

# From Replacement to Elimination: Developments in Anti-Jewish Protestant Theology and the Holocaust

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## Abstract

Most scholars agree that the majority of German Protestant churches were silent in response to the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany; however, the so-called “German Christian” movement was different, as it enthusiastically supported the Nazis’ goals, attempting to extract “Jewish” elements from Protestant texts. This article examines both this movement and its precursors, looking at to what extent German Protestant theology was radicalized in the years leading up to the Holocaust. I argue that this radicalization of Protestant theology acted as a transition between traditional Protestant anti-Jewish ideas and the later more radical anti-Semitism of the German Christian movement. During the years directly preceding the Holocaust, Protestant theology not only began emphasizing the irrelevance of Judaism, but argued that it was necessary to completely eliminate Jewish influences from Christianity. I approach this topic by situating an analytical overview of theological texts from this time period within the broader historiography on this subject.

**Keywords:** Anti-Semitism; anti-Judaism; Holocaust; Jewish-Christian relations; Protestantism; theology

## 1. Introduction

In a speech given in February 1933, Hitler stated that “[t]oday Christians and no international atheists stand at the head of Germany...I pledge that I never will tie myself to parties who want to destroy Christianity...We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit” (qtd. in Penton 149). How could someone who advocated for the persecution and annihilation of the Jews promote the revival of

*Christianity* within Germany? Unfortunately, there were a lot of Protestant pastors at the time who would have agreed with Hitler's statement, as they believed that he had come to save the German people in a way not dissimilar to Jesus Christ ("Nazi Christmas Message"). In the early 1930s in particular, many Protestant churches were supportive of Hitler, as they thought he was upholding the conservative values that they and the Nazi Party held in common, which brings to light many new questions (Ericksen, *Complicity* 37, 45). To what extent did German Protestants support the Nazi regime's treatment of the Jews? How did Protestant theology inform the actions/inaction of the churches during the Holocaust? To what degree did they change and even rewrite their theological texts in order to justify their support of Nazi ideology?

The position of the churches during the Holocaust has been one contested by many scholars during the years following the Second World War. At first, historians were reluctant to invoke the failure of the churches to speak up against the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but after the mid-1990s, historians began arguing that the churches were at best silent and, at worst, actually complicit with the Nazis during the Holocaust. This article will provide an overview of the position of more extremist Protestant churches in Germany, focusing particularly on the radicalization of anti-Jewish ideas within certain Protestant theological texts in the decades leading up to 1933 and the relevance of these ideas to the actions of the later German Christian movement. I argue that this radicalization of Protestant theology is representative of a transitional period between traditional Protestant theology and the explicitly anti-Semitic actions of the German Christian movement.

While scholars have devoted much attention to discussing the German Christian movement, there is a lack of English-language research about how these more radical theological ideas developed in the decades prior to the Holocaust. Most scholars devote only cursory attention to these earlier Protestant groups, presenting them primarily as "precursors" to the German Christian movement (Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Bergen, *Twisted Cross*), while others only mention them in passing when discussing the development of anti-Judaism throughout history (Michael; Probst). However, it is important to examine

this radicalization of Protestant theology in more detail in order to fully understand what informed the blatantly anti-Semitic actions of the German Christians and to what extent traditional Protestantism was (and perhaps still is) anti-Jewish. This article will employ the use of earlier theological sources to show that Protestant support of Nazi racial ideology was rooted in ideas preexisting the Nazi regime. In this way, I will demonstrate that the radical theological anti-Semitism promoted during the Holocaust was not simply a by-product of Nazi anti-Semitism and was a much less unprecedented phenomenon within the churches than depicted by most scholarship.

## **2. Division between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism**

Despite the lack of research on this topic, there is a considerably large body of scholarship on the position of churches *during* the Holocaust. One particular issue that should be addressed before proceeding to the main part of this discussion is the division that most scholars have made and still make between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. The majority of scholars suggest that the anti-Judaism inherent within Christian churches in the past was only directed against Judaism and not the Jews themselves (Chazan viii; Michael 5; Nicholls xxi – xxii). Robert Michael argues that Hitler was important in transforming the anti-Judaic attitudes of Christians into the eliminationist anti-Semitism promoted by the Nazi regime (167). In short, Christian anti-Judaism is solely a theological issue (Chazan 241). In contrast to this religion-based hatred, anti-Semitism promotes the destruction of the Jewish people as a whole, thus going “beyond the framework of Christian anti-Judaism” (Ruether 224). Similarly, Gavin Langmuir also states that anti-Judaism was the precursor to anti-Semitism and was intrinsically embedded within Christian theology (57). He views anti-Judaism as a form of antipathy directed against Judaism and only those Jews who actually practiced Judaism, thus differentiating it from anti-Semitism, which was directed against the Jews as a people (Langmuir 57).

