 1933 they lost no time to unify the Protestant church into a single, top-down organization. With comfortable majorities in all but three of the regional churches, they installed loyal yes-men in all key positions who were happy to wave through all orders handed down from Berlin. Following their political convictions, "German Christians" leadership squarely put the nation’s needs above those of the church.

On September 5, 1933 the new "German Christian"-controlled old-Prussian regional church held in Wittenberg the so-called “Brown” General Synod. It ruled that ordained clergy could only be those of Aryan descent who “*wholeheartedly support the national state and the Evangelical Church*”. This so-called “Aryan Paragraph”—originally used to cleanse the state’s civil service—was applied to all employed in the Protestant churches. Saxony’s new regional bishop and "German Christian" Friedrich Coch clarified what this meant. His orders “*on the Establishment of a National Socialist and Ecclesiastical Civil Service and a National Socialist Pastorate*” ruled:<sup>32</sup>

*"Clergy ... who do not offer the guarantee that they will at all times unconditionally stand up for the National Socialist state and the German Protestant Church may be retired."*

In other words: Whosoever—in the eyes of their superiors!—could not be trusted to stand up for National Socialist ideology at church would be removed from office. It meant that baptized Jews and those married to spouses of Jewish descent would be fired or retired, effective immediately. The practical consequences of the “Aryan Paragraph” seemed small: a mere 29 of over 18000 Protestant church officials were deemed “non-Aryan”. On the face of it, therefore, applying the “Aryan Paragraph” to Protestant clergy appeared to be just another, practically inconsequential gesture of loyalty to Nazi party and its leadership.

But the question of introducing the “Aryan Paragraph” proved a crossroads for the Protestant church: Will we allow the (nationalist) love for the state, its leaders and their ideology to supplant and replace

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted from KIDK. 97.

traditional ecclesiastical confession? Will we allow the universal community of saints to be replaced, in clear contradiction to the Gospel, by a racially defined “eligible” subset of humans? Only the radical faction of the “German Christians” agreed whole-heartedly. On the other end of the spectrum the introduction of the “Aryan Paragraph” into the church prompted the creation of the “Pastor’s Emergency League” to support materially and spiritually those rendered jobless or otherwise affected by it. Just four months later, by the end of 1933, some 6,000 pastors had already joined.<sup>33</sup> By summer the following year this organization became one of the seeds from which grew the Confessing Church.

Emboldened by feeble resistance from the rest of Protestantism, the most radical elements of the “German Christians” started to bend Protestant core beliefs to line up with National Socialist doctrine on race. When another federal election on November 12, 1933 yielded 92% of the populous supporting Hitler, “German Christians” pulled out all stops. At a national convention at Berlin’s “*Sportpalast*” following Election Day a radical, influential member, Dr. Reinhold Krause, no longer minced any words. To conform to Nazi ideology, he explained, Christianity needed to be “purified” by “de-Judaization”<sup>34</sup>—the removal of all Jewish and “un-German” elements—from its teachings. Krause declared National Socialism to be an ideology enveloping the entire existence of any German person. Therefore, this ideology made it inevitable to reshape Protestantism by distilling from its message the “pure Gospel”. This exercise required ...<sup>35</sup>

*“... the liberation from everything un-German related to worship and confession, the liberation from the Old Testament and its Jewish doctrinal morality, from these tales of cattle dealers and pimps. ... But it will also be necessary to ... remove all obviously distorted and superstitious accounts from the New Testament renounce on principle grounds and in its entirety that scapegoat and inferiority theology of Rabbi Paul ...*

*If we extract from the Gospels just what speaks to our German hearts, then the essence of the doctrine of Jesus comes to light clearly and brilliantly, which—and we can be proud of this—completely matches what National Socialism demands.”*

Krause’s speech was a wake-up call for German Protestants: for the first time many realized how far “German Christians” were willing to go. In the wake of the *Sportpalast* debacle the opposition that would later become the “Confessing Church” began to organize. But at that time any resistance from within the Protestant church organization had become difficult. A state-sponsored “bishop” now controlled the unified Protestant “Reichskirche” like a Secretary of State controls foreign affairs. Officiating in Berlin, that “*Reichsbischof*” decided the “church’s” doctrinal as well as personnel matters, including ordinations, defrockings and disciplinary action against alleged deviators. As the “official” voice of German Protestantism the “*Reichskirche*” now easily drowned out dissenting views. It took until May 1934 for the “Confessing Church” to declare itself as the only legitimate representative of German

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<sup>33</sup> Denzler, Georg, and Volker Fabricius. *Die Kirchen im Dritten Reich Bd. 1. Darstellung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1984. 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> German term: “Entjudung”

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from KIDK. 130-131.

