

# Hitler's Theology

A STUDY IN POLITICAL RELIGION

Rainer Bucher

Translated by Rebecca Pohl

Edited and with an introduction by Michael Hoelzl



# Hitler's Theology

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## Mottos

Thus I believe to be acting according to the wishes of the almighty Creator: By fighting off the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.

Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1925

At the heart of our program you will not find any mysterious presentiments, rather you will find succinct realization and hence open avowal. Since we place the sustenance and securing of a creature created by God at the center of this realization and avowal, we sustain God's creation, and it is in this manner that we serve this will. We do not do so at a new cult site bathed in mysterious twilight, but rather, in the open, for the Lord to see.

Adolf Hitler, Party Congress Speech, 1938

The fellow is a catastrophe. But that is no reason why we should not find him interesting, as a character and as an event. Consider the circumstances. Here is a man possessed of a bottomless resentment and a festering desire for revenge; a man ten times a failure, extremely lazy, incapable of steady work; a man who has spent long periods in institutions; a disappointed bohemian artist; a total good-for-nothing. And here is a people obsessed with powerful though far less justifiable feelings of defeat and inferiority, and unable to think of anything save how to retrieve its lost 'honor.' And then he – who had learned nothing, and in his dreamy, obstinate arrogance never would learn anything; who had neither technical nor physical discipline, could not sit a horse, or drive a car, or fly a plane, or do aught that men do, even to begetting a child – he develops the one thing needful to establish a connection between him and the people: a gift of oratory. It is oratory unspeakably inferior in kind, but magnetic in its effect on the masses: a weapon of definitely histrionic, even hysterical power, which he thrusts into the nation's wound and turns round. He rouses the populace with images of his own insulted grandeur, deafens it with promises, makes out of the people's sufferings a vehicle for his own greatness, his ascent to fantastic heights, to unlimited power, to incredible compensations and over-compensations. He rises to such a pitch of glorification and awe-inspiring sanctity that anyone who in the past had wronged him – when he was unknown, despised and rejected, becomes straightway a child of the evil one and merits the most shameful and frightful death.

Thomas Mann, 'That Man Is My Brother', 1938

Every word that issues from Hitler's mouth is a lie. When he says peace he means war and when he most sinfully names the name of the Almighty, he means the force of evil, the fallen angel, Satan. His mouth is the stinking throat of hell and his power is fundamentally depraved.

Fourth Pamphlet of the White Rose, 1942



## Translator's Note

For this translation I have chosen a literal approach both to the text of the study itself as well as to the texts it in turn quotes. Given the methodology of the study – the analysis of historical primary sources – this has posed a number of distinct challenges that also spill over into quotations from secondary material. In order to resolve these challenges, I have chosen the following procedures:

Where available, I have used existing English translations both of primary source material (e.g. Hitler's speeches, Speer's memoirs) and of secondary material (e.g. Joachim Fest). Where no English translation was readily available, I have translated the material (both primary and secondary) myself. In cases where the author has used a German translation of an English source, I have here quoted from the English original (e.g. Ian Kershaw). The references in the footnotes and the information in the bibliography correspond to the details of the actually quoted texts in the present translation.

There is one exception to this: the author makes extensive use both of Henry Picker's *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1942* and *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1944. Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims*, edited by W. Jochmann. There is an English translation of these two texts entitled *Hitler's Table Talk 1941–1944*. It was translated by Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens, with an introduction by H.R. Trevor-Roper and was published in 1953 (by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London). The publication history of these documents is extremely fraught, however, even before questions of translation are considered. Copyright issues have resulted in the two different German versions and the translation is purportedly based on a third set of documents. As the English translation is not only of dubious origin but also of dubious intent and ideological underpinning, I have chosen to translate the German source material myself. (For a discussion of this problematic see: Richard C. Carrier, "Hitler's Table Talk": Troubling Finds'. *German Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (Oct 2003): 561–76.)

