John S. Conway

The North American Churches' Reactions to the German Church Struggle

When Hitler came to power in Germany, fourteen years after the end of the Great War, the churches of North America were caught up in a widespread mood of penitential pacifism¹. Out of revulsion and repentance for the over-zealous militarism of their immediate predecessors during the war years, and very conscious of the terrible toll of suffering and death which had resulted, the leading figures in the North American churches had launched a vigorous campaign against all aspects of war. They committed themselves both institutionally and personally to the cause of peace, taking their cue from such pronouncements as the Anglican Church's Lambeth Declaration of 1930 which stated that war was incompatible with the mind and methods of Christ. This broad-based and ecumenical effort led to numerous affirmations by pastors and laity that they personally pledged themselves to renounce war and never again to support another.

As the General Secretary of the American Federal Council of Churches, Sam Cavert, noted: „political isolationism received reinforcement from religious commitment to peace“².

Yet within a few years, this idealistic stance was abandoned. From 1939 in Canada, and from 1941 in the United States, the churches, almost without exception, gave their support to their nation's participation in the renewed struggle against German aggression. How to explain this remarkable volte-face? One significant factor was undoubtedly the impact made by the events of the German Church Struggle. How developments in Germany were observed, diagnosed and received by the North American churches was to play an important part in preparing the ground for their revised Christian witness as the tides of war once again engulfed the world.

In 1933 many of the churchmen who had accepted this anti-war sentiment and become ardent advocates of the cause of international peace believed that Ger-

¹ For Canada, see *John Webster Grant*, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Toronto 1972) 149–50; for the United States, see *Robert M. Miller*, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1958); *Gerald Sittser*, *A Cautious Patriotism. The American Churches and the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1997) chap 2.

² *William J. Schmidt*, *Architect of Unity. A Biography of Samuel McCrea Cavert* (New York 1976) 128.

mans thought the same. They were therefore ready to accept at face value the notion that the Nazi take-over of power meant the start of a new era of renewal and revival in German life. They welcomed Hitler's initial public statements affirming the churches' place in the new dispensation, as well as applauding the Nazis' determination to restore a healthy public morality by eliminating prostitution and pornography from the streets of German cities. Some church observers even swallowed the widespread claim that Hitler had saved the nation from the fate of a Bolshevik revolution. Despite their commitment to democracy, such observers were willing to accept Germany's need for strong leadership at such a critical time. And their optimism led them to believe that the Nazi demands for the revision of the Versailles Treaty were justified, since they themselves had long regarded the „harshness“ of its provisions as a regrettable and provocative cause of international tension and misunderstanding.

These convictions were soon to be disillusioned. But their holders only reluctantly abandoned the high moral idealism of the 1920s, even as they were forced to face the realities of the unwelcome developments in a part of the world they hoped had learnt to follow their more exalted aspirations. The dilemma these church leaders faced in the 1930s amounted in fact to a renewed crisis of conscience and credibility. But the inescapable fact of the rise of an alien and ominous ideology, and the totalitarian repression of their fellow Christians in Germany, was to force a painful re-assessment and the abandonment of much wishful thinking.

How did the North American churches most closely linked to Germany, particularly the various Lutheran churches and the Catholic German parishes scattered across North America, as well as other denominations with German roots such as the Mennonites, react to the ensuing German Church Struggle? The American Lutherans, as Ronald Webster has ably pointed out³, were understandably very conscious of their debt to Martin Luther, and were organisationally closely associated with their German colleagues in such ventures as their support of German-based missions abroad. At the same time, many of these churchmen still retained a strong feeling of loyalty to their or their parents' former nation, were often nostalgic in their view of their homeland, and were unwilling to credit critical reports. Some, notably the members of the American Missouri Synod, were influenced by Nazi propaganda, assiduously sown in such circles, claiming that the new regime was a noteworthy, even epoch-making, success. Lutheran journals commonly described the Nazi regime as a positive moral force for a society which was previously chaotic and decadent, and dismissed reports of Nazi persecutions as the product of anti-German resentments. They praised Hitler's denunciations of the Versailles Treaty and his plans for economic revival. So too, they displayed an uncomfortable uncertainty or ambivalence about the position

³ *Ronald Webster, American Lutheran opinion makers and the crisis of German Protestantism under Hitler, unpublished manuscript.*

of the Jews, largely accepting the Nazi defamations, even while upholding the view that Christians should not engage in race hatred⁴.