Protestantism. In their *Theological Declaration* a Confessional Synod in Barmen formally dismissed the beliefs of the "German Christians" and their "*Reichskirche*" as false teachings.<sup>36</sup>

## Deified Ruler Becomes Self-Sufficient Source of Future Revelations

But the *Sportpalast* event also sealed the fate of the "German Christians" as they had overplayed their hand. The backlash from Krause's speech made Nazi government quickly drop their support for the "German Christians", who vanished from public view soon after. Whether its leaders understood this or not: The state no longer required religious leaders. "German Christians" had successfully validated Nazi government by elevating National Socialism, a political ideology, to be what God wanted for "His" Germans. Since Christ came the second time in the person of Hitler, Nation and nationality became more important than Christ and Christianity:<sup>37</sup>

*"Christ came to us through Adolf Hitler. He was the decisive man when an entire people were ready to sink and perish. Hitler fought for us in himself, through his strength, his honesty, his faith and his idealism, the Savior found his way to us... Today we feel that the Savior has come to us ... We really only have a single task: Become German! Not: Become Christians!"*

But if Hitler is indeed Christ reincarnate, he can create more "revelation" simply through his daily utterances and action. Once Church validates government and its leaders as the executors of God's will it also delegates irrevocably to political actors any future narrative about what is and what is not God's ongoing revelation. When that happens, any political events—the laws, declarations and pronouncements, the actions, wars, transgressions and omissions of the state—*automatically are* further manifestation of God's will—remember: even the church leaders once said so themselves! In Nazi Germany that meant: Whatever action Hitler, the "Führer" and supreme leader, decided to take—it now was *by design* what God willed for the German nation and its people. By then it no longer matters that state doings result purely from human wisdom, will and action. The Nazi regime understood this dynamic early and implemented it thoroughly.

## State Ideology Becomes the New Religion

To push "German Christians" aside, on January 27, 1934 Hitler made Alfred Rosenberg the "Führer's Representative for the Supervision of Intellectual and Ideological Education of the NSDAP." Rosenberg was an old hand in the party and also the editor of the Nazi newspaper "*Völkischer Beobachter*". His appointment as the party's chief ideologist was a move to replace all the religious explainers and defenders Nazi used thus far. Rosenberg's book "*The Myth of the Twentieth Century*"<sup>38</sup> now became the foundation now defining officially what "positive Christianity"—a term Nazi had used since their earliest days—actually meant. The "Myth" defined the political ideology of National Socialism along racial lines

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<sup>36</sup> Busch, Eberhard, and Daniel Migliore. *The Barmen Theses Then and Now: The 2004 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary*. Translated by Darrell Guder and Judith Guder. Eerdmans, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Julius Leutheuser, a pastor and leader among the "German Christians" of Thuringia on August 30, 1933. Quoted from KIDK. 94. Emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> Engl.: Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (Noontide Press, 1982).

glorifying a neo-paganism with Nordic overtones. Only five years into Nazi rule, in September 1938, the official monthly party publication wrote:<sup>39</sup>

*“The whole man, body and soul, belongs to the German nation and to the German state.”*

In exclusively claiming the totality of people’s existence the party will move to ruthlessly eradicate any rivals.<sup>40</sup>

*“The party claims the totality of the soul of the German people. It cannot and will not suffer that another party or party doctrine should dominate in Germany. We believe that the German people can become eternal only through National-Socialism, and therefore we need every German, whether Protestant or Catholic.”*

This, then, is the essence of any totalitarian ideology over mere autocracies or dictatorships: it aspires to become an “Ersatz” religion, a secular, political religion to replace wholesale Christianity or any other genuine religion. And this is precisely the point that the religious nationalists—and many, many of their fellow Christians—so utterly failed to understand in their enthusiastic “*Schwärmertum*”:<sup>41</sup>

*“National Socialism and Christian concepts are irreconcilable.”*

Not all autocracies become Totalitarian. But in those that do, religion becomes an adversary to be annihilated. In the last consequence, Totalitarian ideologies require their Supreme Leaders (in Nazi Germany: Hitler) to be elevated to a de-facto prophet speaking for the entire church. In 1940, just two years after the quotes above, State Minister for Church Affairs, Hanns Kerrl, could boast:

*“A new authority has arisen as to what Christ and Christianity really are—Adolf Hitler.”<sup>42</sup>*

## American “Christian” Nationalism Today

Comparing the history of Germany’s “Christian” Nationalism of the 1930s with contemporary “Christian” Nationalism in America remains tricky. For example, only during the first 15 months *after* Hitler’s ascent in January 1933 were “German Christians” meaningfully active in taking over the Protestant Church. After that they became useless to the regime. Even later still, Nazi began distorting the Church’s teachings with neo-pagan rhetoric and a quasi-Nordic pantheon on its way to install itself as the new, secular religion laying claim on the entirety of any person’s life—body and soul.