In contrast, I argue that the line between these two forms of anti-Jewish thought is blurred and that it is impossible to fully separate one from the other. In the decades leading up to the Holocaust, anti-

Judaic ideas within German Protestant theology began to be radicalized and were fully realized in the explicitly anti-Semitic form of Christianity promoted by the German Christian movement. In support of this idea, Christopher Probst also argues against making a rigid distinction between these two terms, writing that “anti-Judaic ideas and anti-Semitic ideas existed side-by-side in Luther’s and other’s writings” (19). He states that scholars should avoid the typical “chronological” approach used when analyzing the evolution of anti-Jewish thought (Probst 19). In other words, Probst argues against viewing anti-Jewish thought as a progression from religious anti-Judaism to racial anti-Semitism, explaining that “mixed motives for anti-Jewish hatred have long existed in Christian theological writings” (19). Similarly, others argue that although churches have often presented anti-Judaism as only being theologically driven (Pawlikowski and Spicer xvi), the “sublimation of race into Christian theology had long been a part of particularly the Protestant past” (Steigmann-Gall 290). Overall, in support of these scholars’ views, I also contend that it is problematic to make a strict division between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Furthermore, dismissing anti-Judaism as merely a religious form of anti-Semitism results in a simultaneous dismissal of the importance of examining evidence of anti-Jewish thought within Christian theology. Since most scholars view anti-Judaism as only associated with religious issues, it is also often seen as relatively “harmless.” Stephen Eldridge argues against this idea, stating that “[a]lthough outwardly benign, the theological anti-Semitism that characterized German Protestantism quite often had the potential for viciousness” (157). Alon Confino takes this argument even further, contending that it is vital to recognize the cultural and religious hatred intrinsic within the Nazi regime itself (8). Indeed, he considers it problematic that scholars often ignore the Nazis’ erasure of Jewish culture/religion from within Christian society in Germany in favour of examining hatred based on biological race (Confino 121). He goes on to argue that we cannot fully understand the “reason” for the Holocaust if we only focus on the racial element of Nazi anti-Semitism, as the Nazis were also very concerned with creating a fully

“German” culture (Confino 4). Consequently, there was a much more intimate connection between Nazi anti-Semitism and Protestant Christianity than scholars have previously supposed (Confino 8).

In support of these scholars, I also contend that it is problematic to make a definitive distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, as the two are closely linked. Anti-Jewish ideas within Protestant theology developed over an extended period, acquiring more intrinsically eliminationist connotations in the years leading up to the Holocaust. In the early twentieth century, particularly during the Weimar period, I argue that the connection between the “mundane” anti-Judaism proposed by mainstream Protestantism and the more radical form of anti-Semitism proposed by the German Christian movement becomes clear.

### **3. Precursors to the German Christian Movement**

Protestant anti-Judaism first became more radical with the rise of political anti-Semitism in Germany during the late nineteenth century (Probst 21 – 22). After German unification in 1870, Protestantism in general became increasingly nationalistic, as it was seen as a means of unifying church and nation. Basically, Protestant nationalism acted as a way to link loyalty to church with loyalty to state (Conway 820). At this point, some Protestant leaders began to employ the concept of the Germans being the “chosen people” of God (rather than the Jews) as a way to create harmony between nationalism and Protestant Christianity, as both emphasized the idea of “German exceptionalism” (Conway 821).