On the other hand, we have to note that the German-Americans, as well as German-Canadians, had been widely assaulted for their presumed „disloyalty“ during the Great War, and hence were sensitive about adopting too favourable a view of German events. Webster rightly sees that this led to a continuing and indeed increasing dilemma. North American Lutherans wanted to maintain close contacts with the source of their spiritual convictions, and hence to believe the best about new trends there. Nevertheless, as the evidence of the Church Struggle mounted, their initial optimism was challenged, and their positive evaluations seemed only misguided. The result was often a vacillating stance, or a readiness to adopt a position of abstention, even of isolationism, which was only strengthened by their strongly pacifist inclinations and the pro-appeasement mood of the times. As a result several North American churches and church periodicals were led to tone down or even ignore reports about the persecution of the churches in Germany lest these encourage a revival of the „war spirit“. They were also disinclined to accept the arguments put forward by the declared opponents of the Nazi regime's intentions, such as the Confessing Church, and, at least initially, deplored the so-called „politicking“ of Martin Niemöller and his associates.

Early in 1933, highly conflicting reports on the German churches reached North America. On the one hand, the widespread enthusiasm for the new regime amongst both Catholics and Protestants was well noted, calling forth such responses from German emigrant pastors as the following:

We overseas Germans have, with great joy, experienced inwardly the reawakening of the German Volk. After the frightful war years and the even sadder post-war years, what a turnaround! We thank God that he has raised up a saviour in Adolf Hitler⁵.

On the other hand, alarming reports were received about the massive and violent attacks launched by Nazi thugs against well-known opponents of the new regime, especially communists and Jews, but also against some church members. Open protests were held in New York against this kind of lawlessness, and numerous concerned enquiries were sent by such bodies as the U.S. Federal Council of Churches to their German counterparts. In central Canada, a public rally held in Winnipeg in April 1933, attended by both Jews and Christians, was described as „one of the biggest single-purpose demonstrations in the history of the city“⁶.

But in response, leading German church figures, such as General Superintendent Otto Dibelius in Berlin, prompted presumably by the newly-established Ministry of Propaganda, made a broadcast to the United States which appeared, not to

⁴ See *Kenneth Barnes*, *American Lutherans and the Third Reich*, in: *What kind of God? Essays in honour of Richard Rubenstein*, ed. *B. Rubenstein, Michael Berenbaum* (Lanham, N.Y. 1997) 187–99.

⁵ Quoted in *Andrew Bonell et al.*, *Power, Conscience and Opposition. Essays in German history in honour of John A. Moses* (New York 1996) 495.

⁶ Cited in *Alan Davies, Marilyn Nefsky*, *How Silent were the Churches? Canadian Protestantism and the Jewish Plight during the Nazi Era* (Waterloo, Ontario 1997) 46.

condemn, but to excuse what had happened. He warned his listeners not to give credit to exaggerated and fictional reports of anti-Jewish actions, which were being spread abroad, he claimed, „by persons who did not know personally the conditions in Germany“⁷. The same theme was repeated by the Methodist bishop in Germany, Otto Melle, and his superior, the Methodist bishop in Europe, an American, John Nuelsen.

But in early April, there could be no doubt as to the effect of the well-publicised Law for the Reconstruction of the Civil Service, by which several well-known theology professors were compulsorily suspended and later dismissed, such as Paul Tillich, Emil Fuchs, Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Gunther Dehn. Only two months later, after a bunch of Nazi-hired thugs had raided the hospital in East Berlin where he worked, one of the foremost German figures in the whole ecumenical movement, Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, was summarily banished from the country and fled to Switzerland. Siegmund-Schultze was one of the International Secretaries of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, and hence was a popular figure in ecumenical church circles, having campaigned tirelessly for many years in the cause of peace and international reconciliation. His expulsion sent alarm signals around the globe.

