Ethical Philosophy

Thinking Clearly in a World of Nonsense

Topic for Examination on June 1, 2014

Theologians Under Hitler

Religion’s Moral Slippery Slope or maybe just

What to Claim When You Get Caught

on the Wrong Moral Side, BIG TIME!

(last revised May 28, 2014)

Summary

Nazism is universally considered SUPER BAD in modern Western societies. Religious people always consider themselves on the side of GOOD. Theologians see themselves as “good” and also knowledgeable in what that means, where it comes from and how to achieve it. They must think of themselves as SUPER GOOD!

So when the SUPER BAD and the SUPER GOOD agree, it is a golden opportunity to examine them both. We already know about the Nazi’s, but what were the theologians thinking? It’s like identical twin studies to psychologists or particle colliders to physicists. We can look inside the thing and see what was going on.

Beneath all the Latin, Greek and Hebrew mumbo jumbo, piety, prayers, rituals, obfuscations and pious pontifications...what were they really thinking?
For this purpose, the author (Robert Ericksen1) chose three Protestant theologians who supported the Nazi policies in Germany beginning in the 1920’s. All were highly respected, very legitimate university professors in distinguished institutions. They publically supported Hitler, benefited from it and gave him the seal of Lutheran approval. None of them ever served in the military, so like chickenhawks everywhere, they were aggressive nationalists. After the war, none were charged with crimes although they all lost their university positions in the denazification program.

Gerhard Kittel

Gerhard Kittle was a famous German theologian, the son of a famous German theologian at Tubingen. A professor of New Testament Theology he was considered the foremost expert on Judaism during Christ’s time. By all accounts he was decent man (although sometimes seemingly arrogant) who saw himself “on the side of angels.” As a long time Nazi Party member, he wrote many anti-Semitic tracks between 1933-1944. He was unrepentant and defended his actions as right, patriotic and Christian. He spent 17 months in prison and died shortly after his release, reportedly somewhat bitter.

His Defense
(according to his letters)

Sophistication Above The Vulgar Mob—“Don’t Confuse Me With Them”

He distinguished himself from the Party’s “vulgar anti-Semites.” The fault of the Jews was not racial but “spiritual.” They had become polluted by the modern world and were no longer faithful to their religion. They were “spiritually” polluted. Even Christianized German Jews could not be “good Germans.”

He had privately opposed (A) exportation and/or (B) extermination of Jews on the basis that neither plan could be actually completed, there were too many of them. Instead he was for their (C) segregation inside Germany to keep them from “polluting” society. He assumed that their segregation into ghettos would be done “humanely.”

1 Robert Ericksen is a renowned historian of the Holocaust at Pacific Lutheran University. His book Theologians Under Hitler (1985) was widely acclaimed and made into a documentary in 2004. Wikipedia
Working For Good From Within—Trying to Soften the Bad Actions of Others

Inside the Nazi Party he was working to soften its harshness. Although he claimed to be in such fear of the Nazi’s that he did all his work in *complete secrecy*. As a result, there is no confirmation of his efforts. If they existed, they did him no harm.

His career did benefit from his support of the Nazi regime and when it began to look ugly; e.g. the war going badly, he stopped writing about their issues.

Paul Althaus

A highly respected Lutheran theologian and Professor of Systematic Theology at Erlangen. He apparently had “no character defects” while “exhibiting a warm and humane personality.” He has several children, his oldest son was killed in the war. He was never arrested but did lose his university position in the denazification program. He lived another ten years after the war and taught and published.

His Political Thinking

Althaus was conservative, anti-modern, anti-secular and anti-urban. He held a romantic/mystical view of the German people (volk.) He longed for social order and saw the Weimar Republic as a terrible thing but a transition back to national order.

He accepted the *volksch principles*: the need for social 1. unity, 2. obedience, 3. purity, 4. discipline, and 5. a shared meaning/purpose in life. He felt that Germany had lost these after WWI and the Kaiser’s abdication. He welcomed Hitler’s rise to power as a “gift from God” to bring these qualities back to the German people. He wrote that God wanted them to “obey Hitler.”

