

Kevin P. Spicer and Rebecca Carter-Chand, Eds.
Religion, Ethnonationalism, and
Antisemitism in the Era of the Two World Wars

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This volume of essays, the result of two large-scale academic meetings, explores the role that Christianity has played in the rise of ethnonationalism throughout early-mid 20th century societies. The project is ambitious, as the contributors cover areas ranging from Germany to Finland to the United States of America. Each author examines relationships between the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* (German for an ethnonational community) and Christianity used as a tool of either inclusion or exclusion in the community. The one consistent thread in the examination of Christianity and ethnonationalism is the inclination of many Christians and ethnonationalists to alienate and ostracize Jews from “their” society.

The chapters are helpfully arranged according to the editors’ criteria. The contributors to part one introduce theorists who disseminated themes of ethnonationalism and antisemitism. Building on this theme, the authors in part two relate instances of both Protestant and Catholic leaders’ opting to support their countries’ ethnonationalist policies. Part three offers readers some small degree of hopefulness with essays demonstrating how there were critics of ethnonationalism in various religious institutions and leadership positions. They often attempted to lessen the impact of ethnonationalism in their nations primarily by refusing to allow governments to combine religion and nationalism into a toxic mix. Each part reminds historians that the combination of religion, ethnic identity, and antisemitism were a constant in the vast majority of the cases included in this volume.

Part one takes readers on a journey into the world of Christian ethnonationalist theorists who, between World War I and World War II, laid foundations for leaders and members of ethnonationalistic organizations. The three essays in this part cover American Protestant political activist George Deatherage, Italian esoteric spiritualist Julius Evola, and reactionary European Catholics. What could these very disparate people have in common? They all shared the fears that Christian-based society was being threatened. Charles R. Gallagher argues that for Deatherage, his fear of Bolshevism, and more specifically “Judeo-Bolshevism,” pushed him to

found the American Nationalist Confederation in 1937 to combat “Jewish” influences on American Christian society. Reactionary Catholics, in an overlapping time frame, also believed the longstanding myth that Jews plotted world domination. As Nina Valbousquet shows, they spread the forged document *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as “proof” that everything that was deemed “bad” in modern society was emanating from a Jewish threat. Peter Staudenmaier shows how Julius Evola likewise tapped into the traditions of attacking Jews as the propagators of discord in Italian and more broadly Aryan Christian civilization. Although Evola’s theories were more layered and complex than Deatherage’s or the reactionary Catholics’, all of these serve as prime examples of hostile and exclusionary views toward Jews in Christian-dominated societies of the time.

Part two takes readers on a journey that begins in Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s, where Catholic parish priests in the diocese of Mainz in some cases openly opposed the idea that Catholics could be National Socialists. Despite intimidation and threats of violence, Kevin P. Spicer, writing about the period before Hitler’s seizure of power, reveals that some parish priests clearly understood that National Socialist ideology was incompatible with Catholic teachings. Unfortunately, many of the Catholic bishops and cardinals were not willing to take a firm stand on this issue, thus leading to a missed opportunity for the German Catholic Church to oppose the growing Nazi party. This essay flows neatly into Susannah Heschel and Shannon Quigley’s essay. They underscore the attempts by theologians such as Heinz Weidemann to “sanitize” the Bible, thus eradicating its “Jewishness.” In the minds of men such as Weidemann, Christianity needed to be revamped as a masculine, aggressive, fighting religion (specifically fighting against the threat posed by the Jews). The Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life was able to print its dejudaised gospel for a popular audience, depicting Jesus as an Aryan fighting against the pernicious influence of Jews. Much like Spicer’s essay, here we see how educated elites, in this case theologians, were working to convince ordinary German Christians that it was possible to reconcile Christianity with National Socialism. In much the same vein, Rebecca Carter-Chand’s research reveals the ways in which much smaller denominations in Germany had to negotiate both internal politics with regard to Nazi policies as well as to address their international connections abroad. Carter-Chand’s essay shows how some of these religious minority groups used their position to reach accommodations with the Nazi regime, once again underscoring how Aryan racial designations could be combined with Christianity to offer inclusion in the Nazi ethnostate.