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<sup>39</sup> “National-sozialistische Monatshefte”, No. 108, March 1938. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Dr. Robert Ley, leader of the German Laborfront, the mightiest organization in Germany. Quoted from Epaphroditus. “The Church Conflict in Germany.” Churchman 54, no. 1 (1940): 25–33. 28. This resource also offers a chilling report about the Protestant situation in Nazi Germany around 1940. It is written by an anonymous member of the Confessing Church. Available at [https://www.churchsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Cman\\_054\\_1\\_Epaphroditus.pdf](https://www.churchsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Cman_054_1_Epaphroditus.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Martin Borman in a letter to all Gauleiters (Nazi district leaders). Quoted from “The trial of German major war criminals : Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal sitting at Nuremberg Germany.” Government Printing Office. 187<sup>th</sup> Day. Volume 19. 404. Accessed January 23, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/07-26-46.asp>.

<sup>42</sup> Same as footnote 40.



America at the start of 2026, to be sure, is nowhere near this point. But there are parallels between the German “Christian” Nationalism of yore and its contemporary American cousin. For one, the mood in 2025 America isn’t unlike Germany’s disposition after Hitler’s ascent to power in January 1933. Sure, Trump isn’t Hitler—that’s not at all my point. But like the Germans back then<sup>43</sup>, many Americans perceive themselves as victims of forces outside their control who lost all hope for a better future. The self-declared victims blame globalization or lament an economy that offers no hope for gainful employment as their talent set is rendered unemployable through technical progress and foreign competition. Where the newly-invented radio amplified Nazi messaging in the 1930s, newly-invented social media does so today. Even after experiencing four chaotic, narcissistic and lie-filled years of the first Trump presidency, many Americans longed for the return of their strongman to lead them out of their valley of tears. Then as now, democratic institutions and the current form of government are viewed by many as a failed system, who find the idea of single person rule comfortable or, indeed, desirable over the alleged “chaos” of endless, inconclusive debate in parliament.

Like in 1930s Germany, there is a sizable cross-denominational, Protestant-inspired movement of supposedly “Christian” nationalism aiding the rising strongman and his party. Associations like “Pastors for Trump”<sup>44</sup>, for example, appear similar in spirit and intent to the pastors who joined the Nazi party long before it took on governmental responsibilities. And again: This is not to say contemporary figures are Nazi or even hold Nazi views. But today’s political posturing of clerics and the broad support they enjoy from large swaths of Christian congregations looks only too familiar. For example, at least one American “Christian” nationalist is already calling for a unified Christian church to be formed in America: *“If we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion. One nation under God, and one religion under God”*<sup>45</sup> said former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn at the “Reawaken America Tour” late in 2021. Like from this example, many of our fears remain hypothetical at this time. But I would suggest three aspects of the German experience already observable in American Christian nationalism.

## 1) The False Prophecy of Recognizing God's Will in America's History and Current Affairs

Perhaps the most consequential parallel between both “faith movements” and their supporters is their joint theological conviction that they can recognize a continued, ongoing revelation of God’s will in their country’s history and current affairs. At present, contemporary American “Christian” Nationalism is

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<sup>43</sup> Milton Mayer and Richard J. Evans, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933–45*, (reprint. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Stone, Peter. “Pro-Trump Pastors Rebuked for ‘Overt Embrace of White Christian Nationalism.’” *The Guardian*, May 1, 2023, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/may/01/far-right-pastors-embracing-trump-white-christian-nationalism>.

<sup>45</sup> Smietana, Bob. “Michael Flynn Calls for ‘One Religion’ at Event That Is a Who’s Who of the New Christian Right.” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/11/19/michael-flynn-alex-jones-feucht/>.

usually defined from a sociological viewpoint. A set of political demands and convictions typically held by adherents is thus polled to identify its followers:<sup>46</sup>

*The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.*

*The federal government should advocate Christian values.*

*The federal government should enforce strict separation of Church and State. (Negation)*

*The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.*

*The success of the United States is part of God's plan.*

*The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.*

Except perhaps for the last question, "German Christians" would pass this test, identifying them as "Christian" nationalists—just try reading "Germany" instead of the "United States" in the above questionnaire. While doubtlessly useful, the sociological perspective misses the profound theological error, a false teaching or heresy, which drives both variants. For from this error spring all the various convictions and petitions expressed in the Whitehead/Perry questionnaire—and many more past and future demands similar in spirit and intent.

