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The Churches and National Socialism in the Thought of Eric Voegelin

An Assessment and Lessons for the Contemporary Debate

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Abstract

This work explores Eric Voegelin's assessment of the churches during the Nazi period. Focusing on Voegelin's ideas as expressed in lectures published under the title *Hitler and the Germans*, the work first details Voegelin's critique of the Catholic Church in Germany during the period of the National Socialists. The work then develops an interpretation of the actions of the Catholic Church that undermines the contention, advanced by Voegelin as by many later writers, that the Catholic Church in Germany acted only as a self-interested group unconcerned with common humanity. The piece also works to clarify the status of the important theological concept of the Mystical Body of Christ, and the role that concept played during the period the Nazis held power. The work argues against the idea that the Mystical Body was illegitimately construed by Church leaders in the 1930s and 1940s, as alleged by Voegelin and later scholars. The work concludes by developing lessons for the ongoing debate over the role of the Catholic Church in Nazi Germany that can be gleaned from the failure of Voegelin's critique.

Introduction

[1] 2011 marks the one hundred and tenth anniversary of the birth of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin. His first major piece, *The Political Religions*, was published in 1938, the same year Voegelin fled Nazi-occupied Austria for the United States. This and other major pieces, including the 1952 volume *The New Science of Politics*, have in the last several decades become widely referenced works in political theory. As one contemporary scholar

remarks, Voegelin's stature has grown remarkably, and he enjoys "an expanding circle of admirers in Europe and America" (Burleigh 2005: 5). A major factor in this increasing esteem has been the sense held by many that Voegelin supplies an impressive defense of transcendent moral values and offers an important philosophical account of the threats that beset these values in the history of Western thought.

[2] What Voegelin is not so widely known for, however, is his writings on the role of the Christian churches in Nazi Germany. In his work published as *Hitler and the Germans* Voegelin explores the Nazis and their relationship to German Evangelical leaders and the German Catholic hierarchy. *Hitler and the Germans* consists of a series of lectures delivered in 1964 to the Arts Faculty of the University of Munich following his return to Germany in 1958 to assume the distinguished chair of political philosophy previously occupied by Max Weber. The lectures were open to the public, widely attended, and intended for future publication. They were published finally in 1999. In these lectures Voegelin condemns strongly the barbarity of the Nazi party and forcefully criticizes the leaders of Germany's Catholic and Evangelical churches for not doing more to resist National Socialism, focusing primarily on the failures of the churches to speak out or act sufficiently boldly against Nazism in the pre-War period, but also including sharp criticisms of the churches during the course of the Second World War.

[3] Voegelin's work can be shown, however, at critical points to be unmeasured and unjustifiably bold and overheated. *Hitler and the Germans* is unmeasured in two important areas. Specifically, Voegelin maintains that the Catholic Church in Germany operated during the entirety of the Nazi period only as a narrow "interest group," acting only to preserve itself to the clear exclusion of other groups and individuals, a charge he levels through a biting critique and sharp denunciation that labels the Catholic hierarchy in Germany as men likened to "rabble" who descended to the very "depths of moral degeneration" (188, 121, 196). However, it can be shown that Voegelin fundamentally misunderstands the actions of the Catholic Church, and in particular its actions in the pre-World War II period. Voegelin's critique is more persuasive when he extends it to include the time during the Second World War. Yet even here he shows little attention to the admittedly small measures taken by the Church to confront directly the Nazi evil during the War, nor does he moderate his critique in light of the special burdens facing the German Catholic Church once war had commenced. Hence, Voegelin's charge that from the 1930s through the end of the War the Church was simply a self-consumed, narrow special interest group, is overstated.

[4] Secondly, the German Catholic hierarchy, Voegelin alleges, corrupted the understanding of an important and purportedly clear principle of the Catholic faith – the idea of the Mystical Body of Christ as a spiritual union of all individuals – due to its exposure and special susceptibility to Nazi ideas resulting from its own miserable decadence and rottenness. This perversion by the German hierarchy of a clear Catholic teaching, Voegelin further alleges, influenced the Church's passivity toward the murder of European Jewry. This bold assertion, however, is also simply overstated: the German Church can be shown not to have changed an unambiguous Catholic teaching as a result of a special susceptibility to Nazi ideology.

[5] Providing a criticism of Voegelin's arguments has important implications for scholars of the Nazi period for at least three reasons. First, the corrections that can be made to Voegelin's assessments are relevant due to the fact that the first of his two charges, that the German Catholic Church acted as a narrow special interest group unconcerned with those outside the Catholic fold, continues to be leveled, yet this assertion has not been addressed as fully as it should be, in part because most defenses of the Catholic Church have focused on the papacy and not on the German ecclesiastical leadership (Rychlak 2005).¹ Additionally, the second charge advanced by Voegelin, that the German hierarchy perverted a clear principle long affirmed by the Church, namely the Mystical Body as a universal collection of souls, which in turn contributed to its passivity, has also become a major charge in more recent criticisms. What is more, this accusation is especially important since if true it would indicate not merely personal failings on the part of individual churchmen, but would impugn the very presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church as a protector of its deposit of doctrinal truth. This important charge against the Church, however, has also not been refuted as fully as it should be. By showing that Voegelin is mistaken in his accusations, therefore, we can move forward in important ways the ongoing debate over the relationship between Nazism and the Catholic Church.

[6] The second reason why demonstrating the errors of Voegelin's arguments is important is because Voegelin advances in this work an intriguing assertion in the philosophy of language. Voegelin argues as part of his critique of the Church that unmeasured prose bespeaks the presence of shoddy thinking, jejune analysis, and an enfeebled moral conscience, a claim that he develops by highlighting how observers of Nazism should have seen its intellectual weakness and moral malignancy even at those times in the pre-War period when the Party sought deliberately to downplay its rabid substantive ideology:² the Party's heated mode of rhetoric betrayed something important about the substance of the movement. This sub-thesis about language is intriguing and deserves careful examination. However, the claim is open to the critique that Voegelin's own work supplies grounds for questioning the strength of the connection between moral and analytical soundness and measured expression. For if one were to see Voegelin himself as a man of experienced, erudite, and sophisticated judgment, and as a scholar adhering to a commendable set of moral values, then the heated and exaggerated claims he himself advances in this work would show that in light of moral tragedy language can often become *morally innocuously* overblown and heated.

[7] A third reason why Voegelin's critique of the Church is relevant is because Voegelin indeed is seen by a large number of scholars today as a representative of sound moral reasoning and erudite and sophisticated analysis. Furthermore, many of the same scholars who hold Voegelin in this high esteem often level the sharpest criticisms of the opponents of the Church's actions during the Nazi period, asserting often that criticisms of the Church

¹ Ronald Rychlak's work *Righteous Gentiles* (2005) is one of the most thorough defenses of the German hierarchy, yet his defense amounts to less than half of one chapter (chap. 3). Compare this to the voluminous literature defending the actions of Pius XII.

² Claudia Koonz has shown how Nazi rhetoric often "downplay[ed] sectarian issues like race," which frequently "alienated [] ordinary citizens" (70).

are amateurish, superficial, and frequently motivated by untoward political agendas advanced under the color of historical critique. Hence for those who see Voegelin as representing sound moral conscience and erudite and informed judgment, that his own work is overblown indicates that even the best minds can become overheated when evaluating German history during the period of the Hitler regime. This recognition in turn is especially relevant to the current debate over the Church's role in the Nazi period as it could suggest the proper *way* to approach the debate over Catholicism and National Socialism. For if as sharp and morally well-grounded a mind as Voegelin can be prone to profound overstatement, this seems to indicate that there is something about the boldness of the horrors of the Holocaust that can lead to bold, even rash, accusations. This recognition should caution defenders of the actions of the Catholic Church from dwelling too much on the illicit motives of critics. To be sure, scholars defending the Church are entitled to respond to any errors and, when seen to be necessary, to question motives. Yet defenders should always be a bit more charitable in doing so, by providing a greater benefit of the doubt as to the degree to which illicit motives are at play, and they should do so simply by acknowledging how easily error might take hold in debates over such horrific subjects as Nazism and the Holocaust.

[8] To establish these conclusions I first address Voegelin's status as an important thinker among groups most critical of recent works condemning the Catholic Church, and in doing so I survey several of the most prominent critiques of the Church and the many counter-critiques questioning the capacities and moral motivations of the Church's critics. I endeavor to show that Voegelin supplies an important vantage point in the way his thought does not demonstrate the same weaknesses that many defenders of the Catholic Church see in the Church's critics, and hence that Voegelin represents a worthy opponent from the perspective of many contemporary Church defenders. Second, I provide an abbreviated summary of several of the principal contentions advanced in *Hitler and the Germans*, including Voegelin's assessment of the ideological underpinnings of Nazism, his sub-thesis in the philosophy of language concerning controlled prose and sound conscience, and his two major critiques of the Church's actions during the Nazi regime. I then, third, explore in depth the first of Voegelin's critiques – that the Church acted as a narrow special interest group – endeavoring to show that Voegelin's claim is markedly overheated and unmeasured, both in substance and in form. Fourth, I explore the second critique – that the German Church due to its internal rotteness corrupted a clear and morally important teaching of the Catholic faith, which in turn enfeebled its response to Nazism – endeavoring to establish the serious weakness of the charge. Lastly, I reflect briefly on the importance of this critique of Voegelin's work by situating the discussion in light of the ongoing criticisms of the Church and by reflecting on the implications that recognizing that someone such as Voegelin can be unrestrained in thought and expression has for the way to conduct the debate over the Church and the Nazi regime.

The Church Debates and Voegelin as a Worthy Opponent for Church Defenders

[9] Voegelin's writings in this area join a large and often fractious scholarly debate. Over the last four decades discussion has roiled concerning the actions of Christian leaders, and especially the Catholic hierarchy, during the period of the National Socialists. The last forty

years have seen numerous works exploring the action or purported inaction of Christian leaders, and a high percentage of these works are sharply critical of the churches and of the Catholic Church in particular. Since the debut in 1963 of Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter*, numerous works of condemnation have been published, including such pieces as John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope* (1999), and Daniel Goldhagen's *A Moral Reckoning* (2002). Moreover, critical assessments of the Catholic Church continue to be produced with great frequency: criticisms in the last few years include Michael Phayer's *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* (2007); Kevin Spicer's *Hitler's Priests* (2008); and Gerard Noel's *Pius XII: The Hound of Hitler* (2008).