In Canada, a similar situation prevailed. Caught up in the hardships caused by the Great Depression and the Great Drought, the Canadian Protestant church leaders believed their nation was in travail, their churches were in travail. Here too, many churchmen were sympathetic to the call for national renewal and revival, and most were strongly influenced by the reformist ideas of the Social Gospel, with its strongly pacifist overtones. By contrast the more conservative French-speaking Catholics in Quebec were attracted by the aura of Hitler's anti-communist stance, and some, like the prominent Abbé, Lionel Groulx, were openly supportive of his antisemitic tirades. Canadian Presbyterians, on the other hand, having a history of imperial patriotism, adopted a passionate concern with the German Church Struggle from the outset. Their most prominent preacher in Toronto effectively linked the persecution of both the churches and the Jews as evidence of the iniquity of the Nazi state, and denounced the attempts to create a new state church under direct governmental jurisdiction. From this point of view „the spirit of the German Reformation was dead in its German homeland“⁸.

At the same time, outright politically-motivated sentiments were expressed by the Mennonites of western Canada, many of whom had fled or been expelled from the Soviet Union. Amongst such refugees, hatred of Communism had become a political obsession. Still clinging to their German origins and language, these Mennonites were ready to greet the Nazi revolution as a welcome revival of their German heritage, and to see Hitler as the laudable defender of their anti-Communist faith. The Mennonite German-language publications, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote*, often published counter-attacks on the non-German media

⁷ John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933–1945* (London 1968) 32.

⁸ The Presbyterian Record, January 1934, 4, cited in *Davies, Nefsky, How Silent* 71.

and its persistent lies about the innocent German government and the German people. These journals had nothing to say about the imposition of the Aryan laws, and also attempted to play down the Nazi antisemitic persecutions⁹. Indeed, their editors were later found to have allowed themselves to be used by the propaganda agencies of the Third Reich¹⁰. Such sentiments were, however, not shared by more sober, pacifist Mennonites, nor in the better-informed head offices of the major denominations. Instead the mood varied between a cautious optimism and a muted feeling of alarm.

In New York, the Federal Council of Churches decided that an official visit to Germany was required, and invited their former General Secretary, Charles Macfarland, a man renowned for his extensive contacts and commitment to international reconciliation, to undertake this task. Macfarland, who knew Germany well and spoke the language, accordingly toured the country in late 1933. His report, subsequently published as a book in January 1934 entitled *The New Church and the New Germany* was written with sympathy for and confidence in the German churches, but at the same time showed an awareness of the „magnitude of the problems and the multitude of the difficulties which our Christian brethren have had to meet“ (p.viii)¹¹. This even-handed, liberal approach was not, however, entirely free from wishful thinking, which later events were to destroy. And by showing the complexities of the revolutionary situation, and the entrenched divisions within the German Evangelical Churches, Macfarland's impressions did not resolve the North American dilemma of how to respond as the German Church Struggle became increasingly embittered despite his eirenical approach. Macfarland had forcefully criticized two features of the policies pursued by the Nazis and their enthusiastic supporters in the German Protestant churches, namely the intolerance towards the Jews and the deliberate attempts to suppress the opposition in the churches' ranks. These policies were to become of increasing concern in North American church circles, despite their leaders' desire to keep open the lines of communication and not to break off their relations with the established German churches. Church spokesmen and periodicals alike were to join in a chorus of condemnation of the Nazis' actions which grew with each successive outrage, and which ran parallel to the North American secular press' consistently hostile aversion to Nazism. Most notably, already from 1933 onwards, the Nazi attacks on both Christians and Jews were seen as companion evils, calling for

⁹ As one Mennonite in 1936 remarked „Almost 50 million people have been devoured by the Jewish Moloch in Russia! Hate against the Jews! Ask the millions of orphaned children in Russia, the masses of deprived, homeless, exiled, starving wanderers in the country.“ Or as another inflamed comment stated: „If our people in Russia had been treated only half as well as the Jews in Germany, none, I daresay, would have thought of leaving“, cited in *Davies, Nefsky*, *How Silent* 110, 113.