Various translations of *Mein Kampf* are available. I have chosen to use James Murphy's 1939 version for a number of reasons. It was the first full-length translation published in Britain and it was de facto authorized by the German authorities (ex-negativo: no legal action was taken against the publisher, Hurst & Blackett). It has also been classified as sympathetic to the cause (cf. Stefan

Baumgarten, *Translating Hitler's Mein Kampf: A corpus-aided discourse-analytical study* (2009)) which perhaps allows it to more readily express Hitler's emotive and ideological pronouncements. While translation is always a fraught process, and perhaps none more so than this particular case, a decision had to be made. The situatedness of the translation should hence be borne in mind when reading the text. There are singular instances where I have commented on the translation in footnotes.

Specialist Nazi terminology for which there is no satisfactory English equivalent has been left untranslated and is rendered in italics and explained in a separate glossary (p. 124). The explanations of these terms are based on the following resource: Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (London: Greenwood, 2002). Occasionally I have inserted German terms in square brackets into already translated sources in order to provide a fuller idea of the referent.

A note on *völkisch*: I have chosen not to translate this particular term and so it appears in its German rendition. However, I have adapted the grammatical forms in correspondence with English rather than German grammar. Other sources quoted in the study offer translations of the term and in these instances, I have maintained their suggestions (Max Domarus' English version suggests 'volkic' (cf. Chapter 3) and James Murphy suggests 'folk-idea' (cf. Chapter 5)).

My gratitude goes to Dr Michael Hoelzl for his advice on questions of theology and to Irene Huhulea and Anne Stähr for their attention to detail, both English and German. And to Iain Bailey for his support in matters not only of language.

## Preface

Hitler's theology is intellectually crude, its racism is abominable and its God is a numinous monster. It harbours no mercy, no charity and thus also no peace.<sup>1</sup> But it became – and truly all theology aims to be this – practical. This is not the only, but it is the irrefutable, reason to study it.

For the 'break with civilization' [*Zivilisationsbruch*]<sup>2</sup> signified by Hitler's National Socialist project affected everyone and everything, occurred from the centre of German society and with strong and longstanding support from its elites, as well as broad parts of the population.<sup>3</sup> Hitler's God possessed a great power. It took the united armies of the Soviet Union, America, Great Britain and many others to break it. Incidentally, nobody could guarantee this: Hitler's God could also have triumphed through him.

It is unnecessary to disprove Hitler's theology: it did that itself. But it is necessary to study it. After all, as Ian Kershaw rightly asserts: 'Hitler's mark on the century has been deeper than that of' any other political leader.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of all justified questions of how this physically inconspicuous, petty-bourgeois foreigner, laden with complexes, formally uneducated and lacking in any real work experience or organizational talent succeeded in becoming the most powerful man of the German Reich, and temporarily of Europe, what social and cultural structures and sentiments sustained his ascent, how he anticipated, utilized and steered these, the fact remains: National Socialism was Hitler's project; he enforced it, and nobody even came close to Hitler's singular position of power.<sup>5</sup> After all, the entire country – with the exception of the brave men and women of the few resistance groups – followed him toward disaster.

This book is written by a Catholic theologian. I have studied Hitler academically because I wanted to know why he fascinated some 'progressive' theologians of the 1930s. What induced innovative theologians, who were sensitive to the present and later rightfully gained renown, to enthusiastically welcome Hitler? What problems weighed on them that made them see a fascinating solution in Hitler's social project of all things? What religious structures and what theological discourses, I asked, did this social project offer that made it so attractive to them?

I did not want to content myself with the allusion, which is indisputably correct, to the political naïveté even of great theologians. For in opting for

Hitler these theologians were evidently concerned with the ‘vitality’ of their Catholic Church and its ability to engage with and remain relevant in the present; with the question of how Church can continue to exist in the condition of modernity that has become vexingly plural. This did not seem self-evident to them and Hitler’s project, of all things, seemed to make it possible again.

The dynamic of modernization and the intense access to personal engagement fascinated not only his own followers. For it was exactly this, dynamism and the intensity of personnel, that the Church lacked – at least precisely in the eyes of some of the more innovative theologians. In any case, Hitler’s offer was more attractive for his contemporaries than it might seem in hindsight and with the knowledge of his monstrous crimes. Hitler appeared to enable modernization without pluralization, and thus without the relativization of his own claims to validity, as well as without the liberal emancipation of the subject.