The book next shifts to chapters on Finland and the independent state of Croatia. In the case of Finland, Paavo Ahonen and Kirsi Stjerna show how Lutheran Church leaders championed antisemitic publications that had permeated Finnish society in the wake of the World War I. In particular, the antisemitic writings came to influence political decision-making in Finland, revealing the extent of the Finnish Lutheran clergy’s ability to label Jews as enemies of Protestant Finns. Next, Danijel Matijevic illustrates the relationship between the Catholic Church and the

Ustasha regime in the newly-created Independent State of Croatia before and during WWII. In Croatia's case, unlike in Finland, a very ethnically- and religiously-diverse population had co-existed. However, he argues that the new government leaders were willing to go to any extremes in order to eradicate the diversity, thus creating a monoethnic state. Unfortunately, the Catholic leadership often worked closely with the new political leaders, particularly targeting Serbian Orthodox people for a "double conversion," i.e., a religious conversion to Catholicism and an "ethnic" conversion turning them into Croats. Matijević writes that the Catholic Church leadership in Croatia placed the idea of the Nation above all else and, in so doing, compromised the moral authority of the Church.

Part three opens with the only essay that portrays Jewish agency in the face of such discrimination and physical violence. Sara Han's work examines one school in Nazi Berlin, the Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums, as a place of perceived—albeit temporary—protection for many Jewish students. The Hochschule offered German Jewish students in Berlin the only opportunity to continue their higher education in Nazi Germany. Many university students and professors came to regard the school as a refuge from the attacks and discrimination against German Jews. The school closed in 1942, but in the time of its existence a new culture of education had emerged that many survivors took with them if they were able to emigrate abroad.

The next essay shifts the focus to western Ukraine and to a Greek Catholic metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky. Sheptytsky, recently named as "venerable" by Pope Francis, took the theological resources of the Greek Catholic traditions and tried to offer an alternative to ethnonationalism and antisemitism. Through his writings but also through his organization to save Jewish children's lives, Sheptytsky shows that for Christians there was an alternative to the toxic mixture of ethnonationalism, Christianity, and antisemitism. Unlike so many of the earlier examples in this work, Sheptytsky encouraged an inclusive patriotism, preaching it as a Christian virtue to love one's country and to love one's neighbor. Sheptytsky was also clear-eyed in that he recognized that "neighbor" did not come with a specific ethnicity or religion. The next author Ionut Biliuta discusses Romania, well-known to most Holocaust scholars as a place of terrible anti-Jewish violence. However, through careful examinations of state archives as well as through personal interviews, he uncovers the role of some Romanian Orthodox parish priests who defied their government and attempted to treat Jews humanely, offer them protection, and work against their destruction. Many of these would-be rescuer priests were later persecuted by Soviet-era authorities and many of their lives ended tragically. In the case of Romania, we once again can see that the genocide of the Jews was not inevitable and that there were Christian leaders who rejected ethnonationalism and its path toward genocide.

The final two essays in part three return us to the basic theme of widespread Christian support for National Socialism. Samuel Koehne's essay examines the Protestant fundamentalist group the Korntal Brethren in Germany. The Brethren recognized National Socialism as un-Christian, neo-pagan, and a "political religion" founded on concepts of race. The Brethren remained firm in their

commitment to using love as a bridge to repair what they viewed as a broken society. They used their own theology, much the same way Metropolitan Sheptytsky did, to argue against ethnonationalism and antisemitism. The final essay by Victoria Barnett examines the international Protestant ecumenical movement's response to Nazism and antisemitism of the 1920s and 1930s. Barnett's work shows us that many in the ecumenical movement worked for solidarity with Jews. However, their support for pacifism and for international peace, as well as their knowledge of the *Kirchenkampf* in Nazi Germany, often trumped their willingness to denounce Nazi anti-Jewish policies. Despite this failing, there were also ecumenical attempts to rescue successfully persecuted Jews, leaving behind a mixed legacy for the Protestant ecumenical leaders.

The book ends with an afterword by Doris Bergen, who provides readers with an exceptional overview of the major themes encountered in the essays. Bergen's essay also provides insights into future areas of scholarship, particularly with her challenge to scholars to research the roles that women played in all of these areas. Bergen's essay poignantly reminds us that Christianity, ethnonationalism, and antisemitism combined in a lethal way in the 1930's and 1940's, that this dangerous mixture still exists in today's society, and that this should encourage further research.