[10] In response, a wide literature has developed defending the Catholic Church, and especially the papacy, against the criticisms. Michael Schwartz's *The Persistent Prejudice* (1984); Margherita Marchione's *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace* (2000); and David Dalin's *The Myth of Hitler's Pope* (2005), among others, defend the Church from the waves of attack. A great deal of this work has argued that criticisms of the Catholic Church are often shallow, superficially journalistic, and lack an informed sense of perspective. Ronald Rychlak among several others argues that works such as Goldhagen's are intellectually insubstantial – full, he asserts, of “disregard of facts,” and happily content with “blindly accepting” evidence that should be seen as questionable (2006: 178, 168). Hence the critiques, in the words of Edward Mark Ruff, are often “slapdash scholarship” (153), a point made more acute, it is often asserted, by the lack of first-hand knowledge of the time period by the Church's critics (Rychlak 2006: 168). Moreover, defenders have also claimed to unearth political and moral agendas that inform much of the attacks. Noted Catholic scholar Margherita Marcione defends the papacy, for example, by claiming that the true cause of the attacks on its role in the Nazi period must in large measure be the moral agenda of the critics and, specifically, their attempts to defend the moral perversions of the liberal 1960's (21-22). David Dalin argues that the root of the critique of the Church during the period of the Nazis is the desire to “smash” traditional moral teachings on issues such as contraception and the role of women (2, 8). The late distinguished philosopher Ralph McInerney is even more assertive: the attacks on the Catholic hierarchy during the 1930s and 1940s are “really not about the Church . . . or Pope Pius at all” (182). Rather, the criticisms constitute an all-out assault by the partisans of the “Culture of Death” in a war to remake modern society – a war meant to assault not only the traditional truths of the Catholic faith, but even “the very concept of ultimate truth”(i).³

[11] Voegelin's treatment of the Nationalist Socialists and the Christian churches can provide an important contribution to the debate over the Catholic Church and Nazism first of all because Voegelin speaks very critically of the Catholic leadership during the Nazi period, yet his contributions are unlike so much that has recently been produced, precisely in the sense that his work is not susceptible to the same level of critique as has been advanced by many of the defenders of the Church.

[12] First, Voegelin's criticism of Catholic leaders is important simply because his motives and values are unimpeachable in terms of a commitment to an objective order of moral truth

³ And as quoted in Rychlak (2002: 53; see also 2007). One could add to the charge the assertion of Catholic writer Eugene Fisher, who has gone so far as to claim that Goldhagen's work represents a “hate crime” (quoted in Rychlak 2002: 44).

understood as affirming traditional moral concepts: he has a strong dedication to traditional moral truth and, as part of this, an openness to the truths of traditional religious faith. As Michael Burleigh comments, for Voegelin, “when considering National Socialism . . . one must proceed on the assumption that there is evil in the world and, moreover, that evil is not only a deficient mode of being, but also a real substance and force effective in the world. Resistance against a satanical substance that is not only morally but also religiously evil can only be derived from an equally strong, religiously grounded force” (quoted in Burleigh 2005: 5). A scholar holding such a viewpoint cannot fairly be accused of plying an untoward political agenda, at least not from the perspective of those most sharply denunciatory of the criticisms of the Catholic Church.

[13] Second, Voegelin’s firm defense of timeless moral values and his openness to religious truth have served to endear him to many conservative commentators, including many commentators most likely to condemn the criticisms of the Catholic Church. Voegelin as we have noted is seen often as a resolute critic of relativism and a defender of the classical Western understanding of moral truth; in turn he has enjoyed great support among scholars of a generally conservative orientation.⁴ As one recent biographer, Michael Federici, observes, “conservatives are among Voegelin’s greatest admirers” (78).

[14] Moreover, as liberal and conservative scholars alike must readily acknowledge, Voegelin’s writings are marked by unusual philosophical acuity, and his work is informed by a sharp mind profoundly learned and not given to commercial pursuits or superficial and journalistic overviews of important issues. Additionally, all can acknowledge that Voegelin speaks with heightened credibility due to his personal experience with and courageous opposition to the Hitler regime.⁵ His personal resistance to the Nazis caused him to flee Austria, leaving behind his prestigious position in the law department in the University of Vienna. He was not an outsider or a distant observer. His experienced judgment therefore can readily inspire confidence, and can do so especially for those quite skeptical of the uninformed perspectives of many of the recent critics of the Catholic Church.

[15] For these reasons, Voegelin represents for many in this debate what, in the spirit of Nietzsche, might be called “the worthy opponent.” As Nietzsche maintained, the one most to be taken seriously is precisely the foe perceived as one’s equal in battle (Cox: 113). Voegelin’s criticisms therefore can provide a valuable lens on the National Socialists and their relationship to Catholic Church leaders.

Overview of Voegelin’s Assessment of Nazism and the German Catholic Church

[16] Voegelin sharply denounces the National Socialists. First, he establishes a philosophical baseline. There exists truth about humanity and the moral life. Man is bound by moral restraints and constituted by a union of matter and spirit destined to an eternal estate following death. This recognition comes first through an intensely personal experience of the transcendent order. This experience will most often occur only after one has had an

⁴ Indeed, as Yotam Hotam remarks, for many “Voegelin [is] considered [a] founding father . . . of American neo-conservatism” (2007).

⁵ As early as 1933, Voegelin had published two short books condemning the Nazi understanding of race.

extensive cultivation of one's mind and spirit, and this is best secured for modern individuals through a classical education, an education that should include the study of great works of Greek, Medieval, and Enlightenment thinkers. Second, Hitler and most of the Nazis who followed him were the type of men who rejected the possibility of an order of truth beyond the world. They instead imbibed the crude reductionisms of the time, and so were materialists who did not appreciate even the concept of an order of higher reality. The Nazis were without a moral code derived from a transcendent focal point, and hence there was "nothing to inhibit them" (Burleigh 2007: 120). As such, they acted through sheer perversity of libido in a rage to remake the world to suit their passions.⁶

[17] Moreover, as part of the philosophical rigor with which Voegelin addresses Nazism, he advances an additional and distinctive sub-thesis concerning the moral decline and monstrosity of the Nazi period. Voegelin maintains that communicative precision and expository clarity, and specifically moderate and controlled prose and oratory, are deeply important aspects and indicators of an authentically human life and thus a morally cultivated soul. Hence, one insight into the presence of noxious beliefs in Nazism can be gained by assessing the writing and oratory of individual Nazis and those closely associated with the Hitler regime. The writings and speeches of Nazis – even when disguising their substantive malevolence – were, Voegelin notes, often so terribly bold, so unmeasured, so imprecise; so often replete with excessive adverbs, adjectives, and misplaced and ill-conceived metaphors; so often free of concern for controlled expression. Hitler and the Nazi leadership, Voegelin asserts, used "persuasive adjectives" in a decadent way (141), and were prone to "grammatical mistakes" and overheated rhetoric that Voegelin is at pains to emphasize (93). Schramm, a high ranking official in Hitler's circle, for example, spoke with "adverbs and adjectives!" (137). He and others in the Party had "stylistic incomprehension" (110); and he and his fellow Nazis used "mixed metaphors" and had "not one decent sentence" – their works being so lacking in precise and measured prose (113). Here in a miasma of expository heatedness and unclarity is a window on the poisonous soul of Nazism.

[18] This is so first because if writing is unclear or grammatically poorly crafted, it indicates a lack of classical refinement on the part of the author. One with a classical education, one who has taken the time to learn the great works of the West, will deeply cherish clear and measured expression. And so since a lack of clarity indicates a lack of classical education, and since classical education also contains wisdom about the reality of a genuinely transcendent order of being, a lack of clarity will betray a decadent tendency in the soul, since it demonstrates the occlusion of the distinction between the present world and the transcendent realm. Additionally, if writing is full of excess, that itself Voegelin thinks indicates a deeper excess of mind; for excessive, heated, and condemnatory writing, by being a form of agency by which an author's voice and power are made central, often itself bespeaks a rage to find through personal agency a form of release from the present structure of the world. For excessive speech, Voegelin argues, often issues from a deep need to vocalize as much as one can one's condemnation of the current state of the world and its lack of a proper order. But again, such an expression of contempt for the current state of the world is made by a person who is asserting his own power: the writer whose voice is

⁶ As such, the Nazis became paradigmatic exemplars of what Voegelin calls the "Gnostic" mindset.

excessive and uncontrolled can be suspected of believing that he can change or even perfect the present world by swaying it through his power to deploy language. Indeed, since written and spoken communication are capable of being shared by communities in the present world, implicit in excessive prose is a sense that the world of the here and now can be changed into a better here and now in the future; that the reconstituted world of the future is readily *commensurable* with the present world, only made perfect by human power. A lack of a belief in transcendence therefore is an implicit commitment of the person who deploys words as decisive weapons. The one who knows and appreciates genuine transcendence, on the other hand, knows that there must be *incommensurabilities* between the transcendent realm and the earthly world, and so does not try to reshape reality by a battery of caustic words. For the appreciation of transcendental reality can never be fully shared with others by means of language in the present condition of man (although the learned person will try through calm philosophical language to reconstruct at least part of the experience of truth). Hence, measured prose, a recognition of transcendence, and a restraint on libido are intimately interconnected.

[19] Voegelin next provides a sharp and often bitingly caustic critique of both the Evangelical and Catholic churches in Germany. In his section on the German Catholic Church he claims that the Church in Germany, due to its internal decadence, including its lack of classical learning, became culpable of failing to act decisively against the Nazis, for which it deserves a scathing censure. This failure took two forms, Voegelin asserts, which I address in turn.