I owe my personal interest to the Catholic Youth Association of my hometown of Bayreuth. In 1973 the Catholic Youth Association managed to organize a trip to Poland, still part of the Communist regime at that time, which I was happy to join. We visited Breslau, Krakow, Częstochowa – and also the Auschwitz concentration camp memorial. I realized there that the ground of civilization is thin under our feet and that it is threatened from the centre and not from the margins of society, and I have not forgotten it since.

This book is based on research that I undertook a while ago and presented to the research community in the context of my Habilitation in pastoral theology, *Kirchenbildung in der Moderne. Konstitutionsprinzipien der deutschen katholischen Kirche*.<sup>6</sup> The results have been updated and are herewith presented to a broader audience with an interest in history.

I thank Ottmar Fuchs, Maximilian Liebmann, Lucia Scherzberg, Norbert Reck, Katharina von Kellenbach and Claus-Eckehard Bärsch for stimulating exchanges of ideas across disciplinary borders.

I am grateful to Michael Hoelzl for taking the initiative to translate this book into English, to supervise the translation which has been carefully carried out by Rebecca Pohl. I also want to express my sincere gratitude to Continuum and to Kirsty Shaper in particular, for their assistance and extraordinary support to make this project happen. I also want to take this opportunity to mention that Michael Hoelzl’s preface lucidly illuminates from the religio-political standpoint what I intended to achieve with the present theological study.

I dedicate this book to Ernst Ludwig Grasmück on his 75th birthday in grateful memory of my years studying Church history with him.

Rainer Bucher  
Graz, January 2011

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> However, this does not mean that it is a 'religion of war' [*Kriegsreligion*], as Schirrmacher argues in *Hitlers Kriegsreligion*. The war is certainly the inevitable consequence of the implementation of this theology, but it is not its aim: its aim is the 'idyll' of the Aryan/German *Volkgemeinschaft*. Schirrmacher's study, which was published shortly after the manuscript for the present book was finalized, deserves an extensive critical appraisal.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf.: Diner, *Zivilisationsbruch*. 'Break with civilization' here signifies the devastation of all confidence in the ability of civilization to exercise even minimal control over the State's actions and the fact, for instance, 'that the unfounded extermination of humans has become possible and actual.' (31)
- <sup>3</sup> Cf.: Falter, *Hitlers Wähler*; Kershaw, *Hitler I*, xxixf.
- <sup>4</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler I*, xix.
- <sup>5</sup> This does not mean that the major ideas of Hitler's 'Weltanschauung' were in any way original, let alone devised by Hitler himself. But he assembled them in this combination and above all: it was he who empowered them.
- <sup>6</sup> Bucher, *Kirchenbildung*.

# Introduction: The Study of the Phenomenon of Adolf Hitler in Theology

Michael Hoelzl

## Enduring fascination with Adolf Hitler

The most shocking scene in Bernd Eichinger's film *The Downfall*, based on the reconstruction of the last days of the *Third Reich* in the *Führerbunker* by Joachim Fest<sup>1</sup>, is Magda Goebbels' proof of unconditional loyalty to Adolf Hitler, the *Führer*. Magda Goebbels is writing a farewell letter to her first born son Harald Quandt, who was at that time a prisoner of war, to explain her decision to take her six children with her:

'My beloved son! We are already in the *Führerbunker* since six days, Dad, your six siblings and I, to end our National Socialist life in a dignified and final way.[ . . . ] You should know that I have decided to stay against the will of your father and that even last Sunday the *Führer* wanted to help me to escape.[ . . . ] Our great idea comes to an end and with it all of the beautiful and admirable I have ever known in my life. *The world which will come after the Führer and National Socialism is no longer worth living in and therefore I decided to take the children with me, because they are too valuable for the life after us*; and a merciful God will understand my decision to give them personally their redemption. [ . . . ] Remain loyal! Loyal to yourself, to people and loyal to your country [ . . . ].'<sup>2</sup>

On 1 May 1945, a day after Hitler's suicide, Magda Goebbels anesthetized her six infant children and poisoned them with hydrocyanic acid. How can we understand such an incomprehensible deed? How is it possible that Magda Goebbels declined all proposals, refuses all pleas, even from the *Führer*, to save her children. A life, as she is convinced, after the *Führer* was not worth living. Magda Goebbels' decision shows all essential characteristics of religious fanaticism.