¹⁰ See *John F. Wagner*, *Brothers beyond the Sea, National Socialism in Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario 1981) 102.

¹¹ *Macfarland*, *The New Church and the New Germany* (New York 1934). Both Macfarland's successor, Sam Cavert, and the Federal Council's „foreign secretary“ Henry Leiper took a similar stance after visiting Germany in 1933.

widespread protest, and leading, even more remarkably, to an unprecedented recognition that the churches' circle of obligation should be enlarged to include the victimized Jews. The *Christian Century*, probably the leading religious journal in the United States, had early on recognized this feature. In May 1933, an editorial had already noted the implications of the Nazis' misuse of nationalistic feelings:

In Hitler's Germany, the principles of nationalism are being carried to an apotheosis higher than any nation has attempted since the days of ancient Israel, and the Jews themselves are made the first victims of it. But this is a Christian nationalism. Alas, it is even so! It is those nations which bear high the banner of Christ who are guilty of this evil¹².

In North American Catholic circles, their initial alarm at the impact of the dictatorial Nazi regime was greatly relieved by the signing of the Reich Concordat in July 1933¹³. The excesses of Nazi radicalism would now, it was hoped, be curbed, and the inflammatory rhetoric and actions of the early revolutionary phase be replaced by a more sober acceptance of the Catholics' place in German society. German Catholics were absolutely and reliably patriotic. So matters would surely in time settle down, if Hitler was able to control the party underlings who were seen as the worst inciters of anti-Catholic outbursts. Most American Catholics were, moreover, pre-occupied with other issues, such as the even more violent persecution of the church in the Soviet Union, Mexico or Spain. Many Catholic observers, however, were alerted by the views of such well-informed journalists in Berlin as F.W. Voight, who quickly recognised the incompatibility of Nazism with Christian principles. In Voight's view, the Nazi campaign was the product of a populist and totalitarian nationalism, attacking the universalist aspirations of Christian civilisation. He sought to strengthen the faithful inside the Third Reich by championing the cause of their resistance – a view which accorded well with North American Catholic opinion. At the same time, some Catholics were concerned about the possible renewal of the *Kulturkampf*. In 1935, a well-informed and provocative book by a leading American Catholic, George Shuster, explicitly warned his readers against any illusions on the score of Hitler's intentions: „Der Fuehrer' is a pure double-croser“, and directly responsible for the attacks on the churches¹⁴.

In 1934, observers in North America, who had been alarmed by the ominous and seemingly unstoppable nazification of the Protestant churches in Germany, warmly greeted the growth of the Pastors' Emergency League, the adoption of the name Confessing Church and the issuing of the forceful Barmen Declaration by this group at the end of May. To be sure there was a tendency to believe that such

¹² Editorial, „Jews and Jesus“, in: *Christian Century*, 3 May 1933, 582–4.

¹³ Interestingly, events in Germany were closely monitored from a far-away monastery in Oregon, where the monk-editor of a German-language weekly newspaper, *St. Josephs-Blatt*, kept his readers well informed, including commentaries on the Protestant Church Struggle. His earlier assessments that the Nazis' dictatorial drive would soon cool down were later replaced by a much fuller awareness of the dangers facing both Christians and Jews.

¹⁴ *George Shuster, Like a Mighty Army. Hitler versus Established Religion* (New York 1935) 121.

developments constituted not merely a theological opposition to the errors of the „German Christians“ but also a political protest against the regime. As the General Secretary of the Lutheran Council in America, Ralph Long, remarked, these churches were „fighting a valiant fight“ against the Nazis' attempts to impose their nefarious policies¹⁵. English-speaking commentators were inclined, unanimously if one-sidedly, to see the German Church Struggle in political terms, as one of Church versus State, good versus evil, Confessing Church versus Stormtroopers or racials. Despite Karl Barth's remonstrance that the conflict was not at all politically motivated, but really between rival theological parties in a dispute between the true and the false church, the prevalent view abroad was too simplistic to take account of these differentiations. In the Protestant ranks, including the American Lutherans, despite their differences with Barth's theology, the Confessing Church came increasingly, but in fact wrongly, to be seen as the champion of those liberal and democratic values so highly prized on the other side of the Atlantic.