The German Catholic Church as a Narrow Interest Group from the Start of the Regime to the End of the War, and the Weakness of the Charge

[20] Voegelin first levels against the German Church the significant charge that it failed to endeavor to assist common humanity as a result in large measure of its deliberate choosing to protect only its own institutions clearly *over and against* the Jews and other non-Catholic groups. It acted in other words to protect only itself without regard for others. Due to alleged decadence and a lack of classical training among the German hierarchy, Voegelin bitingly asserts that Catholic leaders “became angry” only when the Nazis’ actions began to “affect . . . their affairs” (188). By this he means, the Church acted only when it came to “the immediate interests of the church as an organization”(188). The Church protested the activities of the regime but only to defend itself as an institutional “interest group” concerned with its own organizations (188). As such, helping others just because they were human became “completely insignificant in comparison to . . . maintaining [the] interest group” (188). The Church chose its own institutional security *clearly over and against* Jews and members of others groups.

[21] It is important to appreciate that for Voegelin the most critical time to be analyzed is the time before the War. In the first section of *Hitler and the Germans* Voegelin defines the problem his work is primarily designed to assess: “the central experiential problem of our time . . . is Hitler’s rise to power” (52). In the second chapter he repeats that “our problem is the spiritual condition of a society in which the National Socialists could come into

[absolute] power” (77).⁷ He is concerned primarily with Church inaction in the 1930s. However in the sections where he develops in detail his critique of the churches, Voegelin occasionally broadens his assessment, including examples of inaction by Church leaders from the time after the War commenced – inaction that he criticizes with the same level of acidity (171-73, 196-99). The time frame of Voegelin’s argument, therefore, is from 1933 to the end of the War, with a primary but not exclusive focus on the period before the commencement of the fighting. Given this, it is helpful to disaggregate his claim into two different time periods.

The Catholic Church in Germany before the War

[22] Voegelin’s claim that before the War the Church was only a self-consumed interest group can be shown to be misleading and actually deeply overstated. The record indicates that in the pre-War period the German Church thought that by protecting its institutions it would be in the long run protecting from egregious mistreatment *everyone in Germany*. There is no such radical distinction between the Church’s sense of preserving its institutions in the pre-War period and its understanding of itself as providing a service to *all in the country*.

[23] To see this we need to establish five points. They can be stated as follows: First, by “institutions” we can mean what we might call the formal institutions of a church – personnel, buildings, etc. – and also what we can call a church’s substantive institutions – its religious and moral teachings. Second, the German Catholic Church’s substantive institutions included moral teachings that extended protection to all humanity, and so were antipodal to Nazi assertions of value, and the German Catholic Church remained committed to these moral teachings throughout the Nazi period. Third, the German Catholic Church saw its formal institutions related to its substantive institutions in this way: The Church thought of the strength and autonomy of the former as in part conduits for and protectors of its substantive teachings; focus on its formal institutions was in part a way to keep alive and viable the substantive teachings in the life of its members, however nominal their attachment to the Church may have become. And indeed the Church was not only trying, through the preservation of its institutions, to keep its moral teachings from dying the death of social irrelevance, it was also actively trying to *deepen* and *sharpen* the commitment of its members to these moral precepts so that they would be teachings *assertively* upheld by Catholics. Fourth, through its formal institutions the Church was not only *defensively* protecting itself, its number of members, and the moral compass of its members, it was also energetically attempting to missionize Germany through *offensive* action *to expand* the number of people who accepted Catholicism or at least Catholic values (values again antipodal to Nazi values) – a point not sufficiently highlighted in the contemporary literature. Fifth, the legal basis enabling the Church’s defensive and offensive actions against Nazism – the legal treaty or Concordat with Hitler – has often not adequately been seen as itself a kind of offensive weapon against Nazism. For through the Concordat the Church deliberately acted with the hope of infusing the operations of the Nazi state with some measure of the reasoned restraint that the Catholic understanding of the rule of law demanded, an objective

⁷ Hence in chap. 5, where he develops his charge against the Church, he addresses the time of the War in only several sharp paragraphs, but the pre-War period in over 7 pages.

that the Church hoped would provide benefits to all subject to Nazi rule. In all, therefore, the German Catholic Church, by defending its “institutions” before the War cannot fairly be charged with acting as a self-consumed special interest group unconcerned with common humanity. Voegelin here is simply excessive. I shall explore each of these five points in greater depth below.

[24] The formal institutions of the Catholic Church of course include church buildings, Catholic priests, and Catholic bishops. But the Church’s formal institutions in the Germany of the 1930s included much more than that. They included (for a time) political associations like the Center Party; social organizations, such as “Catholic Action” (about which more later); Catholic trade unions; Church-sponsored musical and theatrical troupes; Church-sponsored marriage guidance offices; Catholic charitable organizations such as *Caritas*; and Catholic publications of a wide variety. In addition they included also Catholic youth groups. There were many forms of Catholic youth association in Germany including clubs such as *Jungmannerverband*. These associations provided activities for young men and women before they entered high school and during their high school years. Also important were an array of vocational training clubs. Lastly, we must consider Germany’s system of schooling. Here we should note that the German educational system at the time of the Nazi seizure of power afforded the Catholic Church a considerable role. First, the system before the Nazi takeover allowed “free election” of private religious education at the primary, elementary, and secondary levels, that is, it allowed parents to send their children to parochial schools paid for almost entirely by state resources. Second, there were schools run directly by and funded through the state that nonetheless offered periods of religious instruction by Catholic faculty for Catholic schoolchildren, and the same for Protestant students. Finally, the Church maintained a large number of theological faculties at state-supported public universities.

[25] We should note that such organizations, as substantial as they may be, do not alone define a church’s institutions. In addition to the formal understanding of a church’s institutions, we can understand church institutions also to mean the substantive teachings of a church. The substantive teachings of the Catholic Church in Germany included moral principles that required restraints on behavior. These principles demanded restraints *by* all people *in regard to* all people. Throughout the Nazi period the Church remained firm as to both the inviolability of these principles and the scope and applicability of them; in other words, the Church consistently upheld moral principles that formed restraints that, if adhered to, would afford protection from serious sin to all individuals whom the adherent would come in contact with.

[26] The sources of authoritative Catholic teaching on morality were (and are) at least the following: the divine unwritten law, or natural law; divine positive law as set forth in revelation; and the traditional teachings of the Church as found in its magisterium. The German hierarchy did not waver during the Nazi period in its adherence to these sources as ones establishing authoritative guides and controls on behavior. Focusing as we are here on the pre-War period, in his Lenten pastoral address of 1933, for example, von Faulhaber, archbishop of Munich, proclaimed that “the state must never legislate in opposition to natural law” (Gallin: 207). Further, in a pastoral letter of June 1934 the German Bishops jointly stated: “You have heard and read that one can make an oath of unconditional loyalty. We, your bishops, observe: the oath is a solemn invocation of God, and so it can never

oblige anyone to perform an action which would go against a commandment of God” (Scholder: 185). The hierarchy also insistently maintained that moral principles derived from Church tradition remain inviolable.

[27] Moreover, these authoritative sources the Church doggedly remained committed to were indeed understood as setting forth principles which afford protection to all people from acts of egregious sin. A few examples from the pre-War period from each authoritative source will suffice. As to the natural law, in 1932 and again in 1934 and 1935 the German bishops in joint letters stated that no race could be seen as not covered by the natural law principles that demand that innocents not be murdered, robbed, or denied the fundamental rights of man. The bishops condemned Nazism for its narrowing of the applicability of the natural law on the basis of race (Rychlak 2005: 46). Bishop von Galen reiterated this point in his episcopal letter of 1934 and many times thereafter (Rychlak 2005: 46).

[28] As to the Ten Commandments, the same 1932 decree on the natural law states also that the Ten Commandments cannot be narrowed on the basis of race. Moreover in the strongly worded 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, which was drafted with the assistance of several German bishops, it is stated: “God, th[e] sovereign master, has issued commandments whose value is independent of time and space, country and race.” As to Church tradition, in a joint pastoral letter of August 1935 the bishops state: “The Church’s love as found in her teachings is to be visible to the life of all the people” (Helmreich: 276). Moreover, in *Mit brennender Sorge* it is stated clearly: “The Church’s moral teachings are there for all Germans.” And as part of its commitment to established Church teaching, the German hierarchy remained committed to the long tradition of papal decrees defending Jews, a tradition set forth at least as early as Pope Gregory I in 590 and reiterated by Pope Calixtus II in his bull *Sicut Judaeis* of 1120, which, among much else, “forbids Christians to vilify the Jews,” and which was reaffirmed throughout the history of the Church for centuries (Dalin: 19). There was no change in Germany concerning this ancient traditional teaching. Indeed, the Vatican issued a statement that was widely circulated in Germany in 1928 that stated: “the Church condemns to the maximum extent hatred of the people once chosen by God, the hatred that commonly goes by anti-Semitism” (Rychlak 2000: 67). This traditional teaching remained in force and was upheld by the episcopal leadership after the Nazi seizure of power. As the German bishops stated jointly in 1933 after the conclusion of the Concordat, there is now “no renunciation of the condemnation of moral errors voiced in earlier measures by the universal Church” (Matheson: 9-10). Hence in 1935 the Vatican denounced the Nuremberg laws as an act of vilification of Jews; and through this and other measures, as Ronald Rychlak concludes, the German Church “took a leading role in opposing [Nazi] racial laws” (2000: 78).

[29] It is very important to see that the Church saw the relationship between its formal institutions and its substantive institutions, marked as they were by firm teachings that applied restraints on behavior to all and so sought to protect all from egregious harm, in this way: The Church’s formal organizations were seen to allow its moral doctrines and teachings to remain influential in German society through the lives of Church members. Formal institutions were a vehicle for the distribution to the Catholic faithful of Church doctrines, and for their penetration into their life and thought. And since 35% of the German population was Catholic (Knox: 40), that would mean a great many could in principle be

swayed to avoid egregious sin, and so, thereby, many others would be protected from acts of egregious sin being perpetrated against them. Catholic teachings, the Church held, if kept pure and vital, would preserve others from egregious harm perpetrated by those within the Catholic orbit. This goal was sought in several ways. I shall focus on the efforts of the Church to empower morally Catholics through schooling, the liturgy of the mass, reinvigorated pastoral care, and massive Church ceremonial processions.