First, her decision is an existential one. It is a decision on life or death. Secondly, the option for death is based on unconditional loyalty based on the belief not in 'the' *Führer*, but in 'Mein' *Führer*. Any other decision appears to be a betrayal of the ultimate goal and therefore, in a negative way, by her action the supreme good is confirmed. Thirdly, the decision is absolute in the sense that everything, not just individual lives, depends on it. Fourthly, the situation is condensed to its uttermost intensity. It is a unique singularity in a person's life and cannot be repeated, like a religious conversion. Finally, the step taken reveals the belief in a transcendent reality. The world as it is

cannot be everything. There is a hope for a better future in ‘another’ reality of whatever kind.

How was this ‘quasi- religious fanaticism’ possible to emerge? In other words, how can we explain the fascination with Adolf Hitler that mobilized so many people who were prepared to follow at any costs? It seems that Max Weber’s analytical category of the ‘charismatic leader’ is not going far enough to explain the fascination with Adolf Hitler or to understand the phenomenon of Hitler. Weber’s famous definition of charismatic leadership is based on the Pauline concept of charisma as a gift from God vested in a single person: “Charisma” should be called an extraordinary quality of a personality on the basis of which this person is seen to be endowed with supernatural or superhuman, or, at least with specifically extraordinary powers or qualities that are not accessible to everyone; or this person is seen as sent from God or being exemplary and therefore is accepted as “leader” [*Führer*].<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, Hitler was seen as a charismatic person<sup>4</sup> and Joseph Goebbels’ diary<sup>5</sup> clearly reveals his unwavering belief in the *Führer’s* extraordinary powers and abilities until the end. Nevertheless, the concept of the charismatic leader does not explain why the fascination with Hitler, the belief of so many in his extraordinary qualities, endured even when the downfall was obvious. According to Weber, the authority of the leader is likely to disappear with the leader’s failure. ‘If the success remains absent permanently, if the charismatically gifted is abandoned by his God or loses his magical and heroic powers, moreover; *if his leadership does not create welfare for the governed*, then his charismatic authority is likely to disappear.’<sup>6</sup> This was clearly not the case with Adolf Hitler. The concept of the charismatic leader is also inappropriate in an analytical sense, in attempting to explain the fact that there is still a fascination with the phenomenon Hitler today and as an ideal-typical concept it is not precise enough to examine the people’s concrete demands that National Socialism and its leader promised to satisfy. Maybe, that is the reason why Rainer Bucher in this present study does not refer to it.

## Temptations as unfounded promises

*Hitler’s Theology* is written by a practical theologian. It is one of the few detailed studies on the phenomenon of Hitler from an explicit theological standpoint. Rainer Bucher pursues three directions of investigation. First, there is Hitler’s use of theological ideas and his own theo-political theory. Second, Bucher raises the question of what he offered the National Socialist movement that appealed to Catholic theologians so that they attempted to reconcile the National Socialist propaganda with their own desire for a renewal of the Church. Thirdly, how could ‘Hitler’ be understood in terms of an alternative to the critique of modernity, *Kulturpessimismus* and secularization in general?

All three dimensions of the argument presented here culminate in the question of the fascination with Hitler. In the final tenth chapter of the book, sec. 2: Bucher writes: ‘Temptations are unfounded promises, promises that can be made, but can never be kept. Temptations play with yearnings and draw their political strength and their personal fascination from these. The monstrous crimes of National Socialism cover over those elements within it that can develop a lasting attraction. But they play with yearnings and hopes that did not simply disappear with National Socialism.’<sup>7</sup>

Rather than Weber’s question of what makes a charismatic leader believable, Bucher asks: what are the false promises that deceived the people and how can we understand why these promises were and remain so convincing?