This false teaching promulgates the idea that a single nation and its people somehow are closer to God than others, that such nation's current affairs—to the exclusion of all other nations and peoples—express God's will and intent in the sense of an ongoing, contemporary revelation that sides in co-equal relevance with the Gospel and the revelation that is Jesus Christ. In the Lutheran recognition the revelation ends with the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ.

Such erroneous belief in continuous revelation is the heresy of "natural theology", and it isn't new: not even "German Christians" invented it. When the first crusaders in 1096 cried "*Deus vult*" (God wills it) they meant they were executing God's will as recently revealed to their leaders. During the German Reformation, Luther's opponent *Thomas Müntzer*, calling himself "god's hammer" on a mission to "eliminate the godless", repeated the cry during the German Peasant's War of 1525. Radical Anabaptists also built their bloody, sectarian government in the German city of Münster 1534-35 because, supposedly, "God willed it".

American "Christian" Nationalism is now repeating this error: human choice and action is re-interpreted as the expression of God's will for America and its citizens. Contemporary examples include seemingly harmless cases like the Trump-ordered relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem<sup>47</sup> and the

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<sup>46</sup> The criteria were developed by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry in their book Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Updated edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. For actual poll results on "Christian nationalism" see PRRI. "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture." Accessed February 19, 2024. <https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>.

<sup>47</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D., Elizabeth Dias, and David M. Halbfinger. "Israel and Evangelicals: New U.S. Embassy Signals a Growing Alliance." *The New York Times*, May 19, 2018, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/middleeast/netanyahu-evangelicals-embassy.html>.

“success” of appointing ultra-conservative judges to the American Supreme Court. Many far-right extremist, white supremacy and neo-Nazi movements across the Western world calculatingly use historic symbols to place themselves within the tradition of those that fell for the same heresy centuries ago. For example, participants of the “Unite the Right” rally of white supremacists carried crusader-style “*Deus vult*” crosses on August 11–12, 2017 Charlottesville, VA,<sup>48</sup> just like those storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021 equipped with flags and placards similarly carrying medieval mottos and symbols.<sup>49</sup> It did not need the “*Deus vult*” tattoo that now-Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, sports on his right biceps, to proclaim a close ideological connection to the Christian crusades.<sup>50</sup>

But their logic is as simple as it is fatally flawed: If “God’s candidate” loses an election that election just has to be rigged and “stolen” by the dark side; if he wins then “God willed it” and he is thus automatically promoted to be the executor of God’s will—that’s pseudo-theological claptrap. There is no extra-Biblical revelation hidden in election outcomes or in a given nation’s current affairs—neither for Nazi Germany back then nor in America today.

## 2) Idolizing Contemporary Political Leaders

Both “faith movements” featured the idea of a white, masculine, militant, and fighting Jesus whose re-incarnation many recognize in the strongman at hand. “German Christians” saw Hitler as a divine agent. American “Christian” Nationalism has identified Donald Trump in that role: Created with the active support of Liberty University in 2018, a movie titled “*The Trump Prophecy*” declared Trump to be a prophet specifically sent by the Almighty himself to lead the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Despite all scoffing by religious and secular establishment alike, this logic worked in 2016 and in 2024 and continues to do so: The white Evangelical vote for Donald Trump increased from 77% in 2016 to 84% in 2020<sup>52</sup> to 85% in 2024<sup>53</sup>. In 2023 “Christian” nationalist promulgators declared investigations to hold Trump accountable for his actions as president, as business man and as individual to be akin to

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<sup>48</sup> Washington Post. “Deconstructing the Symbols and Slogans Spotted in Charlottesville.” Accessed December 31, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-videos/>.

<sup>49</sup> Amanda Tyler (ed.). “Report on Christian Nationalism and the January 6 Insurrection”. Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Christians against Christian Nationalism. Released February 9, 2022. Accessed January 2024. <https://bjconline.org/jan6report/>.

<sup>50</sup> Marina Dunbar, “Pete Hegseth’s Arabic Tattoo Stirs Controversy: ‘Clear Symbol of Islamophobia,’” *The Guardian*, March 27, 2025, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/27/pete-hegseth-tattoo-arabic-language>.