[30] As has been noted by several scholars, education of the youth of Germany was a critical theater in this campaign of moral reinforcement for Catholics. We can appreciate how formal institutions were instruments for substantive teachings by reference to the depth of the struggle over German education. Throughout the Nazi period the Church was very concerned to keep its schools intact. That was in fact a driving concern for the Church. Fully to understand this concern we should notice how the Church in the pre-War period thought of itself as facing a *long term* cultural battle with Nazi ideology.⁸ Hence, “the most crucial of the areas of confrontation between the Nazis and the Church was that occupied by the rising generation. On the question of religious education in the schools the two sides were fundamentally opposed, for here would be formed the ideal and conscience on which the . . . future rested” (Walker: 41). Under sustained Nazi rule, would the Church’s doctrines remain observed, would they remain salient features of German culture through the lives of future generations of well-raised Catholics?

[31] Additionally, other measures designed to defend commitment to Catholic values by those within the Catholic orbit were attempted, ones that have received less attention in the historical literature. As the German bishops stated in the Fulda conference decree of August 20, 1935, the Church sought to strengthen the moral fiber of Catholics against the “propaganda of the new paganism” (Gallin: 215). Bishop Preysing of Berlin clearly noted this view of the German hierarchy by stating that the Catholic mass must always be, in addition to its canonical function as the celebration of the Eucharist and sacrifice to God, a central tool of *moral* advocacy and personal *moral* empowerment, expressing the episcopal view of the centrality of moral empowerment by highlighting the morally empowering character of the liturgical life of the Church. Hence he stated squarely that it is “infinitely important” that religious services such as the mass endeavor to keep individuals free of moral error, and so protect others from egregious harm (Gurian: 245). The priest must stress how the mass, with its participation through the Eucharist in the life of Christ, both demands and enables moral behavior by communicants approximating that of Christ, a moral strength to resist the temptations of the fallen world. In addition, sermons must reiterate this point, with the moral power that comes from receiving Christ in the Eucharist underscored by homiletics stressing that one is to heed Paul’s command “not to be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2).

[32] Another way the Church sought to anneal the moral fiber of its members so to resist Nazi values has also been less reflected in the contemporary literature, namely the development of the so-called Spiritual Exercises Movement. As the Church by the mid-

⁸Hence Ian Kershaw argues that the Church saw itself at this time as locked in a “war of attrition” with Nazism (2001: 112).

1930s began to experience ever-mounting pressure from the state to “coordinate” its activities (that is, subject them to complete control by the regime), the Church in turn sought to resist Nazism in new ways, ways which historian Michael O’Sullivan argues were energetically embraced by the Church at all levels in Germany. One critical tool in this new approach to resisting the Nazi moral vision was *Exerzitiienbewegung*, or the movement to develop Spiritual Exercises to strengthen Catholic individuals’ faith in light of Nazi assaults on traditional Christianity. The Spiritual Exercises Movement was championed by the Church and became a “center of [a] new mobilization” by the Church to defend the faith of its members, and so *pro tanto* to reduce the appeal of Nazism’s merciless ideals (O’Sullivan: 252).

[33] The Spiritual Exercises movement was a concerted effort to strengthen Catholic faith in light of the pressures placed upon it by the Hitler regime. Inspired by the life and work of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the movement took three forms. First, considerable resources were invested to secure “first class facilities” in often idyllic locations to be used for spiritual development (O’Sullivan: 254). Parishes across Germany in the 1930s invested considerable resources in acquiring and maintaining new facilities for this purpose. The movement was meant to attract baptized Catholics who attended church but whose attendance had become checkered or episodic by offering compelling experiences in retreat facilities in lovely locations. At the retreats, priests adopted a new approach to the laity, an approach designed to “break down barriers between the teacher and pupil” (O’Sullivan: 253). Through a new emphasis on “dynamic energy” in religious training, the priests sought to make a powerful impact on the lives of the participants (O’Sullivan: 253). Importantly, these efforts were self-consciously designed so that they “blended opposition to Nazi policy” with heightened religious conviction, stressing that the latter – orthodox religious faith – involved in part a strengthened opposition to the Nazi value system (O’Sullivan: 253). As a second tactic, the Movement also developed what it called “home spiritual exercises,” often with a priest visiting a family’s residence for a few hours to assist in spiritual development. Thirdly, the movement developed the “very popular” *Einkehrtage*, or smaller spiritual workshops undertaken on Sundays following mass (O’Sullivan: 252). These workshops saw the Church deploy the same new and energetic tactics to bolster the faith of its own members, members who, due to lapsing church attendance, were becoming susceptible to Nazi propaganda.

[34] A further means by which the Church sought to protect its members from infection by Nazi values and so uphold values opposed to the merciless treatment of minorities was the mobilization of mass public rituals meant to serve as a counter-balance to the appeal of Nazism. The use by the German hierarchy of mass mobilization of Catholics in public rituals was an effort in part to demonstrate to those Catholics whose faith was fraying the strength of the Church. In effect, the Church attempted to show its strength to its wavering members in something of the same way that the National Socialists attempted to use mass rallies to convince susceptible Germans of the strength of its party. As Kosters has documented, in the 1930s the Church frequently sought to assert its strength against the state by religious processions (158-65). These processions often became enormous affairs demonstrating “Catholic solidarity” and strength (Burleigh 2007: 195). For example, the Great Procession of Munster in 1934, which took on the character at one and the same time of a protest against Alfred Rosenberg and a display of the Catholic Church’s power to excite and attract

people to its cause, was used by the Church as a sign to lukewarm Catholics of the appeal of the Church and so a call for them to reenter its pastoral life. In this one procession in Munster over 45,000 Catholics in the region rallied in procession behind relics and religious symbols dear to the region, and did so after a denunciation by the hierarchy of the thought of Rosenberg (O'Sullivan: 241). Similar mass rallies occurred during the Christ the King processions and other traditional days of solemnity across the country for a number of years before the War (O'Sullivan: 243, 239).

[35] Moreover the Church in what it perceived as a “war of attrition” with the Hitler regime was not wholly defensive; it was not wholly concerned with “circling its wagons.” Instead, the Church actively sought, in addition to the measures designed to defend and deepen its own adherents’ commitment to traditional values, to *expand* its influence beyond those already self-identified as Catholics: the Church did not just try to have Catholics remain or become good Catholics, it also sought to expand the number of people who were within its fold and to expand the reach of its ideals in the wider culture. As Daniel Horn recounts, “the Catholic response was not always in terms of self-defense”; the Church, he asserts, “[w]ould even go on the offensive” (577). Central in this respect must be the “offensive” activities to increase the Catholic fold and therewith to undermine the Hitler regime undertaken by the organization known as Catholic Action.

[36] The Catholic Church from the time of Pius XI began to place increasing importance on lay involvement in propagating the faith in society, and a principal tool was the lay movement, Catholic Action.⁹ The prominence of Catholic Action bespoke a “fundamental alteration in the nature of Catholic organizations” (Gellott: 573; see 571-89). It set forth an “ambitious apostolic mission” (Burleigh 2007: 161), seeking through “grass-roots human fellowship” (Burleigh 2007: 145) nothing less than “reestablishing the reign of Christ the King through lay action” (Delallo: 71). As was widely commented on at the time, Catholic Action came to be called in Church circles the “New Sword of Christendom.” The essence of the movement was to have lay groups echo scripture and “go forth to teach . . . what I have commanded” (Magner: 7). As James Magner recounts, Catholic Action viewed itself as energetically embracing a great commission to missionize society – that is, to *increase* the number of Catholics or, at a minimum, the number outside the fold who would listen respectfully to Church teachings (7; see also Hellpach: 263-64).

[37] The role of Catholic Action was significant in Germany during the Nazi period. Its special position in the Church’s response to Nazism can be seen firstly in the Concordat, which was predicated in part on the idea of having not political groups but Catholic Action combat the pagan elements in the Hitler regime. “The Concordat conformed with Pius XI’s belief that movements such as Catholic Action, with their campaigns . . . for the ‘rechristianization’ of modern society, advanced the cause better than confessional parties, with their inherent tendency to fragment along class lines over economic issues, and their pursuit of compromise and secular agendas” (Burleigh 2001: 720). Indeed, as Michael Burleigh has argued, the Catholic Centre Party in Germany had been “a classic party of

⁹ Pius XI made Catholic Action a major focal point through his pronouncements in the letter *non abbiamo bisogno*.

compromise, rather than one capable of setting forth a bold vision for the future” (2007: 35-36).¹⁰ The Concordat was born of a call for a very active, unbending thrust into society, a thrust to gain converts to the Church or at least her values, led by Catholic Action.¹¹

[38] Several bishops were especially supportive of Catholic Action in Nazi Germany. Bishop Kaller was one who supported it extensively and from the first days of the regime (Krieg: 45). Its prominence in German Catholicism grew in 1934 after it was given greater control over Catholic vocational schooling (Harrigan: 180). Despite persecution, its position was enhanced by decrees issued by the German episcopacy in the Fulda conference in 1936; and further, in 1937 its stature increased after primary and secondary Catholic schools became more thoroughly “coordinated.” By 1937 Catholic Action had become “the central strategy” of Catholic resistance to the Nazi regime (O’Sullivan: 252).

[39] Catholic Action groups were attempting to convert society to Catholic values and so represented a frontal assault on the vital core of Hitlerism and Nazi ideology. They sought the transformation of society in part through the conversion of adults, which the movement undertook through at least four means. First, in the pre-War period Catholic Action groups, in conjunction with the Caritas Association, mobilized opposition to the regime’s eugenics and pre-War euthanasia programs (Burleigh 1994: 255). These protests were principled oppositions, to be sure. They however were also self-conscious attempts to recruit new members to the Church, by presenting Catholicism as the protector of the weak in society. Hence the opposition to eugenics had a dual purpose, and was in part a strike at Hitlerism to win converts to the faith among non-Catholics and the un-churched, and so was a weapon to bring more people toward the Church and away from Nazism. Second, Catholic Action sought to influence public opinion through buying news outlets whenever possible. Catholic Action members took over a number of newspapers in the early 1930s. One example can be seen in how members of Catholic Action funded and edited a new magazine called *Der Gerade Weg*, which was sharply critical of the regime, deploying satire and biting deflations of Hitler (Burleigh 2007: 178). Third, Catholic Action groups made special missionary appeals to unchurched women. Catholic Action saw itself mounting a strong missionary appeal to unchurched women as can be seen in widely circulated Catholic Action statements, statements which seem to have resonated with many. A characteristic rallying cry of some Catholic Action groups can be seen in statements issued by local chapters such as this: “It is often said that a woman must be a mother in order to fulfill her true profession. We must reject such notions. A woman is as fully human if she chooses another lifestyle that leaves her free for other tasks and services. Therefore we reject the unrestricted application of the old saying ‘the woman’s place is in the home’”(Gellott: 586). Statements such as these were both sincerely held views, and nets with which to become fishers of men – and women – in a war to expand the Church and thus reduce the power of the Nazi Party. Fourthly, Catholic Action engaged in a wide variety of other missionary activities among unchurched adults.