The first line of investigation provides a theological reading of Hitler’s recourse to theological concepts in his speeches. This is done, as mentioned above, from a practical theological perspective, simply because Hitler’s ‘theology’, even though it was not orthodox, in any dogmatic or academic sense of the word, became practical. And practical in this context means politically decisive. To a certain extent Hitler’s theology can be called ‘political theology’. In his treatise on political theology Carl Schmitt states his famous thesis: ‘All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.’<sup>8</sup> Political theology, therefore, implies a theory of secularization that links theological ideas with political concepts. In a similar way, Bucher quoting Kenneth Burke, points out: ‘the patterns of Hitler’s thought are a bastardized or caricatured version of religious thought’ and ‘Hitler appeals by relying upon a bastardization of fundamentally religious patterns of thought.’<sup>9</sup> Hitler’s political project gains power by drawing on religious ideas and reinterpreting them in his own theological way. Central to Hitler’s project are the idea of community (*völkische Gemeinschaft*) and providence (*Vorsehung*) as legitimation of his role as the chosen leader. Given these two key aspects of Christian theology, it would be more accurate to rephrase Schmitt’s thesis with respect to Hitler’s theology: All significant concepts of Hitler’s modern theory of the ‘state’ are secularized and bastardized ecclesiological concepts.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly true if we take Hitler’s theology of history into account, since no ecclesiology can exist with a theory and theological interpretation of history. This might explain why, for Magda Goebbels, Hitler’s death is at the same time the end of National Socialism as an historical epoch. The downfall of the Reich shows truly its apocalyptic dimensions.

The second line of Bucher’s investigation<sup>11</sup> concentrates on some well-regarded Catholic theologians’ (like Karl Adam, Joseph Lortz and Michael Schmaus) fascination with Hitler. Bucher summarizes this second line of investigation as follows: ‘This book is written by a Catholic theologian. I have studied Hitler academically because I wanted to know why he fascinated some “progressive” theologians of the 1930s. What induced innovative theologians, who were sensitive to the present and later rightfully gained renown, to



enthusiastically welcome Hitler? What problems weighed on them that made them see a fascinating solution in Hitler's social project of all things? What religious structures and what theological discourses, I asked, did this social project offer that made it so attractive to them?'<sup>12</sup> Some Catholic theologians went further than a policy of appeasement and attempted to elaborate a theology that is capable of reconciling Catholicism with Nazism. Bucher limits his analysis to the Catholic Church and Catholic theologians. In this respect research into the fascination with Hitler's programme from a Protestant, Anglican and even Non-Conformist theological standpoint is still needed – despite some excellent works published recently.<sup>13</sup> Such research from a theological perspective and not merely from a historical one would be even more promising given the different ecclesiologies these denominations have generated and how they responded differently to Hitler's appeal. In other words, it would be interesting to analyze comparatively the responses to Hitler's project, his promises and temptations with respect to different teachings of the nature and purpose of the church as God's people in this world as well as a spiritual community.

The third line of investigation into Hitler's theology reiterates the problem of how the fascination with Hitler can be explained or at least understood. Bucher offers a systematic attempt for explanation rather than an explanation on an individual basis. The central thesis Bucher advocates is that Hitler promised the benefits of modernity (technological progress, social equality, economic growth, betterment of social welfare and foremost unity) without the threats of modernity's demand for pluralism and social disintegration. The fascination with Hitler, as Bucher suggests, cannot be understood without recognizing his paradoxical promise to the people. He appears to the critics of modernity as a modernizer without accepting the shortcomings and discontents of modernity; he promises progress without loss and he gives back a vision or calling to a humiliated people. This was only possible, as Eric Hobsbawm has demonstrated convincingly, because the political tradition of Liberalism and the political trust in parliamentarism had already been eroded before Hitler's rise to power.<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm illustrates the paradoxical appeal to fascism: 'The novelty of fascism was that, once in power, it refused to play the old political games, and took over completely where it could [ . . . ] Fascist movements had the elements of revolutionary movements, inasmuch as they contained people who wanted a fundamental transformation of society, often with a notably anti-capitalist and anti-oligarchic edge. However, the horse of revolutionary fascism failed either to start or to run. Hitler rapidly eliminated those who took the "socialist" component in the name of National Socialist Worker's Party seriously – as certainly he did not. The utopia of a return to some kind of little man's Middle Ages, full of hereditary peasant-proprietors, artisan craftsmen like Hans Sachs and girls in blonde plaits, was not a programme that could be realized in major twentieth-century states (except in