Karl Barth's authorship of the Barmen Declaration ensured that his views were widely supported by Presbyterians abroad. Indeed, a Canadian minister in June 1935 was to compare Barth with John the Baptist as a man „sent from God“ to awaken the German churches from their spiritual errors. Some months later, the same minister castigated the „spirit of anti-Christ“ that was overwhelming German Christianity. „The clouds lie dark and heavy over Christian Germany. Hitler's latent desire is to starve out the great living elements of German Protestantism which resist him. ... Side by side with this goes something akin to the deification of Hitler.“¹⁶

1934 also saw the holding of the Baptist World Alliance's international Congress in Berlin, despite fierce debate and considerable doubt over the location. Although they declared their intention not to interfere in the domestic affairs of the German state church, the Baptists made clear their resolve to uphold the principle of freedom of religion and their total opposition to any religious compulsion. Even more outspokenly, the Congress passed a resolution which „deplores and condemns as a violation of the law of God, the Heavenly Father, all racial animosity and every form of oppression or unfair discrimination toward the Jews, toward colored people, or toward subject races in any part of the world“¹⁷.

¹⁵ See *Webster*, Lutherans. This view was echoed by the *Christian Century*, which provided extensive and critical coverage to the German Church Struggle throughout the whole period.

¹⁶ *Davies, Nefsky*, How Silent 71.

¹⁷ *Western Baptist*, October 1934, 4; for the debate in the United States, see *Robert W. Ross*, So it was true. *The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews* (Minneapolis 1980) 48–66. A similar attitude prevailed among the Pentecostals. One of their leaders in Canada, Donald Gee, after visiting Germany in 1935, noted that Pentecostals, like the Baptists, were accorded full freedom of worship, but added with some dismay: „It is to be understood, however difficult it may be for those in other lands to do so, that the Christians in Germany as a whole, including our own Pentecostal pastors and people, have a great appreciation for Herr Hitler, ... whose rigidly self-denying and consecrated character... is an

This kind of clear speaking was echoed by others. Claris Silcox, a leading member of the Canadian United Church, was early on to note the dark essences of the Nazi system. In March he observed percipiently:

The Nazis first organised what they called the German Christians, who sought to unify the church life of German Protestantism with themselves in the saddle. They insisted the Church must be the soul of the nation. Their opponents insisted that the Church should rather be the conscience of the nation – that the Church must always be ready to reprove the nation when it did wrong¹⁸.

With leadership such as this, North American church members kept a wary eye on developments in Germany.

In 1935, their dismay at the Nazi state's decision to establish a Ministry of Church Affairs, obviously to control church life more closely, was palpable. So too was their outrage at the blatantly antisemitic Nuremberg Laws. In Canada, as one historian noted: „Protestants of all persuasions followed the battle closely, as the future of Christianity itself was at stake. The cause of ecclesiastical integrity overshadowed the predicament of the Jews, but the persecution of Christians and others and building of concentration camps created an antipathy to the new regime and its ‚Nordic racialism‘.“¹⁹

The Canadian Pentecostal pastor, Donald Gee, was led to comment:

The facts concerning the Nazi opposition to the Jews seems too undeniable to question, and the treatment given to Jews seems on the whole to be beyond defence; but we have heard it said by Christian brethren who deserve to have both sides of a question stated, that the immoral literature which was flooding Germany was largely published by Jewish interests²⁰.