Nationalistic ideas began to filter into speeches and publications given in the late nineteenth century by some Christians, such as court chaplain Adolf Stöcker (Probst 25). In particular, Stöcker’s ideas show the beginnings of the more radical form of Protestant anti-Semitism that emerged during the Holocaust. In one speech given in 1879, Stöcker argued that Judaism was filled with errors and that it was the German Christians who had first corrected these problems (4). The emergent concept of a “German” Christianity is also evident in this speech, as Stöcker associates the German nation with “true” Christianity, arguing that the Germans would be a people without honor if continuing “to yield to the

effects of the Jewish spirit that de-Germanizes and de-Christianizes them” (6). While not yet promoting the elimination of the Jews, he still believed that they should be put to the side to allow for the development of true German Protestantism. For instance, he argued that Jews should be banned from teaching in primary schools in order “to strengthen the Christian-German spirit” (Stöcker 8).

There is some debate over whether or not Stöcker was actually anti-*Semitic* (versus just being anti-Judaic) (Telman 93). However, even if arguing that it is possible to distinguish between these two types of anti-Jewish thought, Stöcker nonetheless mentioned race as one of the issues that was part of the “Jewish question,” indicating that he thought it was impossible for even Jewish converts to Christianity to be fully assimilated into the Christian German nation (Telman 96). Furthermore, his proposed displacement of Jews from positions of influence within society, such as in schools and courts, reflect his belief that the influence of the Jews themselves (and not just their religion) was a problem for German society. His ideas reflect the more nationalistic form of Protestantism that later emerged with the German Christian movement, as he began to advocate for the displacement of Judaism and the Jews within Christian society.

This emphasis on nationalism, however, did not change Protestant church culture in any significant way until the Weimar Republic was founded after World War I. At this point, more nationalistic groups emerged within certain churches that promoted increasingly radical forms of anti-Jewish theology (Preisinger 44). Pastors and theologians, such as Paul Althaus, Gerhard Kittel, and Emmanuel Hirsch, began promoting a new *völkisch* version of Protestantism that particularly focused on critiquing Jewish influences found within Protestant theology (Haynes, “Between,” 34; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 44 – 45). For instance, Adolf von Harnack, another prominent theologian, argued that “[t]he New Testament has secured the continuance of the Old Testament in the Church, and at the same time has guarded against the stunting effect of its Judaism, just because the Old Testament was thrust into an inferior position by the New Testament” (*Origin* 130). In short, he did not completely dismiss the Old Testament (although he did later in life), but nonetheless emphasized the fact that Judaism was harmful to

modern Protestantism and that the Old Testament was of less importance than the New Testament (Erickson, *Theologians* 50). In order to understand the significance of Von Harnack's arguments, it is important to recognize that the Old Testament was based primarily on the Hebrew Bible, meaning that it was a religious text shared by both Judaism and Christianity, although both texts took slightly different forms. Von Harnack critiqued the link between modern Christianity and Judaism by indicating that the Old Testament was less "developed" than the New Testament, thus implying a kind of hierarchical relationship between Judaism and Christianity in which the latter took precedence.

The "Luther Renaissance" in Germany also arose during the early twentieth century, in which Martin Luther's works were revived for new study and critique (Cochrane 61). At the same time, many Protestant groups also started "reviving church life" by putting more emphasis on the importance of German ethnicity and culture (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 5). As the twentieth century progressed, these more radical forms of Protestantism became more virulently anti-Jewish, promoting the de-Judaization of German Christianity by arguing that the Old Testament was completely irrelevant for German Protestants (Cochrane 75; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 44 – 45). For instance, pastor and theologian Friedrich Andersen wrote that Judaism was a *danger* within society, thus indicating that Judaism was no longer just seen as irrelevant, but as detrimental to Christian society (Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 44 – 45). This emphasis on the danger of Judaism sets up an opposition between Christianity and Judaism, rather than just placing Judaism on a lower stage of development. Destroying this Jewish influence from within Christian society then became analogous to destroying an enemy that is causing the destruction of society from within, bearing a great resemblance to Nazi propaganda about the Jews. The elimination of Judaism had now become an integral aspect to the further advancement of German Protestant Christianity.