<sup>51</sup> Kaifetz, Jerry. “God Has a History of Using Men like Trump.” WND (WorldNetDaily), June 14, 2016. Retrieved November 11, 2022. <https://www.wnd.com/2016/06/god-has-a-history-of-using-men-like-trump/>. This theme was later broadened into the movie: “*About The Movie*.” (*The Trump Prophecy*) Archived from [the original](#) on January 2, 2019. Retrieved November 11, 2022. Some of the background can be found at: HuffPost. “An Evangelical University Is Helping Create A Movie About How Trump Was Chosen By God,” June 5, 2018. Accessed January 2, 2024. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/liberty-university-helps-create-movie-trump-chosen-by-god\\_n\\_5b119d9ce4b02143b7cc6cfb](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/liberty-university-helps-create-movie-trump-chosen-by-god_n_5b119d9ce4b02143b7cc6cfb).

<sup>52</sup> Nadeem, Reem. “Behind Biden’s 2020 Victory.” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, June 30, 2021. Retrieved December 2, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Vote: PRRI’s Post-Election Survey,” PRRI, December 13, 2024, <https://prri.org/research/analyzing-the-2024-presidential-vote-prris-post-election-survey/>.

Jesus's prosecution and suffering. Originally trying to arraign Trump during Holy Week 2023 was a testimony to an establishment that seems religiously tone-deaf, needlessly giving Trump's base further opportunity to equate a mere mortal with Jesus Christ.<sup>54</sup> In the 2024 election cycle, still-both-candidates Trump<sup>55</sup> and DeSantis<sup>56</sup> both ran campaign ads in which either of them claimed that God specifically created *him* to correct what's wrong with America. This situation exposes the fatally flawed foolishness of confabulating divine intent into current affairs: Exactly which one of them is God-sent, then? And why not the other?! And while we are at it: why weren't Iran's, Ukraine's, China's or Syria's current affairs also acceptable as to revealing God's intent for their countries and their people, especially when it seem to run interference with His supposed intent for America?!

Without a doubt, large parts of conservative, "Christian" America are well on the way of deifying Donald Trump. It should not have surprised anyone when in 2016 he didn't ask Americans to place their trust in God, but rather, in Donald Trump: "*I alone can fix it.*"<sup>57</sup> In her insightful book *"Jesus and John Wayne"*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez describes how "*generations of evangelicals ... were primed to respond to those fears by looking to a strong man to rescue them from danger*". In the months leading up to the 2016 election many identified Donald Trump as that "*meanest, toughest, son of a you-know-what [one] can find in that role.*"<sup>58</sup> In this mindset, then, Christian-nationalist circles continue to explain away his pervasive, habitual lying<sup>59</sup> and his overt, repeated and ongoing mockery of Christian principles<sup>60</sup> by comparing him to the Persian King Cyrus.<sup>61</sup> But altogether the making political leaders into idols (that is: false gods) seems to work well in America. Referring to the failed assassination attempt, Trump in his

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<sup>54</sup> Klepper, David. "Trump Arrest Prompts Jesus Comparisons: 'Spiritual Warfare.'" *The Independent*, April 5, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-ap-christ-qanon-washington-b2314861.html>.

<sup>55</sup> On January 5, 2024, former U.S. President Donald Trump shared on his Truth Social account a video with the repeated words, "So God made Trump." The video featured an AI version of radio broadcaster Paul Harvey's voice (he died in 2009). <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/111703421569603715>. Bensinger, Ken. "Iowa Pastors Say Video Depicting Trump as Godly Is 'Very Concerning.'" *The New York Times*, January 12, 2024, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/11/us/politics/trump-god-video-pastors-iowa.html>.

<sup>56</sup> On November 4, 2022, DeSantis released a campaign ad claiming that on "the eighth day" of creation God "created a fighter"—referring to the Florida governor. Strozewski, Zoe. "Ron DeSantis Likened to Prophet Sent by God in New Ad Praised by Wife." *Newsweek*, November 4, 2022. <https://www.newsweek.com/ron-desantis-likened-prophet-sent-god-new-ad-praised-wife-1757111>.

<sup>57</sup> Appelbaum, Yoni. "Trump's Claim: 'I Alone Can Fix It.'" *The Atlantic* (blog), July 22, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/>.

<sup>58</sup> Mez, Kristin Kobes Du. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York, NY: Liveright, 2020. 13-14. Du Mez quotes Evangelical pastor Robert Jeffress.

<sup>59</sup> Markowitz, David. "Trump Is Lying More Than Ever: Just Look At The Data." *Forbes*. Accessed December 30, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidmarkowitz/2020/05/05/trump-is-lying-more-than-ever-just-look-at-the-data/>.

<sup>60</sup> "The Trump Revolution Among U.S. Evangelicals." Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/the-trump-revolution-among-u-s-evangelicals/ar-AA1RonF>. Staff, Politico. "Will Evangelicals Finally Dump Trump in 2024?" *POLITICO*, June 23, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/06/23/pbdd-6-23-23-00103044>. Eric Berger, "'Standing up for Christian Values': US Evangelicals Keep the Faith with Trump," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2025, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/trump-evangelicals-christians>.

