



CSF Morality Series, Part 3: The Holocaust and Christian Morality

The Holocaust features prominently and consistently in Christian claims about an objective morality. According to this line of thinking it is only possible to condemn the Holocaust based on their “objective” morality. Conversely, they implicitly use this as an argument for their religion (if one doesn’t have their “objective” morality, one has to be immoral, as one can’t even condemn something as evil as the Holocaust). These claims are highly ironic and deserve proper rational scrutiny as Part 3 of our [CSF Morality Series](#).

Part 1 of our Morality Series, providing context, an overview and definitions, can be found here:

<https://thecsf.xyz/introduction-to-the-csf-morality-series/>

Part 2 of our Morality Series comprehensively shows that there is nothing objective about Christian Morality. This is regarded as a given for the rest of the Series. You can find this article here:

<https://thecsf.xyz/does-christianity-have-an-objective-morality/>

On to Part 3. The Third Reich in Germany was a tragic and complex period in history. It certainly provided tough challenges for Christian Churches and individual Christians alike (not to mention for Jews). It is clear that this period is neither a victory for strong united Christian opposition to Nazism, nor a demonstration of an unambiguous morality condemning the obvious Nazi atrocities. Quite the contrary.

1. Hitler's Views and Rationale.

Hitler was raised a Catholic, confessed to be a Christian, and positioned himself as an instrument of the Christian god.

"It will take under its firm protection Christianity as the basis of our morality, and the family as the nucleus of our nation and our state" - Adolf Hitler (1 Feb 1933)

- Mein Kampf: In July 1925 Hitler published "Mein Kampf", his manifesto in which he outlined the foundations of the Nazi doctrine. The document is largely a religious and creationist document, with a large number of references to "God", "God's will" and him doing god's work, throughout. A typical example: "Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord" [1]. He also heaped praise on Martin Luther.
- Speeches: Hitler invoked "God", "The Lord", "The Almighty", "Jesus", "Christianity" and "Providence" in numerous speeches from 1922 to his death in 1945 (not only at the start of his political career, as some Christians claim). During his first radio address as new Chancellor on 1 Feb 1933, Hitler stated: "It will preserve and defend the

foundations on which the strength of our nation rests. It will take under its firm protection **Christianity as the basis of our morality**, and the family as the nucleus of our nation and our state" [2].

- Propaganda Content: Another example of Hitler's convictions and/or strategy, is one of the preserved Nazi propaganda posters which states that "Hitler's fight and Luther's teaching are the best defense for the German people." (available in the World History Archive [3]).
- Some Christian historians, like Richard Weikart [4], questioned whether Hitler was a Christian by conviction and argued that he just used Christianity for his own political purposes. Weikart could have a point. Many other political leaders throughout history used the political strategy to co-opt religion. Although it is impossible to tell exactly what Hitler's real beliefs were, it seems to me his emphatic and consistent invoking of god, cannot so easily be brushed aside. But even if Weikart is correct, it would still be relevant that Hitler found Christianity useful to mobilize people for his nefarious purposes, that he could make a credible case for himself as an agent of their god and that he succeeded in mobilizing the overwhelming Christian population of an educated country for his agenda.



Adolf Hitler [Image credit: Dreamstime]

2. Christianity and Hitler

- A German census in 1939 indicated that 6 years after Hitler democratically came to power (and his political agenda was abundantly clear), **94% of Germans were Christian. Most of Hitler's supporters had to be Christian**, but we don't have to rely on arithmetic for this conclusion, there are clear historical evidence. There was surprisingly widespread and documented Christian support for Hitler, inside and outside his party [5]. See the next two sections for further detail.
- Christian antisemitism was fairly common in Germany before Hitler came to power. Jews were regarded as behind many of Germany's problems, Marxism was seen as a Jewish movement, homosexuality was regarded as a Jewish disease, while it was not uncommon for Jews to be called "Christ killers". While these views were also

present in other nations, they were less effectively kept in check in Germany by traditions of democracy and civil liberties [6].

- One of the reasons the well-known German protestant reformer, Martin Luther, was used as a good ally by Hitler was the fact that he wrote a strong and rather crude antisemitic publication in 1543 (3 years before his death), with the title "On the Jews and their Lies". In this document he advocates 7 steps which could be taken against Jews, including to burn down their synagogues (from the English translation published in 1948) [7] and [8]. The title of this book looks like it is straight from John 8: 44 (see section 6, below).
- As Victoria Barnett (a scholar whose research focused on the role of the Churches during the Holocaust) put it: "The German Churches stumbled, and they stumbled badly. The leaders of the Churches spent a great deal of time delineating a "viable" position: one that would conform to Christian doctrine, prevent their Church from dividing into opposing factions, and avoid antagonizing the Nazi authorities. In any examination of the German Churches' statements from this era, what is most striking is their painstaking attempt to say, publicly, neither too much nor too little about what is happening around them. Needless to say, this ruled out any consistent or emphatic response to the Nazis' persecution of Jews and others. And institutional inaction gave individual Christians throughout Germany an alibi for passivity. More tragically, individual Christians who did express solidarity with the persecuted Jews -- such as the Catholic priest Bernhard Lichtenberg and the Protestant deaconess Marga Meusel -- received no public (and little private) support from their respective Churches." [9]



The Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC [Image credit: Dreamstime]

3. The Protestant Churches in Germany were deeply divided about Hitler

- The German Christian Movement was a Protestant movement trying to combine Christianity and National Socialism. In 1933 they had a majority support among Protestants, elected Ludwig Muller as national leader and used the slogan "One Nation! One God! One Reich! One Church!". Muller was a Nazi Party member and called them "Stormtroopers of Christ" [10].

- The Confessing Church ("Bekennende Kirche") on the other hand largely opposed Hitler, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, becoming high profile martyrs. Bonhoeffer was executed for a plot to overthrow Hitler and Niemöller was imprisoned for 7 years. They were more the exception than the rule, though. The Confessing Church allowed Nazi members, many Church leaders preferred a neutral stance, they were cautious not to antagonize the Nazis, and overall they did not provide strong resistance to Hitler.
- As an example, "The minutes of German Protestant synodal meetings in 1942 reveal how oblivious the participants were to what was happening in the world around them. While innocent victims throughout Europe were being brutally murdered, Christian leaders were debating what points of doctrine and policy were tenable." [9].

4. The Roman Catholic Church was even less of a Nazi opponent

- Pope Pius XII, was pontiff from 2 March 1939 to his death on 9 Oct 1958. When he was still Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, he negotiated and signed the Reichskonkordat on behalf of the Vatican with the new Nazi Government on 8 July 1933. This gave them their 1st diplomatic recognition and was used by Hitler as proof of the Vatican's support. It also effectively muzzled the RCC: it bound Catholic Bishops to honour the Nazi Government, prevented them from speaking on behalf of any political party and it directly led to the disbanding of a powerful opposition party, the Catholic Centre Party [11].
- Pius XII issued a decree against Communism in 1949 (essentially excommunicating supporters of Communism). However, he never issued any decree condemning Nazism and when requested to officially condemn Nazi atrocities, refused to do so. Even in the 13 years after WWII until his death, he still did not officially condemn the Holocaust. He was regarded by many as a Nazi sympathizer which prompted John Cornwall (a loyal Catholic journalist), to write a book in defense of the Pope [12]. He expressed moral shock during his research, and in the end published a controversial book calling Pius XII "Hitler's Pope" [13].
- The German Catholic Church was accused of more resisting Nazi interference in running their church than resisting the Holocaust. Likewise, when they stood up for Jews, it was for Catholic Jews and not Jews in general [9]. Overall, it was a weak response to an atrocious tragedy of an exceptional scale.
- It is probably best characterized by the German Bishops' Conference acknowledging their complicity with a formal Declaration, 75 years after the end of World War II on 29 April 2020 [14]. Bishop Georg Batzing (President of the Conference) made the following statement when they released this Declaration:

"However, we must not overlook the fact that many Christians collaborated with the National Socialist regime, kept silent about the persecution of the Jews, or even encouraged it. Church leaders and representatives also often stood with their backs to the victims. There is no doubt: The churches in Germany must acknowledge this history of guilt. " [15].



[Image credit: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munchen]

5. Current Christian Morality

Although it is true that Christianity today largely condemns the holocaust, and to a much larger degree than when Hitler was in power, to this day there is still no consensus among Christians about something as evil as the Holocaust. Neo-Nazism (with support for Hitler and the Holocaust) still exist among Christians world wide and also seems to be growing again, notably in Europe, the USA and Russia. There are numerous Christian groups involved with them. One of the influential ones is Christian Identity [16]

6. The New Testament and Antisemitism

- As Christianity emerged as a new religion from Judaism, these two religions were in competition in the first century in the same geographical area. This resulted in early documents being quite polemic, some of which were included when the New Testament canon was finalized. Several highly regarded New Testament scholars argued that the roots of the historical Christian antisemitism are clearly present in the New Testament.
- Some of them published in-depth books over the last century, analyzing these New Testament roots of Christian antisemitism [17]. To list a few of the more acclaimed ones:
 - “The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue” by James Parker (1934)
 - “The Jews and the Gospel: A Re-examination of the New Testament” by Gregory Baum (1961)
 - “Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations” by Terence L. Donaldson (2010).
- Two of the most prominent passages analyzed in these books are
 - Matthew 27: 11 - 26 [18], where the Jewish crowd told Pontius Pilate unanimously that “His blood is on us and our children” (for the crucifixion of Jesus).
 - John 8: 31 - 47 [19], where Jesus describes his Jewish opponents as the children of the Devil, “the father of lies”.