He described “war as an unfortunate but necessary means for nations to resolve their differences.” He then expressed a desire for peace and gave a “subtle hint of implied ambiguity toward National Socialism.”

Althaus always struck a middle ground between extremes. He never spoke out clearly for or against anything specific.
His Theological Thinking

Martin Luther pondered the conflict between the gentleness\(^2\) of Christ’s message and the brutality of governments. Luther decided that governments are god’s tools. Governments are how God keeps order on earth. \textit{Althaus agreed.}

Two Sources of God’s Revelation Debate: Does God speak (1) only through Christ as revealed in the Bible or (2) also through history and current events. Althaus accepted both sources as legitimate. In that way, he could see \textit{Hitler as a gift from God}. He preached that God wants people to obey the government. Governments are God’s tools even if they are peopled with “evil men.”

\textbf{Anti-Semitism} – The Jews, etc. are not bad because of blood or religion, but only because they are of different volk. He saw the German volk is \textit{a mysterious thing brought into being by God}. It should not be polluted by mixing in other volk.

His Defense

\textbf{Mistakes Were Made, But Not by Me}:\(^3\)
After the war he wrote that Germany had “lost its way.”

\textbf{That Was A Long Time Ago} – “I have evolved.”
He had not spoken in favor of the Nazi’s since 1937, nor had he spoken against them or their policies, he has always spoke and wrote ambiguously.

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\(^2\) Christ’s message is viewed by people today as “gentle.” They have apparently not read the New Testament.  
\(^3\) Famous assertion made by Henry Kissinger  
\(^4\) A common phrase used today when politicians find it expedient to reverse their positions.
Emanuel Hirsch

Hirsch was the most intellectual of the three and used it to give intellectual underpinnings to National Socialism. He blended his patriotism with his theology and saw beauty and religious significance in a unified and strong Germany. (193) His lifelong poor eyesight had turned into blindness even before the war. Perhaps this disability (like Nietzsche’s frailty) made him more radical and vicious.

**His Political Thinking**

Hirsch was constantly reinterpreting Luther’s teachings with a strong thread of German pride and nationalism. (p. 121) Even as a student he was strongly nationalistic, believing all the conventional themes; e.g. Germany was forced into WWI, war is inevitable and by pursuing it we are forcing God’s hand to come to our aid. During WWI he supported land annexation and unrestricted submarine warfare. He saw democracy (the Weimar Republic) as only ineffective party strife. (p 190)

**His Theological Thinking**

He considered himself to be a “committed Christian.” Christianity for him was more concerned with “law and order” than with “love and grace.” (p. 189) “The Sermon on the Mount does not work in the real world.”

**His Defense**

 FUCK YOU! - I was right! You’re all are a bunch of cowardly wussies.

When his university tried to give him a partial pension after the war, Hirsch angrily refused it on the grounds that the University had not resisted denazification. He had been right at the time and still was. The denazification program was clear evidence of Nazi rightness.

Hitler had removed communists, Jews, critics etc. from the faculties when he took power. That was exactly what the allies were doing hypocritically, in the denazification program. The Allies were proving Hitler right.

Morality is the exclusive property of the winners.

Germany’s only fault was in loosing the war.
The Authors' Conclusions

The privileged classes in every society take their social positions for granted and justified. They do not concern themselves much with the conditions of everyone else, holding them as lesser and undeserving. When social, economic and/or demographic changes are forced upon them, they become angry. Demanding a return to the previous social arrangements, they use noble virtues and lofty principles as justification. If necessary, they call for violence and illegality from others.

In this case, WWI caused great change in Germany. Economic depression, unemployment and even starvation created urban chaos. Communists, monarchists, socialists, veterans, etc. waged gang warfare in the streets. The formally privileged classes, behaving as they always do, demanded a return to their positions of secure influence. These three men only used the tools at their disposal (theology) to justify their all too human psychological motive.

Other German Religious Types

Catholic laymen rebelled against Hitler before and during his dictatorship. Only the pope was able to dissuade them from resistance and invoke their cooperation with Hitler.