<sup>61</sup> Kaifetz, Jerry. "God Has a History of Using Men like Trump." See footnote 51.

inaugural speech 2025 can now openly claim divine authority for his doings: “*I was saved by God to make America great again.*”<sup>62</sup>

### 3) The Blurring of the Boundary between Church and State in America

Meanwhile, the line separating Church and State continues to be eroded in too many guises to enumerate them. A key claim is the idea that America was created as a Christian nation. But these “Christian” nationalist assertions lack historical evidence. America’s Founding Fathers wisely refused to carry into the new nation any state mandate for Christian religion. The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the Constitution serves to enshrining the freedom of religion.

Regrettably, such claims continue to be deliberately and artificially introduced centuries *after* America was created. Since the 1950s well-financed, well-connected and long-standing interests began to promote the narrative of a Christian nation—with considerable success.<sup>63</sup> Creating Christian national symbols in modern times to retrofit today’s America as genuinely Christian nation is not at all new: A National Day of Prayer was enacted in April 1952 at the initiation of *Conrad Hilton* of Hilton Hotels.<sup>64</sup> The line “*In God we Trust*” began to appear on stamps only in 1954. Although this phrase appeared on the first coins in 1864 it was only mandated for all American currency in July 1955. “*In God we trust*” was adopted as America’s official motto by the U.S. Congress in 1956, replacing the motto *E pluribus unum* (“Out of many, one”). First Dollar bills with the new motto started circulating in 1957.<sup>65,66</sup>

All of the above activity and many more we can’t enumerate here helped to successfully manufacture a narrative of America as “Christian nation” from her first beginnings. At the same time, as one author aptly put it:<sup>67</sup>

*“We have watched over the years as rightwing evangelical churches turned the Jesus we grew up with into exactly the opposite of who we understood him to be. At its most basic, they a figure of love into a figure of hate who blesses precisely the cruelties that he condemned in the Gospel; we went from “the meek shall inherit the Earth” to “the meek shall die of cholera.”*

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<sup>62</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, “Trump’s Inauguration Was a Glimpse of What Is to Come,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2025, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/26/trumps-inauguration-was-a-glimpse-of-what-is-to-come>.

<sup>63</sup> Kruse, Kevin Michael. *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> House, The White. “A Proclamation on National Day Of Prayer.” The White House, May 5, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/05/05/a-proclamation-on-national-day-of-prayer/>. “History.” Accessed December 31, 2023. <https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/about/history>.

<sup>65</sup> “History of ‘In God We Trust’”. U.S. Department of the Treasury. 2011. Archived from the original on 2016-04-17 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160417102334/https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>. Accessed December 31, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> On the history of the decades-long initiative to convert America into a Christian nation, see also “Jesus and John Wayne”. Details in footnote 58.

<sup>67</sup> Bill McKibben, “They’re Doing to America What They Did to Christianity,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2025, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/nov/23/america-christian-evangelical-discrimination-immigration>. For a summary of a parallel Catholic effort to retrofit America with a Christian image see Rana Foroohar, “The Ascension of America’s Catholic Right,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2025, sec. The Weekend Essay, <https://www.ft.com/content/e0a25b05-a016-4c3c-9543-19fe80cdab35>.

All of our considerations about religious nationalism today happen in a cultural climate in which three in 10 Americans interpret the Bible literally, saying it is the actual word of God,<sup>68</sup> and four in 10 *“ascribe to a strictly creationist view of human origins, believing that God created them in their present form within roughly the past 10,000 years.”*<sup>69</sup> The publication of a *“God Bless the USA Bible”* by Trump exploits and furthers this situation by offering what is *“essentially a Christian nationalist’s fantasy: a Bible that is all American flags and bald eagles, with founding documents and lyrics to a patriotic anthem slotted in alongside the holy text.”*<sup>70</sup>

It is easy to see how in such a culture it is a small step to also bring oneself to believe, like the “German Christians” once did about Germany, that all things happening to America and its people continue to reveal God’s intent for them. It is but another small step from asserting one’s nation is a “Christian nation” to concluding that it also needs to be run by Christians and on Christian principle. Dominion theology (“Dominionism”) is the political ideology that seeks to institute government by Christians and based on their understandings of biblical law.<sup>71</sup> Although they did not call it Dominionism, this is very much what “German Christians” and their followers claimed they saw happening as Hitler came to power: A strong, Christian leader as ruler, willing to legislate Christian convictions into federal law.