7. The Old Testament and Genocide

- In my view, the crux of this moral matter is that the Biblical god explicitly commanded genocide on multiple occasions in the Old Testament. For example in Numbers 31 (NIV): "17 Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, 18 but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man".
- In principle, it amounts to divine sanctioning and even explicit divine instructions for genocide under certain circumstances. If there were specific reasons why their god approved of the genocide of the Midianites, the Canaanites, or drowning the entire world's population, similar arguments could conceivably also be used in other historical situations, like the Third Reich.
- The way this god conveyed his wishes for genocide to be committed was within the confines of the skull of a single human being claiming to speak on his behalf (like Moses). Why could he not conceivably convey his wishes for another genocide in the same way to Adolf Hitler?
- How could anyone claim that the Christian revelation provide an objective morality against genocide, like the Holocaust. How could they even claim that the Bible prohibits genocide?

"... the Biblical god explicitly commanded genocide on multiple occasions in the Old Testament... If there were specific reasons why their god approved of the genocide of the Midianites, the Canaanites, or drowning the entire world's population, similar arguments could conceivably also be used in other historical situations, like the Third Reich."

8. Conclusion: Christians are wrong on both their claims about the Holocaust

- They cannot demonstrate an objective morality opposing the Holocaust at all. They can't even demonstrate strong Christian agreement about the Holocaust as it was unfolding. Hitler explicitly claimed Nazi morality was based on Christianity, most Nazis were Christians, there was widespread support for Hitler within the Christian churches, the New Testament contains a number of passages which have been regarded as antisemitic by several New Testament scholars, but most importantly the god of the Bible commanded genocide from time to time. They don't have history, the Bible or the definition of objective morality in support of this claim.
- However, they're also wrong that a subjective morality cannot provide moral guidance on the Holocaust. Why would a subjective morality not be able to condemn the Holocaust? This is a topic which will receive further attention in this Morality series. For now, let me just point out that the majority of Christians today succeed in denouncing the Holocaust using their many different variations of subjective morality, each in its current form.
- If one pays any attention to historical facts, the Holocaust is an exceptionally ironic example to use for an "objective" Christian Morality or for the merits of Christianity. In addition, the Bible is not the best moral source to use for passing judgment on genocide.

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Next Article in the CSF Morality Series:

Are Religious Societies Morally Superior?

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Sources:

[1] "Mein Kampf" by Adolf Hitler (p. 65 and p213)

[2] Link:

<http://bhecinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/Hitlers-First-Radio-Address-Excerpts.pdf>

[3] Link:

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/image/nazi-propaganda-depicting-martin-luther>

[4] "Hitler's Religion: The Twisted Beliefs That Drove the Third Reich" by Richard Weikart.

[5]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nazi_Germany

[6] "Holy Hatred: Christianity, and the Holocaust" by Robert Michael - Chapter 5

[7] "The Darker Side of Martin Luther" by Emily Paras

<https://www.iwu.edu/history/constructingthepastvol9/Paras.pdf>

[8] "On the Jews and their Lies"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Jews_and_Their_Lies

[9] "The Role of the Churches in Nazi Germany Compliance and Confrontation" by Victoria J. Barnett

Link:

<https://www.adl.org/news/op-ed/role-of-churches-nazi-germany>

[10] "Holocaust and Human Behavior, a Facing History and Ourselves publication" (Chapter 5)

Link:

https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Holocaust_Human_Behavior_revised_edition_2.pdf

[11] "Religion in Nazi Germany" by Jennifer Llewellyn, Jim Southey and Steve Thompson

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[12] "The Holocaust and the Catholic Church" by James Carroll (The Atlantic, October 1999 Issue)

[13] "Hitler's Pope" by John Cornwell

[14] The original 23-page declaration in German:

https://www.religionmediacentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/May-2020-DBK_Deutsche_Bischoefe_im_Weltkrieg.pdf

[15] "German Bishops Admit Complicity in WWII"

Link:

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[16] "Christian Identity's New Role on the Extreme Right" by CTEC Staff, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

Link:

<https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/christian-identitys-new-role-extreme-right>

[17] "Anti-Semitism and the New Testament" by Jeffrey Sikes

[18] Matt 27: 11 - 26 (NIV)

11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

12 When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" 14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

15 Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus^[b] Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18 For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

21 "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

22 "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

23 "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

25 All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!"

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

[19]John 8: 31 - 47 (NIV)

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

34 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. 38 I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.^[b]"

39 "Abraham is our father," they answered.

"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would[c] do what Abraham did. 40 As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. 41 You are doing the works of your own father."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. 43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! 46 Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? 47 Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."