In *95 Leitsätze zum Reformationsfest 1917 (95 Principles for Reformation Day 1917)*, Andersen and his three co-authors stated that Judaism had been completely replaced by German Protestantism, arguing that many Germans had turned aside from Christianity because they believed it was impossible to extricate it completely from Judaism (5). They contended that Christianity's connection to Judaism was

no longer tolerable and in fact was harming Christianity, thus necessitating the total elimination of any association between the two (Andersen et al. 7). However, Andersen et al. took these rather commonplace anti-Jewish sentiments even further, stating that Christianity did not emerge from Judaism or the Old Testament, but instead began at the time of God's revelation to Christ. This meant that Christianity was completely independent from the Old Testament, lacking even a historical connection to Judaism (Andersen et al. 14). In this way, Andersen and his co-authors were able to start justifying the exclusion of Jewish elements from Protestantism, because they argued that as Protestantism supposedly did not emerge from Judaism (although this was certainly untrue), there was no reason to retain Judaic elements like the Old Testament within it. While perhaps Andersen's ideas could be considered radical outliers, Heschel argues against this idea, stating that he "attracted no stronger criticism from the churches than a statement" objecting to how "one-sided" his teachings were (*The Aryan Jesus* 47).

Andersen also helped found the League for German Churches in 1921, which was the first direct precursor to the German Christian movement. This group promoted the reformation of Protestant churches along nationalistic lines, maintaining that all churches should be "freed" from Judaic influences (Cochrane 75). While at first these *völkisch* ideas proposed by Andersen and others were offensive to mainstream Protestant churches, they nonetheless gained increasing influence within Protestantism, and although there were certainly exceptions, the churches as a whole became much more receptive to such notions as time went on (Preisinger 44). For instance, Pastor Karl Gerecke believed that Judaism was worthless and should be cast out of Protestant Christianity (8). Gerecke was more openly anti-Semitic than Andersen et al., as he directed his words explicitly against the Jews, in addition to Judaism, believing that the Jewish spirit opposed the spirit of God (14). According to Gerecke, Judaism was not only inconsequential, but sinful, poisoning the German people from within (23, 26). As Christian theology became more explicitly directed against the Jewish people themselves, any perceived difference between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism becomes increasingly indistinct.

Furthermore, at this time, theologians attempted to “break free” of older theological constraints and reorient Protestant theology to fit with the new German culture that emerged after the First World War (Haynes, “Between” 18). In fact, there were new nationalistic elements present within many forms of Christianity all over Europe, indicating that these ideas had become widespread and were not only located within Germany (McLeod 14). These anti-Jewish and nationalistic ideas were considered seriously by prominent historians and theologians, despite their clearly anti-Semitic tone. Any theological resistance to the ideas of the League for German Churches was rather weak, if existent at all (Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 45 – 47).

Other scholars, such as Heath Spencer, contest this view, contending that ideas promoting the de-Judaization of Protestantism were “largely absent” from Protestant discourse prior to the rise of the Nazis and deeming the groups advocating for these ideas a minority that struggled to make their views known (Spencer 528). Spencer states that the majority of pastors argued against these radical positions, although he admits that they still saw the Old Testament as “outdated” (535). Similarly, others state that more radical theologians such as Adolf Harnack were outliers and that their ideas were the exception rather than the rule (Rasmusson 156). In sum, while the notion of the “people’s church” was alive in the minds of most Germans during the 1920s, this concept did not necessarily promote the de-Judaization of Protestantism (Borg 180).

These scholars’ debates make one thing evident – namely, that it is impossible to determine the full impact of these anti-Jewish ideas on mainstream Protestantism. However, it is certainly true that these ideas were not accepted by *all* Protestants. These radical notions were shared only by certain groups within the Protestant churches and were not espoused by the churches as a whole (Bergen, “Ironies of Accommodation” 204). At the same time, it seems clear that Protestant Christianity did undergo a certain amount of change during this period, as it became increasingly associated with nationalism in an attempt to continue “to align the destiny of the nation with Protestantism,” particularly within the new political climate of the Weimar Republic (Preisinger 43). Even Spencer admits that *some* of these pastors

advocated for a Germanized version of Christianity, complete with a Germanized and abridged Old Testament and a Bible that started with the New Testament (535). Overall, it seems likely that while there may have been variance in the radicalism of the Protestant churches' views on Judaism, they nonetheless all shared the view that the Jewish religion was irrelevant within the context of modern Christian belief, some taking that idea even further.