¹⁰ The Party of course was disbanded under the Concordat.

¹¹ Although the term Catholic Action was not mentioned in the Concordat by name, as Lawrence Walker has demonstrated, it was clear that it was meant for protection under the Concordat (41).

[40] Moreover, Catholic Action worked to create assertive groups of youth for the purpose of evangelizing their fellow young people. It did so first through youth missions to convert unchurched children and young adults. As the Fulda Conference stated in 1936, emphasis was to be placed on forming youth missionary groups targeting peers (O’Sullivan: 252). Also, Catholic Action sought to create youth teams to undermine the anti-Christian concepts circulating throughout the Hitler Youth movement. One instance of this aggressive action can be seen in how the Church, from 1937 on, infiltrated the Hitler Youth in an concerted campaign, eventually in the form of what historian David Horn has termed “militant elite units,” eventually known as “combat groups” or *Kampfscharen*, whose task was to gain leadership positions in the Hitler Youth and in the schools, and, having infiltrated these positions, to attack Nazi ideology in order to propagate as best they could traditional Catholic and Christian values and to gain converts (577, 575).

[41] In exploring the Church’s actions during the pre-War period we need to attend also to the primary legal basis by which the Church sought to maintain and to expand its formal institutions: the Concordat. The Church sought to maintain its formal institutions by reference to law, but not merely through morally neutral positive law, which could be an expression merely of personal will, but rather, through a legal instrument that expressed the Catholic Church’s understanding of lawfulness. The Church saw the Concordat as itself a type of weapon in the battle to restrain Hitlerian totalitarianism by the way the legal instrument might be able to influence the operations of the Nazi state. The Concordat would set up a legal framework through which interaction between the Church and the state would proceed. The Concordat itself was seen by the Church not merely as a means for protecting and permitting expansion of the Church’s formal institutions but also as an attempt to infuse some measure of the Church’s understanding of legalism into the operations of the Hitlerian state. And being able to exercise some such influence on the Nazi state was seen as something that would benefit all in Germany.

[42] How was this so? The Church and Hitler were signing a legal document. The German state was thus a party to a legal arrangement with an institution that had, and would defend, a particular understanding of law. The Church’s understanding of the binding characteristic of law is that expressed by Thomas Aquinas. Law is an ordinance of reason, and not will, made and consistently applied by one who has care over the common good (Aquinas: I.IIq.90.4). The Church was hoping to infuse, through the repeated interactions between Church and state over the terms of the Concordat that the Church knew would arise from the Concordat itself, some measure of this traditional understanding of law into the machinery of the German state. By demanding adherence to the legal provisions of the Concordat, the Church hoped to be able, to some extent, to mitigate the idea of law as merely an expression of the will of the Fuhrer. The Concordat left many provisions in it vague and subject to on-going legal negotiations. The Church intended to have these on-going negotiations take place according to the classical understanding of the rule of law, which defined lawfulness as consistent adherence to reasoned protocols duly enacted after calm consideration for the advancement of the common good. The Church hoped thereby to create public precedents on the part of the regime for lawful interaction with organizations within the state. These precedents might prove progressively more difficult for the regime to eschew.

[43] The Concordat therefore served two purposes – first and foremost to protect and enable the expansion of the Church’s formal institutions (which as we have seen provides others protection from egregious sins perpetrated against them); but second, it was intended to influence the operations of the German state by promoting the general idea of law as based on reason, consistency, and attention to the common good. The chief architect of the Concordat, German nuncio Eugenio Pacelli, noted this dual nature of the Concordat in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, which he helped to draft. There the Vatican states that the Concordat has two distinct purposes: “to secure to Germany the Church’s beneficent mission” and “to render the German people a service essential for its peaceful development and prosperity,” that of disciplining the German state through repeated exposure to the Catholic understanding of law.¹²

[44] For the reasons developed above, the Church cannot in justice be accused of being narrowly self-regarding before the War. To be sure, the Church might have acted differently in the face of the Nazis in the pre-War period, but that is not the issue. The issue is whether it acted only as a narrow interest group, not whether it acted with perfect foresight or aptitude. And it simply does not capture the facts at all to say, and to say so boldly, that the Church was preserving itself *only* to preserve its own skin as one narrow self-consumed special interest group. As we have seen, the Church was trying to protect all people in Germany from suffering grave iniquities at the hands of the Party, by attacking the very appeal of the Nazi Party. Indeed, the work of two still rather under-appreciated German historians, Martin Broszat and Ulrich von Hehl, develops a similar interpretation along the lines I have set forth. They argue that the Church’s response was to secure *Resistenz*, in the sense of biological resistance to pathogens, fortifying individuals and the culture as a whole with an alternate set of moral prerogatives (Broszat: 698). The Church sought what von Hehl called “ideological immunization,” (41) an effort that Broszat states was aimed to “infuse potent religious values into society” so to build up resistance to the Nazi pestilence (quoted in Spicer 2004: 5).

[45] Indeed, a wider if is still somewhat limited number of historians have come to acknowledge that this self-defensive attempt by the Church to strengthen the moral fiber of its members afforded, in the words of historian Ian Kershaw, some real “immunity from Nazi ideological penetration” (2008: 172). Moreover, the Spiritual Exercises movement, Michael O’Sullivan has demonstrated, was able to fortify the faith of a good number of individual Catholics, with the Church commenting on the “gratifying number of exercise participants” in 1938 (O’Sullivan: 254). Several other historians have noted how the

¹² Moreover, in seeking to defend and expand its own institutions by means of a legal instrument whose purpose in part was to instantiate in German social life respect for law, the Church committed itself through its own self-protective measures to the protection of the Protestant churches. Indeed the Church recognized that its legally grounded defense of restraint on state power required, by the internal logic of the rule of law it sought to impress on the regime, that protection be applied also to Protestant organizations; the rule of law demanded no less. Hence in 1933 and most strenuously by 1935 the Church began defending sternly the maintenance of state support for, and the further growth of, Protestant organizations and especially Protestant schools (Gallin: 213). This presented a consistent opposition to the Nazi state on the basis of the rule of law, and served the goal of further advancing Christian principles throughout German society, for the benefit of all in Germany.

Movement represented a powerful yet subtle force for resistance that produced concrete results injurious to the Nazi regime. O'Sullivan finds that a high percentage of the participants in the Spiritual Exercises "remained loyal to their faith despite Nazi pressure" (255) – pressure, once again, to adhere to views which as we have seen were "irreconcilable" with the values of the Church (258). Moreover, the Nazis themselves saw the Spiritual Exercises Movement and other measures as a threat, producing, they claimed, nothing but "subversive Jesuits" intent on destroying the regime; indeed, they showed from the pre-War period on "great anxiety" about the Spiritual Exercises Movement and other efforts by the Church (O'Sullivan: 253, 258). In part due to the strength of these efforts, in the "deeply Catholic areas of the south of Germany and the Rhineland, the Church remained an almost insuperable obstacle" (Knox: 41). As to Catholic Action, Gestapo reports indicate the sweep of the movement. Internal Nazi reports indicate that they detected the strength of Catholic Action, with reports describing the "strengthened activity through the clergy" as a result of its work (O'Sullivan: 253). Indeed, by 1937 the regime's internal reports indicate grave concern about Catholic "infiltration and subversion" of German youth (Boberach 1960: 29; see also Boberach 1971).

The Church during the War

[46] Although Voegelin's central critique is not directed toward the Church for its actions during the Second World War, he does include sharp criticisms of the Church for its failure during the course of the War, when genocide was undertaken. In this respect it must be admitted that the Catholic Church continued to engage, to a large extent, in the same strategy of immunizing individuals from the Nazi ideological poison as it had done in the 1930s after the War and eventually the Holocaust commenced – and that such a strategy was woefully inadequate once the egregious and genocidal acts by the regime began to reach fruition. For when the regime began to pursue murderous crimes, a response that tried to limit the social purchase of Nazi ideology became gravely inadequate; a much more interventionist response to limit the commission of grave injustice was necessary. We know that this strategy of developing "immunity" was indeed still being deployed by the Church after the commencement of the Second World War and that the Church remained committed to these programs throughout the War. One example of this is the energy with which the Church pursued during the War such programs as the "Mission to Men," a program based on holding conferences "aimed to give spiritual sustenance to Catholics in order to keep them rooted and strong in their faith" (Coady: 34). This approach was endorsed by Pope Pius XII in a letter to Bishop Preysing in April of 1943. The pope asserted the centrality of the immunization strategy: "Catholics can't become alien to the law and love of Christ, and it pains us that progressively, perhaps almost unconsciously, by dint of habit and incessant propaganda, Nazi concepts may penetrate the minds of Catholics" (Friedlander: 139). The Church, to a large extent, was working to ensure that Catholics did not themselves become complicit in the acts of the Hitler regime. But this is to engage in some of the same kinds of activities the Church was pursuing before the War in the face of new circumstances marked by the commission of sins of unparalleled monstrosity. For this the Catholic Church deserves condemnation.