But the use of state for the church’s purpose isn’t a one-way street. Initially it’s more like a co-dependency: Hitler’s National Socialists needed the Catholic and the Protestant vote to be put in power, much like Trump’s party could not return to power without the votes “Christian” Nationalism generates through its activities. “Christian” nationalists, on the other hand, are happy to lend their vote in exchange for the state’s power to implement their agenda after a largely agnostic state apparatus “failed” to do that in observance of state neutrality on faith per the constitutional 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. Although some three-quarters (73%) of Americans agree that religion and government policies should be kept separate,<sup>72</sup> adherents to “Christian” Nationalism elevate their convictions to the public sphere. In a 2023 poll, over half of Republican voters said the US should become a strictly Christian nation.<sup>73</sup> The politics of American “Christian” Nationalism aims to erode, blur and ultimately erase the boundary between Church and State. Speaking for many, Colorado Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert in 2022

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<sup>68</sup> Gallup Inc. “In U.S., 3 in 10 Say They Take the Bible Literally.” Gallup.com, July 8, 2011. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/148427/Say-Bible-Literally.aspx>. Accessed December 31, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Gallup Inc. “40% of Americans Believe in Creationism.” Gallup.com, July 26, 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/261680/americans-believe-creationism.aspx>.

<sup>70</sup> Adam Gabbatt, “I Bought Trump’s Bible – a Blasphemous, Sticky Nightmare,” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2024, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/06/trump-bible-review>.

<sup>71</sup> Clarkson, Frederick. “The Rise of Dominionism.” *Political Research Associates*, December 5, 2005. <https://politicalresearch.org/2005/12/05/the-rise-of-dominionismremaking-america-as-a-christian-nation>.

<sup>72</sup> Leppert, Rebecca, and Dalia Fahmy. “10 Facts about Religion and Government in the United States.” *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed February 19, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/07/05/10-facts-about-religion-and-government-in-the-united-states/>.

<sup>73</sup> Lopez, Ashley. “More than Half of Republicans Support Christian Nationalism, According to a New Survey.” *NPR*, February 14, 2023, sec. Politics. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/14/1156642544/more-than-half-of-republicans-support-christian-nationalism-according-to-a-new-s>.



declared “I’m tired of this separation of Church and State junk that’s not in the Constitution”<sup>74</sup>. Mike Johnson, the House Speaker, also negated the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment as a constitutional mandate for religious neutrality:<sup>75</sup>

*“The separation of Church and State is a misnomer, People misunderstand it. Of course, it comes from a phrase that was in a letter that Jefferson wrote. It’s not in the Constitution. And what he was explaining is they did not want the government to encroach upon the church—not that they didn’t want principles of faith to have influence on our public life.”*

Johnson is also an influential member of the “New Apostolic Reformation” (NAR), a group that’s near the center of American “Christian” Nationalism.<sup>76</sup> The NAR is a leaders’ network. Many of its members identify either as *apostles* or as *prophets*, the latter claiming to hear directly from God. One of its long-term strategies is to place members in public positions of influence, including government. It uses these individuals to further an agenda that includes Dominionism, extra-Biblical revelation and the idea that the US should become more like a Theocracy. On that latter idea, Trump already issued a little-noticed “National Security Directive” identifying “anti-Christian” and “anti-American” views as indicators of radical left violence, a decree easily abusable as *card blanche* for criminalizing spiritual dissent from—whose?—“Christian” views.<sup>77</sup> Although it would be far-fetched to compare the “New Apostolic Reformation” with the “German Christians” the NAR doubtlessly makes a good candidate for a tool to help a future government to redefine and annex American Protestantism from within. In the meantime it continues to use wherever it can the state’s apparatus to implement an extreme, ultra-conservative persuasion of Christianity.

Echoing the “German Christians” demanding the church take sides in politics is the call for clergy activism in the name of American “Christian” Nationalism. In a best-selling book one of American “Christian nationalism’s” top acolytes,<sup>78</sup> popular writer Eric Metaxas, urges American Christian clergy to repent and dare “become political”. He calls on all clergy to take political right-wing talking points to the

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<sup>74</sup> Suliman, Adela, and Timothy Bella. “GOP Rep. Boebert: ‘I’m Tired of This Separation of Church and State Junk.’” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2022. Retrieved December 2, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/28/lauren-boebert-church-state-colorado/>.

<sup>75</sup> Shabad, Rebecca. “Speaker Mike Johnson Says Separation of Church and State Is a ‘Misnomer.’” *NBC News*, November 14, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/speaker-mike-johnson-says-separation-church-state-misnomer-rcna125181>.