In 1926, the League for German Churches joined with the German League of Christians to form the German Christian Working Community (Moseley 109). Other more radical and nationalist Protestant groups antedating the German Christian movement included the Christian-German Movement, which preceded the National Socialist Faith Movement of 'German Christians' (Moseley 110). As the 1920s continued to progress, even more explicitly anti-Semitic groups emerged, such as the German Christian Working Group and the Thuringian German Christians' Church Movement, which was the most radical of these groups (Moseley 109; Cochrane 75). This group was led by Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser and was closely aligned with Nazi ideology (Cochrane 75). Both Leffler and Leutheuser were emphatic about "religious renewal along nationalist, *völkisch* lines" (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 5), Leffler arguing that the Germans (and not the Jews) were "the new people of God" (Cochrane 77). In 1933, the German Christian movement was founded, gaining as many as two thirds of the votes in the church elections that year, demonstrating its popularity among mainstream Protestant Christians (Moseley 110). Karl Barth, one of the most prominent members of the Confessing Church, which was formed in opposition to the later German Christian movement, argued that there was a direct correlation between the so-called "cultural Protestantism" of earlier years and the theology of the German Christian movement (Rasmusson 155). This idea seems accurate when considering the way in which Protestantism increasingly developed more radical associations, starting with this more "nationalist" variety of Protestant Christianity.

Initially, all Protestant denominations, such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism, had been unified under one umbrella organization. However, as internal tensions increased among the

churches, they separated into three major groups: the German Christian movement, the Confessing Church, and the “middle” group unaffiliated with either side that comprised the majority of Protestant churches (Hockenos 3). The Confessing Church was made up of a number of pastors who disagreed with the alignment of Nazi ideology and Christian thought, forming this group in response to the German Christian movement. They took issue both with the German Christian movement’s revision of Protestantism and the eliminationist form of anti-Semitism promoted by the Nazis (Eldridge 160; Baranowski 90; Barnett 125). The “middle” group of churches remained uncommitted to either the radical beliefs of the German Christian movement or the anti-Nazi resistance of the Confessing Church, although they generally did not speak out against the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews (Hockenos 3; Barnett 152).

#### **4. The German Christian Movement and the De-Judaization of Protestantism**

From 1932 to 1945, the German Christian movement further radicalized already existent anti-Jewish sentiments that were present within Protestant theology, showing that this group did not promote such ideas solely because of the external pressure from the Nazis. Rather than merely *arguing* that Judaism was irrelevant and *proposing* the elimination of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, as the previous groups had done, the German Christians now had the opportunity to fully enact these ideas. At this point in time, their version of Protestant Christianity developed more explicitly anti-Semitic connotations that were directed against the Jews and not just the Jewish religion. For instance, Pastor Friedrich Wieneke argued that the “God of the Old Testament has all the deficiencies of the Jewish race and is therefore utterly different from the God of the New Testament” (289). Some pastors then evidently viewed the Jews as intrinsically linked to the Jewish religion.

Other leaders within this movement made similar statements. For example, Reinhold Krause wrote that in order to bring people back to the churches, they first had to seek “liberation from everything in the worship service and our confession of faith that is not German, liberation from the Old Testament with its Jewish reward-and-punishment morality...For all practical purposes, the one excludes the other”

(258). Similarly, others explained that “[t]he Christian faith is the unbridgeable religious opposite of Judaism” (“The Godesberg Declaration and Responses” 446). In short, the German Christians argued that there was no historical connection whatsoever between Judaism and Christianity, which helped justify their elimination of Jewish elements from Protestantism. If Christianity did not emerge from Judaism, then they argued away any necessity for retaining the “Jewish” elements of their religion. Furthermore, they saw the two as antithetical to one another, implying that in order for one to exist, the other *could not* exist. These ideas bore great similarity with those proposed earlier, but at this point, Protestant theologians and pastors not only disavowed the validity of the Old Testament for a contemporary Christian German society, but argued that it had to be annihilated completely in order for Protestant Christianity to become fully “Christian.”