[47] Moreover, this condemnation remains appropriate even when we acknowledge that the Church hierarchy in Germany did do some things during the War to stop the genocidal crimes of the Nazi regime – and not merely to stop them from being committed by Catholics. The actions taken by the German Church during the War to intervene to arrest the commission of egregious injustice include occasionally very strong statements denouncing the actions of the government. As one example, Bishop von Galen made several defiant pastoral addresses, including his address of August 3, 1941, in which he stated that traditional teachings of the Catholic faith would remain unchanged in the face of “Gestapo terror” and its “murder of innocents” (McGovern).¹³ Moreover to underscore this point, in 1941 a joint official statement of the German bishops declared on the basis of the Ten Commandments that, “we German Bishops shall not cease to protest against the killing of innocent people” (Griech-Poelle: 95). And in 1942 the bishops of Berlin and western Germany in a joint pastoral letter stated on the basis of the natural law that “the ultimate principles of right are not conditioned by time . . . nor national character . . . the claim to such rights are not the prerogative of a single people . . .” (Rychlak 2005: 47). Additionally, in 1943 the German bishops issued the so-called Decalogue Letter maintaining that the Ten Commandments represent a universal code of moral truth that prohibits killing innocents. As the letter fiercely points out, “the extermination of human beings is wrong per se . . . [and] is particularly evil if it is carried out against . . . people of alien races” (Rychlak 2005: 49).¹⁴

[48] Further, certain members of the German hierarchy acted to undermine the commission of grave injustice by loosening episcopal oversight of the actions of parish priests and encouraging creative responses to the crimes of the regime at the parish level (see Spicer 2001). This unleashing of parish-level creativity was a change in the German Church. As David Blackbourn has documented, before the War the German Church was especially bureaucratic and centralized, an artifact of the earlier *Kulturkampf*, which the Catholic Church was able to withstand by “the reassertion of clerical discipline” and “a more efficient bureaucracy at the diocesan level . . . reaching down to the parish level” (298). Hence in Germany since the 1870’s parish priests were “subject to greater control” by their Ordinaries than elsewhere in Europe (Blackbourn: 302, 298). Yet during the early 1940s some bishops authorized priests to exercise a new level of independent judgment by enabling them to take actions they saw as most helpful to protect and assist the victims of the regime. This proved to be helpful in a number of cases, as it served to empower the courageous work of parish priests such as Fr. Bernhard Lichtenberg, who, with the support of his bishop, conspicuously prayed for the Jews in public services and ultimately demanded, in public, to be taken with them to the East (see Spicer 2004).

[49] However, it was certainly the case that not enough was done affirmatively to intervene to confront the Nazi evil. Voegelin’s thesis in *Hitler and the Germans*, nevertheless, remains seriously overstated. He bitingly claims, once again, that the verdict on the Church must be

¹³ This message was directed firstly toward the euthanasia program, but as Michael O’Connor notes, “the condemnation was in universal terms. It was directly applicable to the Jewish genocide” (117).

¹⁴ In addition, a number of German bishops made private statements to officials of the regime denouncing the persecution of Jews (Evans 2009: 550).

overwhelmingly negative, a verdict merited in part because of inattention to the interests of others from the earliest days of the regime. Yet as shown, the Church in pre-War Germany was not entirely self-consumed. Moreover to the idea that the German Church deserves almost nothing but condemnation for its actions during the War, his critique is also overheated. This is so because he does not acknowledge the especially difficult position in which the Church found itself after the conflict commenced. This changed environment made it difficult for the Church to act against the regime – both due to the repressive actions imposed on the Church and because of the Church’s fear of making the condition of the victims and potential victims worse.

[50] As Robert Gellately and several other historians have argued, after 1939 the Hitler regime was clearly focused on war and so sought as a precondition for war a complete control over German social life. Hence the Nazis “revolutionized the Revolution” (2001: 2). Richard Evans notes that from 1939 onwards, “the radicalism and ruthlessness of the regime grew” and “all traditional restraints were cast aside” (2005: 708). And so by 1939 the “thoroughness and ruthlessness of the Nazi attempts to re-mould Germany were virtually unparalleled elsewhere” in history (2005: 708; see also Kershaw 2001: 170). Under such “unprecedented ferocity” the state “perfected a system of church surveillance,” led by “an apparatus of church specialists” (Conway: 266, 287; see also Gellately 2001: 72).¹⁵ The regime unleashed a campaign of systematic surveillance “to infiltrate the churches’ systems at every level,” and to retaliate for the slightest measures (Coady: 27). This in turn led to a severely restricted scope of action for priests and Church leaders. Priests were monitored and unable to speak or print words of condemnation¹⁶ without grave threats of reprisal. As Conway and others have noted, as a result of this, priests were arrested for the smallest infractions: for praying for Jews (Wistrich: 193), for providing aid to orphaned Jewish children (Conway: 262), for mentioning that the war seemed like it might not lead to certain victory (Voegelin: 197), and for reading a report of a fallen air force officer who said the Church provided consolation for him in his hour of need (Conway: 288). Given this context, any condemnation of the Church has to be *proportional* to the scope of possible action.

[51] Furthermore, there is another sense in which the Church faced additional narrowing of its scope of action after the onset of the War: its scope of action was limited in part by its fear that its actions might make conditions worse for the very victims of the regime, especially the Jews. We know based on documentary evidence that this fear was part of the reason behind the Church’s frequent restraint. After the War started the Church hierarchy at certain points clearly stated in its internal communiqués that interventionist action on behalf of Jews would (it felt) likely not work and could even make matters worse; that anything seen as helping Jews could cause massive retaliation against them. Pope Pius XII’s letter to Bishop Preysing in June of 1943 speaks precisely to this point. “Events warrant restraint – despite the reasons for intervening,” the Pope asserted, “in order to avoid greater evils”

¹⁵ Such specialists were driven by men such as Martin Bormann, who Kurzman argues hated the Church even more than Jews (58), and sought, in the words of historian Uriel Tal, “genocidal” plans against the Church.

¹⁶ All publications of the Catholic Church were closed in June of 1941.

(Rychlak 2000: 264).¹⁷ Richard Evans underscores the importance of this fear of making conditions worse for the victims, noting that Church officials often thought that “a public stance against the killing . . . might simply speed them up” (2009: 552). To appreciate how the Church in Germany faced a situation in which its leaders had at least some reason for fearing in good faith that concerted action on behalf Jews could engender a backlash against Jews, we should attend to three points, which, when seen together, render more explicable the Church’s concern.

[52] First, as Gellately’s research has shown, the Nazi regime during the War established “the strictest possible parameters on behavior, so that there emerged in Germany an extreme example of what Michel Foucault calls a ‘surveillance’ or ‘panoptic’ society” (1990: 15). This emerged by the willing participation of a large number of German informants, as the Gestapo membership was always relatively small in number, and the system depended on “informal reinforcements of the terror system” by “amateur Gestapo” drawn from the general population (1990: 30). Moreover, the regime signaled to the population precisely that this system of amateur informants suffused society (1991: 129-58).

[53] Second, this wide network of informants not only inhibited the scope of possible resistance by ministers of the Church (see Gellately 1990), it also inhibited the Church for an additional reason. Most parish priests and bishops knew that the German psyche had come to be brutalized during the War, making many ordinary Germans prone to backlash, recrimination, and reprisal. In other words, it was not utterly unreasonable to think that many seemingly ordinary Germans under the brutalizing conditions of the War could come over time *to participate* in this wide circle of informants providing critical assistance to the murderous Nazi regime. That some Germans not predisposed to assist the regime could slip into collaboration with this wide circle of informants could be feared based on the brutalizing impact that the War had on a very large percentage of ordinary Germans. By “brutalizing impact” I mean what Kershaw refers to as “the undoubted weakening that the war brought in moral principle” (2008: 199). Many factors led to widespread brutalization in this sense. They include the allied bombing campaign, which caused massive damage to German civilians, and which in turn unleashed, as Kershaw and others have documented, embittered calls for *Vergeltung*, and caused many to sympathize with the regime, as they began to see it as their protector (Kershaw 2001: 185; Herzstein: 91). Alternatively, when sympathy with the regime or a lust for vengeance did not take hold as a result of the bombing, many “felt shock that amounted to temporary . . . neurosis, and that produced a kind of numb indifference” (Wright: 251). Additionally an often forgotten component of the impact of the bombing campaign was the fear by many Germans that bombing would develop into massive poison gas attacks on the civilian population, which deepened the psychological impact (Evans 2005: 671-72). Furthermore, as the War dragged on memories of the starvation embargo imposed on Germany at the end of World War I took hold among the older population, and a profound fear of shortages at home emerged among a wide

¹⁷ A sentiment echoed by Pius XII to the Cardinals in 1943: “Our public utterances have to be carefully weighed in the interests of the victims themselves, lest, contrary to our intentions, We make their situation worse” (Marchione: 64). Warnings to the effect that things would be made worse for Jews were frequently advanced to the pope (see Chang: 398).

swath of the populace, with “many millions of Germans,” Trommler recounts, “thinking they would not survive if the war lasted much longer” (130-31). Added to this were the fears occasioned by the Allied demand for “unconditional surrender” (see Fleming: 165-88),¹⁸ and the call first announced by Goebbels on February 18, 1943 for *den totalen krieg* – and the constant rhetoric deployed thereafter of a “Life or Death Struggle,” with every German now a soldier, every person not in the Reich, now an enemy (Herzstein: 77). As Robert Herzstein documents, this brutalizing rhetoric made Goebbels perhaps the most popular person in Germany in 1943 and 1944 (see 80-91). And of course, such a brutalized and so enfeebled moral conscience was by constant propaganda implored to thrust this vengeance on the Jews. Germans were constantly being told that Jews were responsible – for the souring verdicts on the Russian battlefield, for the bombings, for the deprivations at home (Herzstein: 65-68). This brutalizing impact was magnified all the more by the horrific cheapening of life by the regime’s cynical deployment of economic incentives to support Jewish deportation from Germany, with Jewish goods and property sold at bargain basement prices – in the midst of grave and growing material shortage (see Gallately 2001: 130).¹⁹ In this context, it was not totally unreasonable to fear that conspicuous special treatment toward Jews would engender a backlash. Indeed, this was a critical component of Pius XII’s instructions to Preysing to move with caution, with the pope stating precisely that “due to the *length and psychology of war*, events warrant restraint – despite the reasons for intervening – so as to avoid greater evils” (Rychlak 2000: 264, emphasis added).