Similar sentiments prevailed in the United States. Indeed by the mid-1930s, there was general recognition that the Church Struggle had become an international scandal, and the Nazis' antisemitic policies with their „aimless“ cruelty, whatever their alleged justification might be, had reached „a pitch of brutality and injustice“ which North American church leaders believed the world should no longer tolerate²¹.

A related issue was the question of what practical steps could be taken to relieve the consequences of Nazi brutality and persecution. This is not the place to outline the various proposals to assist refugees from Germany, both Christian and Jewish, which have been well analysed by Peter Ludlow, William Nawyn and Haim Genizi²². But it is notable that, despite, or because of, the refusal of both the

inspiration to the whole nation. ... Naturally there is the fear that things may go too far, and such fears are anything but groundless“, *The Pentecostal Testimony*, May 1935, 2.

¹⁸ *The New Outlook*, 7 March 1934; see also *Sam Cavert*, *What the Tourist in Germany does not see*, in: *The Christian Leader* XXXVIII (Oct. 1935) 1259.

¹⁹ *Davies, Nefsky*, *How Silent* 34–5.

²⁰ *Donald Gee*, *The Truth about Hitler and Germany*. *The Pentecostal Testimony*, February 1935.

²¹ The limit has been reached, *The New Outlook*, 22 January 1936, 73; see also *Ross*, *So it was true*, chapter 2.

²² See *Peter Ludlow*, *The Refugee Problem in the 1930s: the Failures and Successes of Prot-*

American and Canadian governments to open their doors to increased immigration, the church leaders were increasingly concerned about this problem and were vocal in stressing their countries' obligation to render humanitarian assistance. Already in 1934 the American Federal Council of Churches launched a campaign to raise half a million dollars for this cause, and had sponsored the establishment of a new agency, the American Christian Committee for German Refugees. But the results were disappointing, even though leading academics, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, strongly supported this cause, and such journals as the *Christian Century* were tireless in drawing attention to this issue. But the majority of their followers did not see the necessity for turning their abhorrence of Nazism into tangible measures on behalf of its victims, especially since most of them were not Christians. In the wake of the Depression, potential immigrants from anywhere were unwanted in North America. The widespread feelings of xenophobia and anti-alienism created inhibitive barriers, at least until 1938. So too did the effects of the continual inter-denominational rivalries within the church bureaucracies, and the lack of any overall structure with sufficient political influence to mobilize public protest against their governments' intransigence²³.

Nevertheless, church leaders, as early as 1936, did try to express their sympathy since, as an ecumenical team in Canada stated: „as a Christian people, it is ours to see that those whom the spirit of anti-Christ has bruised, whether they be Aryans or non-Aryans, are healed by the compassionate spirit of Him, in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, Greek nor barbarian, bond nor free“. Pragmatically, this group called for the admission of a „reasonable number of selected refugees“ which was hardly a heroic demand, but was clearly influenced by their awareness of the prevailing political atmosphere²⁴.

In 1936, during the holding of the Olympic Games in Berlin, a relative relaxation seemed to set in, but in the following year the situation escalated again. In March 1937, the issuing of the Papal Encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, which had been secretly smuggled into Germany and read from all Catholic pulpits, again alerted the world to the dangers of Nazi racism. In North America, its message was readily picked up by the leading Jesuit periodical *America* which published a strong article by John LaFarge condemning the idolatry of unfettered nationalism, and its frequent companion, antisemitism. North American Catholics continued to be warned of the impact of this „new heathenism“.

In the Protestant ranks, the sensational arrest of Martin Niemöller in July 1937 and his subsequent show trial, aroused tremendous reactions. Church notice boards prominently displayed posters: „Pray for Pastor Niemöller“. His staunch defiance of state interference into church affairs was frequently compared with

estant Relief Programmes, in: *English Historical Review* XC (June 1975) 564–603; *William Nawyn*, *American Protestantism's Response to Germany's Jews and Refugees 1933–1941* (Ann Arbor 1981); *Haim Genizi*, *American Apathy: the Plight of Christian Refugees from Nazism* (Ramat-Gan 1983).

²³ *Webster*, Lutherans.