Given the political climate under the Nazi regime, the German Christians were also able to start putting these ideas into action and thus completely sever Protestantism from its Jewish origins. For example, they eliminated “Jewish” elements from their church music, such as the Jewish word “hallelujah,” and were also instrumental in removing the Old Testament from the Protestant canon (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 143; Heschel, “When Jesus was an Aryan” 73; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 106). Together with the church-funded Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, they helped publish *Die Botschaft Gottes (The Message of God)* in place of the traditional Protestant Bible. This text was a revised version of the New Testament that was free of any references to the Old Testament and reworded certain passages to fit with Nazi ideology (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 143, 162 – 163, 171). They argued that the Gospels did not preach the salvation of humanity, but instead commanded them to continue a racial struggle against the Jews that Jesus had begun and for which he died, showing that at this time Protestantism had developed distinctly anti-Semitic content (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 154). Instead of viewing Protestant Christianity as promoting the salvation of humanity, the German Christians believed that the *annihilation* of Judaism was implicitly necessary to fulfill their new revised mandate of Protestantism. This movement was not solely a tool of the Nazi regime, but used

the opportunity of the Nazis' rise to power in order to fully realize these already existent anti-Judaic ideas and dissolve any remaining links between Protestantism and Judaism.

In addition, the German Christians enthusiastically embraced the Aryan Paragraph enacted by the Nazis, which meant that they stopped recognizing Jewish baptism and restricted Jews who had converted to Christianity from holding positions in their churches (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 86, 93). Robert Ericksen takes this idea even further, contending that the churches were not compelled to accept the Aryan Paragraph when it was first introduced, but accepted it eagerly in the desire to align themselves more closely with the state (*Complicity* 26 – 27). Furthermore, these actions demonstrate how Protestant prejudice against Judaism developed distinctly racial and anti-Semitic connotations at this point in time, as even the definition of becoming a Christian had changed to one based on racial “belonging,” rather than salvation through faith alone. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the anti-Jewish ideas proposed by theologians and pastors in the years prior to the emergence of this movement already intrinsically carried a certain degree of prejudice against the Jewish people, according to some scholars (Barnett; Eldridge). As Eldridge explains, the “racial aspect of anti-Judaism” within Protestantism was deeply rooted in the theological writings of Martin Luther and continued to inform the anti-Semitism that characterized the Protestant response to the Jews during the Holocaust (157). In this way, the connection between the more explicit anti-Semitism promoted by the German Christians and earlier and less radical ideas becomes clear. Certainly, the actions of the German Christian movement were likely influenced by the ideology accompanying the Nazi regime, but I believe that these radical actions within some of the churches, such as eliminating the Old Testament from the Protestant canon, would not have occurred had these actions not been justified by theological arguments antedating the rise of the Nazi Party.

There is a distinct division between how earlier and more recent scholars have presented the German Christian movement in relation to this discussion. For the most part, scholars before the mid-1990s viewed this movement as a fringe group that was basically an extension of Nazi power, rather than one having any significant influence among the Protestant churches in general (Barnes 37, 39; Barnett

27). For instance, Arthur Cochrane and Franklin Littell both argue that the Nazi regime played an integral part in informing the anti-Semitic actions of the German Christian movement during the Holocaust. Over time, the German Christian movement became increasingly controlled by the state, basically functioning as a tool of the Nazi regime (Cochrane 105). Indeed, the Nazis were the ones who dictated the German Christians' more violent attitude towards the Jews (Littell 222).

Similarly, Kenneth Barnes also believes that the German Christian movement was simply a function of the state, arguing that the churches *had* to be anti-Semitic because the state was anti-Semitic (158). Barnett takes a more neutral view of the issue, contending that the German Christians were somewhat supportive of the Nazis' goals on their own terms (32 – 33). However, she still attempts to minimize this less than positive view of the churches, stating that to some extent the churches were helpless in the face of Nazi oppression (Barnett 153). Furthermore, she argues that the de-Judaization measures taken by the German Christian movement were not accepted by many Protestant theologians (Barnett 37).

More recently, however, scholars have shown that the German Christian movement was quite influential and operated independently from the Nazi Party, as it enacted many anti-Semitic measures that were not enforced by the Nazis (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 2 – 3, 143; Ericksen, *Complicity* 26 – 27; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 169). In particular, the work of Susannah Heschel and Doris Bergen helped promote this change in direction of the historiography on the Protestant churches during the Holocaust with their extensive research on the German Christian movement. These scholars argue that the German Christians enthusiastically supported the Nazis by actively trying to de-Judaize Protestantism, although there is nothing that indicates that the Nazis would have dissolved these churches had they refused to Nazify their religion (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 3, 24; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 69 – 70; Heschel, “When Jesus was an Aryan” 80). Furthermore, the Nazis themselves were not that supportive of the German Christian movement, disliking its aim to “complete National Socialism” (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 3).