Other Lutheran pastors resisted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Germany (from America in 1938) and joined the secret resistance intend on assassinating Hitler. Justifying this, he wrote that "the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live." He accepted that he was taking guilt upon himself as he wrote "when a man takes guilt upon himself, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace." (In a 1932 sermon he said: "the blood of martyrs might once again be

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6 These conclusion are my recollections from one reading. I misplaced the book itself while painting the living room.
demanded, but this blood...will not be innocent, shining like that of the first witnesses for the faith. On our blood lies heavy guilt, the guilt of the unprofitable servant who is cast into outer darkness."

In other words, he advocated murder...just like Hitler.

What's the difference?

Bonhoeffer was hanged at dawn on April 9, 1945, just two weeks before American soldiers liberated the camp.

I give the Lutheran theologians under Hitler a ...

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It's just the same old crap, over and over. Unconscious psychological desires come first, then evidence and reason support them.

These were all comfortable men who enjoyed a nice life. They were never in personal economic or physical danger. They saw social change and didn't like it. Their political positions had nothing to do with their religion, theology just gave them a little moral authority with people who feel that religion has some moral authority. Then, in a display of amazing moral bankruptcy, two of them used the same old lame excuses. (1. you misunderstood me, 2. mistakes were made but not by me 3. I was secretly working from within and 4. I was never a supporter but if I was, I have since evolved) Therefore, they used their positions and education to intellectually justify their basic, self-serving instincts.

These guys were just doing what people do in that situation. However they deserve more blame because they had enough education to reflect upon their own motives. Other theologians left Germany and some resisted and were even killed. These guys, claiming piety and learning, failed themselves, their people and even their religion.

What grade do you give it?
We expect a report.

Sincerely,

Sebasitan Twit,
May, 2014

Later Reflections

Today we have the exact same thing happening in America. America’s privileged status in the world is being dissolved by the recovery of Europe from WWII, the collapse of the USSR, new technologies, world trade, profligate military spending, internal political stalemate and suicidal fiscal policies.

Instead of acknowledging this, many politicians seek votes from the most ignorant voters by scapegoating minorities. They claim high patriotic principles, lofty religious faith and pseudo-science. Our Congress is like the Weimar Republic, it has abandoned all reason and neutralized itself.

In this election season, we see politicians saying the most shamefully ignorant things to “appeal to the base,” things they cannot possibly believe. Like Hitler blaming Jewish pollution of Aryan blood and Polish aggression, if repeated enough, people will believe it and act as if it were true. It’s dangerous!

The evangelical movement has recently reinterpreted Jesus Christ to be pro-war, pro-American, pro-gun, anti-birth control and anti-gay. Christian radio stations regularly call for armed revolution and the assassination of elected Federal office holders.

Candidates for public office call for a denial of health care to millions, suppression of voter rights, an end to reproductive health care, a 4,000 year old earth and the denial of climate dangers.
These people have enough education to know better.

What kind of people are they?

Still Further Reflections

When temptation rears its head (as in the Weimar Republic and today's political uncertainty) the rats crawl out of the sewer.

No one knows his own character...until tempted.

Five justices of the Supreme Court shamed themselves before the world in Bush v. Gore⁷. When they had a chance to grab for power, like little boys left along with a cookie jar, they couldn't resist.

Congress is now filled with people who will say anything to curry favor. They extract right and wrong, good and bad, wisdom and folly from the results of the last primary. They are in a race to the bottom with what engineers call a positive feedback loop. They will only adjust their moral compass when it stops working. Preening in religiosity and patriotism, they apparently have no moral compass. In that, they are exactly like the Nazi's.

These theologians, seeing themselves as high moral beings, had the cruel misfortune of being tested by life. When tempted, they fell right into the trap that Jesus (at his best) spoke of.

Perhaps the ultimate question is:

What do you do after you have discovered yourself morally bankrupt?

Robert McNamara apologized to the world for Vietnam and warned against his errors.

What do you think will America do?

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⁷ according to Alan Dershowitz and Bugliosi