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, Bradley Onishi, Matthew D., Bradley Onishi, and Matthew D. Taylor. “The Key to Mike Johnson’s Christian Extremism Hangs Outside His Office.” *Rolling Stone* (blog), November 10, 2023.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/mike-johnson-christian-nationalist-appeal-to-heaven-flag-1234873851/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ken Klippenstein, “Trump’s NSPM-7 Labels Common Beliefs As Terrorism ‘Indicators,’” December 10, 2024, <https://www.kenklippenstein.com/p/trumps-nspm-7-labels-common-beliefs>. For the text of this “NSPM-7” see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence/>.

<sup>78</sup> Amanda Tyler (ed.). “Report on Christian Nationalism and the January 6 Insurrection”. Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Christians against Christian Nationalism. Released February 9, 2022. <https://bjconline.org/jan6report/>. 17.



pulpit—or else risk God’s (harsh) judgment upon themselves for their complacency or cowardice.<sup>79</sup> The same author’s Bonhoeffer biography was ripped to shreds by renowned Bonhoeffer scholars for “hijacking” Bonhoeffer for political purpose.<sup>80</sup> This new book should fare no better. The fatal flaw of the book is that its author fails to grasp that German Protestant pastors did not aid Nazi rule by failing to take sides, or being naïve, complacent or lazy. On the contrary: as evidenced above they genuinely longed for Nazi rule, they thought of it compatible with Christianity and actively welcomed it in the exact same spirit that seems to drive Metaxas’ support for “Christian” Nationalism. Back then, the many German Protestants recognized their error only after it was too late to correct. Few recognized the danger in time to act against it. Many others categorically refused to ever acknowledge their well-documented role as willing accomplices.

## Conclusion

No one should confuse “Christian” Nationalism with genuine expressions of Protestant faith. They are mutually exclusive. Rather, “Christian” Nationalism promulgates the idea that any one nation and its people somehow are closer to God than others, that their nation’s current affairs—to the exclusion of all other nations and peoples—expresses God’s will. This is the old heresy of “natural theology”, claiming for there to be a continual, contemporary revelation that in co-equal relevance sides with the Gospel and the revelation that is Jesus Christ. In the Lutheran tradition, this false teaching drives both, the “German Christians” of yore and American “Christian” Nationalism today—all else grows from this root.

As the example of the “German Christians” teaches us, this heresy not only poisons the actual Christian message and narrative. It is the gateway drug that wants to equate church authority with state power and sanction *any* government action as the will of God revealed to His “prophets” in government office.

While comparing both “faith movements” remains tricky, perhaps the experience of the “German Christians” holds glimpses about the future of American “Christian” Nationalism: Once the movement idolizes some political leader as Christ reincarnate, there remains no logical stopping point preventing the leader to replace Christianity with the pseudo-religion of some state ideology of that leader’s choosing—for any of his actions are now automatically justified as additional revelation of divine will. But let me again forewarn you not to over-interpret the German historic experience; many distinctions

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<sup>79</sup> Metaxas, Eric. *Letter to the American Church*. Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2022. XII and 45-46. In February 2024 the book was made available as a movie, offered for free to churches to screen to their congregations: Brown, Jon, and Christian Post Reporter. “Eric Metaxas’ Film ‘Letter to the American Church’ Issues Sobering Warning to Christians amid Rising Evil (Review),” February 15, 2024. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/eric-metaxas-film-issues-sobering-warning-to-christians-amid-evil.html>. There are also “Workbooks” available to help disseminate the book’s poison into congregations.

<sup>80</sup> Green, Clifford. “Hijacking Bonhoeffer.” *The Christian Century*. Accessed February 19, 2024. <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/hijacking-bonhoeffer>. Barnett, Victoria. “Review of Eric Metaxas, Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich.” *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 16, no. 3. Accessed February 19, 2024. <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2010/09/review-of-eric-metaxas-bonhoeffer-pastor-martyr-prophet-spy-a-righteous-gentile-vs-the-third-reich/>.

remain. But for me the experience is akin to looking at the back of a carpet: although I cannot see its actual front, the pattern is unmistakably clear.

In the form of “Christian” Nationalism, false prophets and a false church are knocking at our door in America. Although this is a new experience for Americans, this isn’t the first time this happens. The historic experience of German Protestantism and the “faith movement” of “German Christians” demonstrates what could happen if they get their way. But history can also teach us how to effectively respond to the threat. Back then, without the benefit of hindsight, the vast majority of German Protestants recognized their error too late. But today the blade of Barmen slices right through the confusion: the foundation of American “Christian” Nationalism is, again, the heresy of ongoing revelation in the history and current affairs of a single nation. Cut that away and “Christian” Nationalism in the US retains no legs to stand on. 90 years on, Barmen’s first thesis can, again, focus our response.