Similarly, Stephen Haynes and Stephen Eldridge also argue that the churches' silence and the German Christian movement's direct support of the Nazis stemmed primarily from the anti-Semitic roots of Protestantism (Eldridge 157; Haynes, "Who Needs Enemies?" 351). Instead of introducing new anti-Semitic ideas into Protestantism, scholars emphasize the ways in which the ideas promoted by the German Christians were merely radicalized versions of preexisting Christian theology (Confino 130; Michael 1; Eldridge 151, 157). Furthermore, historians consider this movement as far more influential than earlier historians supposed it to be, as other Protestant groups besides the German Christian movement endorsed their attempts to de-Judaize the Protestant churches (Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 2; Heschel, "When Jesus was an Aryan" 87; Haynes, "Who Needs Enemies?" 352). In this way, these scholars indicate that the German Christians were not a Nazi-controlled movement, but saw the rise of the Nazi regime as an *opportunity* to create their ideal racially-pure church that excluded both the Jews and Judaism.

While this group was likely influenced to some extent by the rise of the Nazi regime, I chiefly support more recent scholars' stance in this debate. I argue against the idea that the German Christian movement was a mere extension of Nazi power, contending that already existent anti-Jewish elements within Protestant theology were the main factors informing the anti-Semitic actions of the German Christian movement. In short, examining the radicalization of Protestant theology during the decades prior to the Holocaust shows that the anti-Semitic actions of the German Christians were the opportunistic realization of anti-Jewish ideas long embedded within Protestant theology.

## **5. Christian Supersessionism and Nazi Eliminationism**

While these anti-Jewish ideas within Protestant theology may have been radicalized in the decades prior to the Holocaust, they were not new. Instead, I contend that these anti-Jewish ideas emphasizing the antithetical nature of Protestantism and Judaism were rooted in mainstream Christian supersessionist doctrine. Indeed, supersessionism had been in existence since far prior to the birth of

Protestantism itself and remained a core doctrine within almost all Christian denominations until after the Holocaust. In brief, supersessionist doctrine asserts that after Jesus Christ came to earth and died for humankind, “God's purposes for, and love of, the Jewish people came to an end” (McGarry 120). According to supersessionist theology, the New Covenant of the New Testament had made the Old Testament of the Jews obsolete, and the Christians replaced the Jews as God’s “chosen people” (McGarry 120). Christian theology taught that God had rejected the Jewish people (Breidenthal 319). As discussed in the previous sections of this article, this concept was clearly demonstrated in the theological ideas of the German Christians and their precursors. For instance, Von Harnack echoes this idea in his *Outlines of the History of Dogma*, arguing that God cast off the Jewish people (42). Later pastors and theologians then took this idea even further by simply implying that the concept of “chosen people” was irrelevant, as the God of the Christians and the God of the Jews were completely different from one another (Andersen et al. 15; Brökelschen 409).

Some scholars propose that supersessionism was directly connected to the eliminationist anti-Semitism of the Nazis, believing that anti-Judaism had “murderous implications” if carried out to its full potential (Haynes, “Christian Holocaust Theology” 566; McGarry 120). As Michael McGarry says, if the “Jews do not have a place in salvation history after Jesus, do they have a place in any history? Do they have a right to exist at all?” (120). Siegfried Leffler and Gerhard Kittel, both prominent members of the German Christian movement, actually discussed killing the Jews as a proposed solution to the “Jewish question” before the Second World War even began (Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 10). While Kittel eventually dismissed this so-called “solution” in part owing to the associated ethical issues, he also did so because “[t]he violent extermination of the Jews is not a serious option: if the systems of the Spanish Inquisition or the Russian pogroms did not succeed, it seems highly unlikely this will happen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (qtd. in Solberg 32). In essence, Kittel implied that the murder of the Jews could be a feasible option if he was not certain that it would fail. Leffler placed the burden of guilt on the government, arguing that he would “have to kill him [a Jewish person], have to shoot him” if the state required it (qtd.

in Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus* 10)]. The fact that both dismiss the atrocity of such a sentiment reveals a “Christian” viewpoint in which such a horrific action might be unfortunate and perhaps unnecessary, but still could be considered a conceivable solution.