[54] Third, the Church’s hope for and action on behalf of a conditional peace must be kept in mind. This is so since as the condition of the Jews undoubtedly became unimaginably horrific, it can be tempting to ask, how could one ever have felt that the Jews’ condition could become *worse* than it eventually became? However, it is important to emphasize that many in the German hierarchy hoped that, through Vatican efforts, a conditional surrender of Germany could be secured, ending the War sooner than many others expected.²⁰ (This sentiment was never voiced in public; see Coady: 60.) Pius himself was personally involved clandestinely in “numerous peace-feelers” throughout the War, and so was thinking of shortening the War, based on the rejection of unconditional surrender (Hoffman: 294), and an alternative plan based on the elimination of the political power of Nazism, a view he consistently felt would empower the German resistance and cause the War to come to a quick end, a goal that he supported by giving his full assurance that to any conditional surrender that resulted in the end of Nazism, he would extend his plenary and public

¹⁸ Added to this we must consider the extent to which many Germans acted with disgust when Goebbels’s propaganda machine flooded the country with its description of the so-called Morgenthau Plan of 1944 – a plan to severely reduce the industrial capacity and economic potential of post-War Germany (see Dietrich: 69-74).

¹⁹ Additionally, the regime cynically stated that the deportation of Jews, which began in October of 1941 and escalated thereafter, was sending Jews to the East to alleviate the housing shortage caused by Allied bombing, and even that *all* were benefiting from this, as movement to the East meant Jews were released from the ravages of the bombing campaign (see Browning: 387).

²⁰ Bishops Dietz (of Fulda) and Faulhaber were especially active in planning ways to secure peace (see Lawler).

apostolic blessing.²¹ In light of this search for an expedited end to the War, an end short of unconditional surrender,²² the fear that action by the Church could make matters worse appears more sensible, as does the sentiment voiced by bishop Faulhaber that, until such time, trust must be had that “God always punished the tormentors of his chosen people, the Jews” (Wistrich: 73-74).

[55] It is important once again to emphasize that I do not at all doubt that more could and should have been done to intervene to assist Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide; my point is only that condemnation must be proportionate to the limited scope of action and the sweep of not wholly illegitimate fears held in good faith by the Catholic Church. But again, this is not at all to fully excuse the Church. For it does seem that the Church was often not much short of pusillanimous – fearful of making matters worse not only for the targets of the regime, the Jews, but also for itself. The Church was fearful of the physical coercion of its ministers (Evans 2009: 550), and related to this, it was fearful of losing its capacity to execute its mission of celebrating masses to faithful congregations (Breuer). For indeed it does appear that the Church was, during the War, especially fearful of losing souls through declining church participation, fearing that many Catholics, under the horrific circumstance of the brutalizing war, would come to vilify *it* should it appear unpatriotic and soft, and would cease receiving the spiritual nourishment of the mass. Hence as Donald Dietrich perceptively notes, during the War Church leaders often “crouched their critique within a framework of what their flock wanted and would support” (259). This pusillanimous thinking even caused the otherwise courageous von Galen to pause at times: In a 1941 sermon he noted that “Because of the heavy visitation brought on us by enemy air-raids, I originally resolved to keep silent in public about certain recent acts of the Gestapo.” In all, as Kershaw argues, during the War priests faced “indifference or sullen helplessness” among their flock and did not wish to alienate their parishioners too much (2008: 172).

[56] This sentiment, based on ensuring the continued participation in Catholic services, cannot be entirely condemned as morally disgraceful, since we need to recall the view of Bishop Preysing and others that the mass was and is to remain a tool of moral empowerment; hence, working to ensure that more Germans attended mass was not entirely morally neutral. Nourished by the mass the moral conscience of church goers might be strengthened, and individual acts of courage on behalf of Jews made possible.

[57] Nevertheless, it is here that the Church does deserve serious blame. For the Church did at times come to suffer from a lack of confidence in its very witness, its very mission, its very

²¹ The pope’s peace initiatives sought not only the elimination of Nazism per se but also the elimination of any political power unwilling to heed the “just demands” of all “racial minorities” (O’Connor: 54; see also von Klemperer: 174, 242). If such a peace could be secured by doing so, the pope expressly approved of killing Hitler (see Kurzman: 71).

²² A search that came “very close indeed to yielding results” in 1940 (von Klemperer: 179). Due to how close clandestine papal peace initiatives with German resisters came to securing peace in 1940, General Ludwig Beck of the *Wehrmacht*, a key opponent of Hitler, encouraged the pope to continue the effort, which the pope did (see von Klemperer: 179, 180, 242). This is not to take a stand as to whether the objective conditions would have actually allowed a plan of conditional surrender to succeed, only that many high-ranking churchmen thought in these terms in good faith.

vitality and strength. It failed at this point to live the admonition of Saint Paul so often thundered from her pulpits – “do not be conformed to this world.” The Church should never have apportioned its advocacy to the ears of a war-weary populace. As Christ demands, one never puts the light beneath a bushel (Matthew 5:15) – under the cover of a warped and depraved environment. To do so is cowardice, and cowardice is frailty in faith, as “the gates of hell shall not prevail against you,” and “faith shall move mountains” (Matthew 16:17-19; 21:21.) The ministers of sacred scripture should have heeded the clear words of God: “Be strong; do not fear!” (Isaiah 35:4; Mark 6:50).

[58] Such a critique seems insurmountable. The point, however, is that Voegelin’s biting condemnation, by only being condemnatory and acidic, does not acknowledge the difficulty of the Church’s position during the War and the time of genocide. Voegelin’s critique, therefore, when seen in toto is overwrought, unmeasured, and unfair.

The German Catholic Church as a Perverter of a Clear Catholic Doctrine

[59] Voegelin in *Hitler and the Germans* argues also that another aspect of the Church’s inattention to the plight of non-Catholics was that the German Church perverted an especially important Christian principle due to its accommodationist tendencies and decadent weakness. Voegelin places special focus on the idea of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ (201-204). His assertions in this regard take the form of four contentions. He first claims that there is a clear meaning to the idea of the Mystical Body of Christ – that it includes every human throughout all of history. Second, he asserts in mordant and biting prose that in Germany in the 1930s a unique danger existed for the perversion of this idea due to German ecclesiastical decadence. Third, he states that the German Church did indeed become guilty of seriously altering this Catholic teaching. Voegelin is not saying that honest theologians genuinely disagreed about the meaning of the Mystical Body of Christ. That would not at all have the kind of critical force he is manifesting. No, Voegelin is saying that there is a clear meaning to the Mystical Body of Christ and that the Church in Germany lost this clear meaning due to its high levels of moral and intellectual decay. Fourth, Voegelin claims that this corruption of the idea that all are in the Body of Christ contributed to the Church’s failure to defend common humanity, leading to what he calls the “de-humanization” of those outside the institutional Church (188). By decadently twisting the idea of the Mystical Body of Christ into a teaching that saw only members of the institutional Church as united together in a mystical union, the German Church came less energetically to see harm to non-Catholics as deserving fierce condemnation. Voegelin’s set of charges is especially serious since, if true, it would impugn the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church as the guarantor of fundamental truths of the Christian faith.²³

[60] This set of charges however is simply unfounded and so deeply overstated. First, is there indeed an original, univocal, and transparently correct understanding of the Mystical Body of

²³ This is not to say that the failure, attended to above, of the Church to act boldly in the face of an evil it denounced is unimportant. Clearly the failures of individual church leaders to live up to the Church’s teachings are of great importance. However the Church itself has since at least the time of Augustine held that the behavior of Church leaders may fall short. But the teaching office of the Church with respect to core principles of the faith is held to be secured by the presence of the Holy Spirit; hence, teaching errors are of grave importance.

Christ? And if so, what is it? Voegelin states firmly that *the* meaning of this truth is that the Mystical Body of Christ includes every human being, past, present, and future (203). He speaks in scolding terms of those who do not share this view. Saint Thomas, he maintains, made this idea clear for all time. But this view is doubtful. First, even Saint Thomas does not seem to understand this doctrine in Voegelin's way. The statement in the *Summa Theologica* that Voegelin relies on reads as follows: "the [mystical] body . . . is made up of people from the beginning to the end of the world." Yet Thomas goes on to state: "people can be classed as members of the mystical body because of their potentiality." All people are potentially members of the Body of Christ in so far as grace might assign them to it. Thomas states that "there [are members] who do not have grace but may have it later on" (III.IIIc.8a. 1-3). The Mystical Body therefore is made up only of those who have received grace. The Church is privileged to have the commission by God to communicate grace through external signs; hence, membership in the Church will make one a member of the Mystical Body. Others outside the Church may also, by God's inscrutable grace, be made members as well. But there is no indication whatsoever that just by dint of simple existence one is given the grace to enter the Mystical Body; and indeed some men upon "departure from this world, wholly cease to be members of Christ" (III.IIIc.8a.3). As the noted theologian Father Emile Mersch points out in explanation of Thomas's position: "the Mystical Body of Christ includes a pagan *who has received grace*," but there is no implication that all will necessarily receive grace (Mersch: 238).

[61] It is important to reference the work of Father Mersch, as his understanding was a standard treatment of the issue in Europe in the pre-War period. Mersch was a theologian at Louvain in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s and he wrote lengthy treatments of this topic that were widely disseminated. He states that the Mystical Body of Christ is "the union which those who believe in Him have with the persons of the trinity" (238). Membership in it requires either willed affirmation of the Church through belief and sacramental participation, or a special action by God (Mersch: 304). So all humanity is in the Mystical Body only by way of potentiality. "Every man is a member, at least by invitation," Mersch summarizes. "All can be a member if they heed the call" or are "supernaturally elevated" (304). It is important to note that Mersch's treatment was made before Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, which, following the tradition Mersch gives voice to, also held that all men are in the Mystical Body only potentially, and that men are made actual members only by gracious election or by an exercise of a willed acceptance of the Church's offer. In all, it seems quite tendentious for Voegelin to claim that the idea of the Mystical Body had some prototypical meaning, and one that viewed all humans as members of the Mystical Body, a meaning later corrupted by the institutional Church in Germany.