²⁴ *Davies, Nefsky*, *How Silent* 39.

that of his valiant predecessor, Martin Luther²⁵. Hundreds of sympathetic letters poured into his prison cell, but to no practical avail. Nevertheless the fate of this well-known and erstwhile foe highlighted the equally awful plight of thousands of other unknown victims of Nazi repression. The lesson for the North American churches was clear. As Sam Cavert commented:

The traditional readiness of German Lutheranism to regard the State as absolute in the temporal sphere is part of the explanation of the rise of the totalitarian State in Germany. Unless American Christians can now learn that there is no realm in which the secular State is absolute. We may discover to our sorrow that what has happened in Germany can happen here²⁶.

The North American reaction to such scandalous injustice was eloquently voiced by the Anglican bishop of Montreal, John Farthing, addressing his Synod in 1937:

Fascism will go down in history... as the darkest blot on our modern civilisation. [It] is the negation of all for which Christ stands. In Germany it has now come out boldly as pagan, which it has been in spirit since its inception. ... What a hell such a condition of life would be to us liberty-loving Anglo-Saxons²⁷.

This call for a more militant stand was strongly supported both by Canadian Presbyterians and by a leading Canadian Baptist educator, Watson Kirkconnell, in his outspokenly condemnatory book *Canada, Europe and Hitler*²⁸.

Such views were, however, off-set by two factors. The first was the tendency, reflected in the Canadian Anglican Churchman, to believe that the Nazi repressive actions were due not to Hitler, but to the radical wing of his Party underlings. This illusion, frequently fed to North Americans by many Germans who refused to know better, continued to claim that „if only the Fuehrer knew, he would put matters right“. So too there was also a tendency, as noted by the editor of a Catholic German-language newspaper in Oregon, for North Americans „to have the false impression that the Third Reich’s measures are merely designed to bring about the separation of church and state, such as we have here, and hence are not seen as a persecution of every kind of Christianity“²⁹.

The second factor was the still lingering sympathies in North America for the pacifist cause. In 1937 and 1938 the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement was widely supported by all who dreaded the thought of a renewed war. However regrettable the Nazi policies might be, they were no reason to forgo the isolationist stance of North Americans, whose priority was to work for peace through negotiation and the good example of disarmament. The Munich Conference of September 1938 seemed therefore to many churchmen to

²⁵ In March 1938, The Canadian Baptist pointedly referred to Niemöller’s „martyrdom“.

²⁶ Quoted in *Schmidt*, *Architect of Unity* 130.

²⁷ Quoted in *Davies, Nefsky*, *How Silent* 50–1.

²⁸ *Watson Kirkconnell*, *Canada, Europe and Hitler* (Toronto 1937). Already in 1933 the American Northern Baptist press had sought to mobilise its readers against the „barbaric Hun“. Throughout the thirties, this policy continued, updating Baptists on events in Germany in suitably indignant tones.

²⁹ *St Josephs-Blatt*, 21 November 1938.

be a victory for such policies, and received the heartfelt blessing of many church leaders. But Hitler's subsequent actions soon destroyed the credibility of such endeavours.

Some resolutely patriotic clergymen had already recognised the dangers of such unrealistic appeasement of Hitler. In Toronto, the Canadian Baptist preacher, T.T. Shields, led the way in denouncing not only the Nazi leader, but also those sentimentalists who so recklessly sold out to this „utterly satanic personality“. „It is amazing to us how any man of moral sense and ordinary intelligence can be a pacifist.“ Neville Chamberlain's government was a disgrace to the British imperial tradition, since, Shields maintained, „the whole programme of Hitlerism is against God! We cannot take the bloody hand of Hitler, who is the devil's chief representative on earth, in friendship. I, for one, will not.“³⁰