It is important to note that this “solution” was not expressed openly by the majority of Protestant churches, even those associated with the German Christian movement. So, while it would not be fair to deem all Protestant churches as eliminationist, the idea promoting the “replacement” of Judaism and the Jews still clearly reflects anti-Jewish sentiments endorsed by the Protestant churches both before and during the Holocaust. Robert Michael locates the birth of such ideas to the first centuries of the common era when the break between Christianity and Judaism was made, after which “the Church attempted to establish its own, unique identity, as independently as possible, from Judaism. To achieve this, the Church cast the Jews in the role of aliens, monsters, pariahs” (1). Later, after the Reformation, theologians such as Luther emphasized the idea that the Jews had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, which resulted in their rejection by God and replacement by the New Israel represented by the Protestant Church (Pak 2). German theologians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only argued that Judaism had been replaced by Protestantism, but they also advocated for the elimination of Jewish influences from within Protestantism, thus radicalizing Christian supersessionist doctrine. Furthermore, more explicitly racial associations came to the forefront of supersessionism at this time, which made it even more problematic, as both Judaism and the Jews were deemed replaceable and a “threat” to Christian society.

This link between religion and race within Protestant theology at this time is clarified by Kittel, who argued that the so-called “Jewish question” had to be seen as both a religious *and* racial question (4). Other theologians echoed this idea (Stöcker; Andersen). If the Jews themselves were viewed as intrinsically connected to their religion, thus comprising an ethno-religious group, it becomes very difficult to define hatred as being directed solely against their religion without it being directed against the people themselves at the same time. For instance, Friedrich Andersen, the German Christian theologian

who helped found the League for German Churches, explains that biological race itself is not the issue with the Jews, as he describes them as a mixed group of people no different from most other races (aside from the Aryan race) (112). Instead, he argues that the Jewish spirit as manifested through their teachings and religion somehow changed their very racial makeup (Andersen 112). Ignoring the many issues involved with this very unscientific argument, it nonetheless points to the fact that, to many of these theologians, race and religion were almost inextricably interlinked, which indicates that making a division between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism would be rather unfeasible in this case.

After World War II, many Christian denominations renounced supersessionism, possibly because of its eliminationist connotations (Breidenthal 319). Theologians and churches as a whole began reconsidering this doctrine after the Holocaust and tried to establish a more Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than seeing the two religions in opposition to one another. However, is it possible to accomplish this task given that Protestant theology continues to assert that the specifics of the Old Testament law are irrelevant for Christians (Skeel and Longman 11)? Despite theological arguments renouncing supersessionism, mainstream churches continue to promote the idea that Christianity has replaced Judaism (Bader-Saye 256). Does Protestantism then inherently carry anti-Semitic connotations? Can churches escape anti-Jewish sentiments when continuing to argue that Christianity has replaced Judaism? These questions are integral to address within mainstream Christianity today, in order to avoid the possibility of perpetuating anti-Jewish propensities within modern Protestant theology.

## **6. Conclusion**

Overall, this article has presented an overview of the historical background and scholarship about the German Christian movement and the precursors to this movement. Protestant doctrine was radicalized in the decades leading up to the Holocaust, showing a link between these ideas and the Judaic purges of the German Christian movement. Alice Eckardt goes so far as to argue that “the Holocaust could not have occurred” without the background of Christian anti-Judaism, stating that “[i]n that sense, the Shoah is the

culmination of the thrust of much (if not in fact most) of Christian faith and history” (229). Eckardt perhaps takes this idea too far, as there are problems inherent with using any sort of “master narrative,” including religious ones, to “explain” the Holocaust (Von Kellenbach 656 – 657).

Nonetheless, this discussion of Protestant anti-Judaism is important because it highlights the necessity of reexamining Protestant doctrine, as anti-Jewish ideas intrinsic within Protestant theology even today have the potential to develop distinctly eliminationist connotations. While it is inaccurate to view the churches as either totally resistant *or* complicit with the Nazis, most scholars agree that even if Protestant churches did not all actively persecute the Jews, almost all of them were silent in response to the Holocaust, probably owing to their shared heritage of anti-Judaism (Hockenos 17; Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 3 – 4). The Protestant churches in Nazi Germany may not have actively promoted the annihilation of European Jewry, but their ideas provided a religious and moral justification for the elimination of both the Jewish religion and, by extension, the Jewish people as well.

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