[62] Second, Voegelin claims that the German Church was uniquely riddled with a rottenness and weakness that would allow for the alleged misunderstanding and perversion of a univocal teaching of the faith. The Church in Germany he claims was "much more dangerous" than the Church in other areas (203). The German hierarchy in fact, Voegelin boldly maintains, lived in an "abyss" (184). However, this idea of a uniquely German perversion must be questioned. We have seen that the German Church was in no way unique in holding to the idea of the Mystical Body as the body of those with a chosen commitment to the visible Church or a special divine grace. There is no uniquely German

perversity there. Moreover, in this context it is important to note that the Concordat with the Hitler regime – seen by Voegelin as by others as evidence of a German ecclesiastical decadence – was initially opposed most forcefully by some in the German Church. Initially it was Rome that pushed – and pushed quite strongly – for the Concordat, doing so over strong opposition from some local bishops. A strong “rejectionist” camp among the German bishops existed regarding the Concordat (Burleigh 2007: 175). The negotiations surrounding the Concordat were given critical life in 1933 by a push from Rome over the strong opposition of several German bishops, who feared any formal recognition of Hitler (Matheson: 18-21). Hence, “on a number of occasions, Vatican initiatives were retracted at the urging of the national episcopacies concerned” (Burleigh 2007: 161). There was therefore more fear of recognizing the Nazis through the Concordat among some Catholic bishops in Germany at this time than by papal officials in Rome (Scholder: 89-122; Godman: 49).

[63] Of course, the Concordat was eventually signed, and many German bishops did come to support it – yet many, as we have seen, precisely because they saw it as providing assistance to all in Germany. Moreover, in this context it bears noting that a treaty with Hitler is nothing uniquely perverse.²⁴ The simple act of signing a treaty with Hitler early in his seizure of power is not at all uniquely German. The Concordat, for example, was signed while the Four Power Pact among the governments of Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France was very close to being finalized, and was signed after an important trade treaty between Germany and the U.S.S.R. (Bullock: 328).

[64] To be sure, as William Harrigan and others have noted, there were some among the German episcopacy who were “sanguine and credulous” about being able to reform Nazism and constrain its virulence (165).²⁵ However, the papacy was also guilty of believing the Hitler menace could be contained. Pacelli himself noted that he thought Hitler would only over time break the Concordat, and then only somewhat slowly and not all at once (Harrigan: 168).²⁶ And he specifically endorsed continuing negotiations over the way to apply the Concordat as late as 1936 – not yet convinced that restraint on the regime through legal negotiations could not be obtained (Harrigan: 191; Godman: 152). At the same time, at the Fulda conference the German bishops made a strong collective denunciation of Nazism in 1936 (which the Nazis banned from being published) (Harrigan: 194). And by 1937 the German bishops were of one mind with Pacelli that “it was time for Rome to issue an authoritative statement” (Burleigh 2007: 188) against the regime, supporting the call for a denunciation as a result of their collective assessment of the “very dark picture in Germany” (Harrigan: 197). Hence with the full support of the episcopacy, Pius XI issued the

²⁴ Further evidence of how a concordat need not imply moral weakness can be seen in the fact that many in the Church sought a concordat with the Soviet Union in the 1920s – and the Church was not soft on communism.

²⁵ Several German bishops would come to the conclusion that Hitler meant what he said when he cynically asserted that he could guide Germany to a “really profound revival of religious life” (Harrigan: 167). However, as the bishops at several times jointly declared, they were at no point prepared to surrender “one iota” of the faith (Harrigan: 196).

²⁶ And there was at this time at least a perception in various quarters that the Vatican was displaying what commentator Karl Polanyi in 1933 called “conciliatory tendencies” (586).

denunciatory *Mit brennender Sorge*. In all, the charge of a unique rottenness in the German hierarchy appears tendentious.

[65] Third, Voegelin implies that the allegedly thoroughly rotten German Church did in fact change or radically undermine a clear principle of the Church. Yet this view is simply a non-sequitur. The Church was not especially rotten, and there was no clear doctrine defining the Mystical Body of Christ in the manner Voegelin asserts.

[66] Fourth, Voegelin claims that an emphasis on the Mystical Church as closely tied to the visible Church (and not understood to comprehend all humans as such, past, present, and future) contributed to the moral decadence of the German hierarchy. Voegelin holds that the focus on how membership in Christ's Mystical Body is assigned only to institutional believers created a "dehumanization" of non-Catholics; seeing others as *outside* the spiritual union with Christ caused others to be seen as less valuable than Catholics, Voegelin alleges. But in fact quite the opposite appears to be the case. It appears that a good deal of the discussion in Germany concerning the close relationship of the Mystical Body and the clearly defined institutions of the visible Church was inspired by a desire to *avoid* infection of orthodox Catholic thought by mystical and vague notions that might supply succor to Volkisch nationalism, a point emphasized by Krieg (40-44). Volkisch ideas, which influenced many in the Nazi movement, were often based on heretical Christian amalgamations such as those developed by Artur Dinter in the 1920s and 1930s. A rabid anti-Semite who advanced bold reinterpretations of a so-called spritualized Christianity based on mystical unity, Dinter articulated the idea that individuals could be connected by spiritual unions of an ill-defined sort. As the leader of the Christian-Spiritual Association, he founded its journal *Spiritual Christianity*, where he asserted that there exists a level of spiritual union whereof men can say "now we are together, we are with you, and you are with us" (Burleigh 2007: 104-105). Such mysticism seemed to knit Germans together in a collective spiritual body. This mysticism aided and informed many Nazi members and propagandists (Burleigh 2007: 105).²⁷ As Krieg notes, the Church had become deeply suspicious of these mystical ideas and feared the possibility of the Mystical Body of Christ being used as pretext for such ideologies. Hence an emphasis on the concrete quality of the Mystical Body represented in fact an expression of anti-nationalist and anti-Nazi thought.

Implications for the Contemporary Debate

[67] *Hitler and the Germans* is as a description of the German Church simply too bold. The errors of the work, however, are instructive for the wider debate over the role of the Catholic Church and National Socialism for at least three reasons. First, the charges made by Voegelin in 1964 continue to be leveled. The first of his critiques of the German Church, that it acted as a narrow special interest group, has been made by many subsequent critics. The charge is found in the work of John Cornwell, Daniel Goldhagen, Robert Krieg, and Beth Griech-Polelle. As one example, Griech-Polelle dichotomizes the Church's institutions and the upholding of religious and moral values. She says that "the German hierarchy limited its focus to strictly Church-related problems and failed to address the higher questions of religious values" (52) – as if Church-related concerns were always distinct from moral

²⁷ Indeed, many senior Nazis were influenced by mystical ideas of supra-personal unity (see Griesmayr).

advocacy precisely informed by high religious values. As a further example, Robert Krieg sounds just like Voegelin in asserting that the failure of the German Church was that during the entire Nazi period the hierarchy was concerned only with its “institutional interests” rather than “a moral commitment to mankind” (162, 158) – again, as if the Church’s institutions and a moral concern for mankind were always and necessarily opposed. Priests involved in the Spiritual Exercises movement and in Catholic Action, however, saw themselves very much as missionaries *to the culture* against a rising and vicious paganism and not merely as celebrants of Eucharistic mysteries or as church wardens. Moreover, the mass, in Bishop Preysing’s words, is always to be seen as a tool of moral empowerment; so the matter is much more complex.

[68] Additionally, the charge that the Church’s putatively extremely anemic defense of non-Catholics can be attributed in part to a change in the understanding of the visible Church as the Body of Christ by the hierarchy also has an important position in more recent critiques of the Church. Michael Phayer in his 2007 piece *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* makes claims against the Catholic hierarchy, and specifically Pius XII, that are quite similar to those made by Voegelin concerning the corrupting of the idea of the Mystical Body. Phayer claims that the Catholic hierarchy, specifically in this case the papacy, twisted a purportedly clear and firmly held older idea of the Mystical Body as including all humanity into a confined understanding emphasizing the visible Church in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* of 1943. Phayer asserts further that this twisting and truncating of a clear Catholic truth contributed to the allegedly anemic response by the papacy to the Germans’ seizure of Jews in Rome. There was for Phayer a decadent twisting of the noble idea that the Mystical Body contains all humans and this grew from and contributed to the inordinate emphasis by the Roman hierarchy on preserving the treasures of the Holy See and the physical safety of the pope, which inhibited the leaders of the Church in Rome from energetically helping Jews (68-69). By viewing, as a result of a growing decadence, only co-confessionalists as united into one body, the papacy became less energetically supportive of non-Catholics. However, as we have seen there was no such clear doctrine of the Mystical Body there to be perverted, and there is no necessary connection between the association of the Mystical Body with the institutional Church and a narrowing of moral vision. Rectifying Voegelin’s errors, then, can help to clarify the actions of the papacy in its own precincts. Once more, therefore, the arguments that I have developed can advance, to some extent at least, the substance of the current debate.

[69] A final point of relevance that can be drawn from these conclusions is that Voegelin’s sub-thesis about language is called into question when we see the errors of his own work. By his work being able to be seen by many as at once morally clear and sound yet also substantively and rhetorically unmeasured, the conclusion emerges that Voegelin’s work itself gives us grounds for questioning how written and spoken clarity and moral clarity are related. At least some considerable excess can come from those who are not morally suspect. This somewhat common-sensical recognition should in turn highlight an additional point of considerable relevance to the debate over Catholicism and National Socialism. The heated yet morally innocuous nature of Voegelin’s assessment of the Nazis gives us reason to address the on-going debate about the Nazis and the Catholic Church in a particular *way*. That language can be overheated and overblown but not immoral or sinister seems to

counsel a greater economy of condemnation in the debates over the Church and the *Sbo'ab* – it seems to counsel a focus on claims and not on motives. For if a scholar such as Voegelin can err through overheated words, it seems that many defenders of the Church must appreciate that the very topic of the Nazis and their horrific crimes might fuel overheated claims, and that one should be slow to charge critics with impure and unholy designs. Perhaps, therefore, defenders of the truth, like the apostles, should give testimony, dust the sand off their feet, and move on.

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