Such sentiments were overwhelmingly confirmed, less than two months later, by the notorious pogrom of 9 November 1938, commonly called Crystal Night. No other single event served, not only to shatter many illusions, but to lead to an unprecedented show of ecumenical solidarity, and to an equally unprecedented demonstration of Christian readiness to espouse the cause of the persecuted Jews. In New York, a joint resolution brought together not only all the members of the Protestant Federal Council of Churches, but for the first time the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and the Southern Baptist churches, to attack the barbarities of the Nazi antisemitic orgy. In Canada, huge non-sectarian public rallies involving civic officials, members of parliament, educators and leaders of the churches and synagogues were held in all the major cities expressing their outrage, and their deprecation of these baneful results of antisemitism. They also called on the government in a series of strongly-worded and thoroughly unwelcome pro-Jewish and pro-refugee resolutions „to ameliorate the lot of refugees in Germany and Austria, and to make the German people aware of the horror with which their actions have filled the civilised world“³¹.

So too, in the United States, various church bodies passed similar forceful resolutions expressing their shock and indignation, and were followed by their periodical and journal editors in even harsher terms. The authorities of the Lutheran churches, who had hitherto been careful to defend Germany's best interests, now acknowledged that the Nazi violence was disgraceful, though they affirmed their belief that such deeds were not approved by the German people. At the same time they also expressed the hope that the terrible sufferings of the Jews would lead them to a recognition that their true salvation lay in coming to Christ. All these church representatives endorsed proposals for the admission of refugees to the full limit of the quotas, while urging their government to remember the American tradition to be a haven for those oppressed for conscience's sake. Several of these

³⁰ Quoted in *Davies, Nefsky, How Silent* 83–4.

³¹ Quoted in *Davies, Nefsky, How Silent* 135; by contrast, the Crystal Night received scant attention in the German-language press, and *Der Bote* at the end of November 1938 was still trying to persuade its readers that concentration camps were a myth, and that no Jew had died during this orgy of antisemitic hatred, *Der Bote*, 30 November 1938, 4.

statements were sent, for greater effect, to the German Ambassador³². But for other churches, notably the Southern Baptist Convention, even the scandal of Crystal Night could not induce them to break their total silence on the subject of conditions in Germany, or the needs of the refugees, which prevailed unbroken between 1933 and 1941³³.

For most North Americans the horrors of the Crystal Night cemented the almost universal hostility towards Nazi Germany, fully reflected in the church press. Even the formerly pro-German Lutherans and Mennonites were converted to a more critical stance. And as one far-sighted Catholic observer noted: „The old experience that persecution of the Jews precedes and parallels persecution of the church has been proved again.“³⁴ As the dark clouds of war loomed ever closer, the churches, even if reluctantly, accepted the necessity of resorting once again to arms to halt the advance of Nazi paganism and totalitarianism.

Their one regret, only occasionally voiced, was that the German churches had failed to take their own measures to oppose such an obvious menace. Some of the more engaged ecumenical leaders were, to be sure, well aware of the dilemmas and difficulties of their German church partners, torn between their conflicting religious and political loyalties, especially in the Confessing Church, but also in the Catholic Church. But for public consumption, the notion was disseminated that the German churches were being repressed by Nazi intolerance, and that the „true“ voice of German Christianity had been silenced by the Gestapo's draconian persecution. In line with their political interpretation of the German Church Struggle, North American church leaders could therefore reach the conclusion that participation in the war after September 1939 or 1941, could in part be justified by the thought that they were helping to rescue their fellow Christians from the evils of Nazi domination. Even though North American churchmen could be criticized for too often reflecting the vacillations of their politicians, especially in the isolationist climate of the 1930s, they were genuinely scandalized by events in Germany, and found the language needed to rally their followers in a renewed campaign to reassert the claims of Christian justice and morality. Armed with such sentiments, they could embark on a new holy war to make the world safe both for democracy and for God.

³² *Nawyn*, American Protestantism's Response 38.

³³ *Nawyn*, American Protestantism's Response 37.

³⁴ *St Josephs-Blatt*, 21 November 1938; the General Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches, *S. Cavert*, repeated this theme in an article entitled „The Church may be next. Anti-Semitism leads to anti-Christianity“, *The Lutheran Companion*, 20 October 1938, 1323.