

# PASTOR NIEMÖLLER

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WHEN I first saw Martin Niemöller, he was Vicar of Dahlem, a fashionable suburb of Berlin. During the War he had been a U-boat commander, and, from the point of view of the German Admiralty, a highly successful one. When the War was over and the nations had for a time ceased to breathe out "threatenings and slaughter," he saw the light from heaven shining about him, and from that moment acquired a new and tremendous purpose in life. The energy and daring, the determination and ability which he had shown in the hazardous game of war, was transformed into evangelical zeal which gave him no rest until he decided to take orders and proclaim his healing message. He was called to Dahlem, and in a very short time became recognised as the most influential preacher, as Karl Barth is the most powerful Christian thinker, in Germany.

After the Revolution, Pastor Niemöller was fighting a double battle. He was not only preaching Christ crucified so that he might win souls to God; he was challenging with all his strength the conception of religion that lies at the base of the Nazi ideology. Pastor Niemöller's message is a direct challenge to the theory that the State can, by raising the standard of material prosperity, cure the spiritual troubles of man as well. His message is more than a challenge; it is a denial that the National Socialist Revolution has made any real progress at all, that it ever can make any true progress so long as it continues to emphasize the material rather than the spiritual, and to esteem treasure on earth of more account than treasure in heaven. He has been fighting against officialdom, against the totalitarianism of the State. He has been fighting what Professor James Moffatt calls "the insidious new paganism which in the name of patriotism is undermining loyalty to the Christian gospel" . . . "He is content to preach the commanding Word of God with its demands for spiritual faith and freedom in the Church and in the individual life, and this he does with a direct, urgent note which rings clear as a bell across the frontiers of Germany. He fought against the Allies during the War, but he will win from many of them in this country a deep sympathy with his

efforts to win the greater War against dark powers of worldliness in political and even in ecclesiastical life."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Pastor Niemöller says that God and not the State must come first.

Pastor Niemöller, let it be understood, has not been personally anti-Hitler. The two men are old comrades-in-arms; they have at least that mysterious and intangible bond between them. For Hitler as the *Führer*, who not only succeeded in bringing about an epoch-making revolution in his country, but who rescued that country from the depths of despair, Niemöller has shown nothing but respect and admiration. Both men were accustomed to discipline; both know the value of it; both saw the tragic results to their nation when discipline cracked and broke. Both men suffered when their country had to pass under the yoke; both men dreamed of the day when it would arouse itself and come into its own again. Both men had their visions, and the visions were glorious. But they were different. Adolf Hitler dreamed of the road taken by the Teutonic Knights, and of a greater Germany; Pastor Niemöller dreamed of the Knights of God, of a greater Germany too, but a Germany not made with hands. Hitler believed that in order to achieve his purpose the State must move forward to its goal in its totality, that the lives and faculties of all citizens must be subservient to its will. "The State is the synthesis of all the material and non-material values of the race," said Mussolini. The citizen, that is, exists for the sake of the State!

This is entirely opposed to the teaching of Pastor Niemöller and the ministers of the Confessional Church. It outrages the belief of many thousands of German men and women who believe in the message of the Gospel and who try to follow its teaching. For them "the Christian religion is a spiritual society founded by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, deriving its existence and commission from Him alone." The Church believes in the sacraments. It believes in the fact of sin; it holds that through Christ mankind is redeemed. In its eyes neither the State nor the man at the head of it is infallible. They are simply the creatures of God, in whose sight all men are equal. They have received no special revelation from God, and have no right to speak as if they were infallible. The State is good up to a point; but the State cannot supply the soul's needs as God can. Each man must find God for himself; the State cannot give him

1. Introduction by James Moffatt to *First Commandment* by Martin Niemöller. Translation by Jane Lymburn.

God. The ministers of the Confessional Church are willing to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, but they must have liberty of worship and freedom to teach. It is where both Church and State seek to determine which things are Caesar's that conflict becomes inevitable.

This crisis was not, however, brought about by Pastor Niemöller. The fight against secular religion and against secularisation had begun in the early twenties of the present century, when Karl Barth was beginning to be recognised as a spiritual force in the country; it was carried on by the Altona Pastors in the manifesto issued just before the National Socialist Revolution. With the triumph of the Revolution the issue became a national one. The Church, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, cannot yield without sacrificing the fundamental principle of its being; the State cannot yield without sacrificing its claim that it is infallible. At the present moment the scales seem heavily weighted in favour of the State; it has the power, it has the material resources, it has the big battalions. For the moment these appear to be on the winning side. Hundreds who think like Niemöller have been arrested. The Evangelical Christians have protested to the Government against the measures taken by the State against the Church, interference in its internal administration, tampering with the young people, who have been largely absorbed into the *Hitler Youth*. For it is with the young people that the State is mainly concerned, the younger members of the church, who attend Sunday School and Bible Class. The aim of the State is to wean them away from such influences as quickly as possible, and to mould their minds to standard Nazi pattern. "From those who resist we shall take their children and train them to be what the German people needs," decreed the *Führer*. And to-day there is not the least doubt that the young people of Germany are National Socialist. To them the theology of Luther is mere reactionary dogmatism; and in their eyes the Roman Catholic Church, with its central seat of authority in Rome, is an alien organization, the worship in the churches a dead formalism, a mere valley of dead bones.

A few days ago I came across an interesting passage in a book written by an Englishman in 1914. It was written in the first heat of anti-German passion, and had many faults. But it contains passages which showed the author to be a close student of Germany and a keen observer of the trend of the

times. In fact, when he is writing of Church and State in 1914, he might be discussing the situation in Germany to-day:

Since St. Boniface introduced Christianity into Germany, its doctrines have had a remarkable history. But to anyone who has observed the religious life of modern Germany it would seem that the passing centuries have only served to extract the spirit of Christ from his teachings, leaving only the outer husk—the dry bones of dogma and formality. Bones which still excite never-ending strife and contention, although every vestige of the meat of grace has long since disappeared . . . Every department in the great national beehive is organized—including the one for religion—and here the organization genius has run amuck! The essential part, the spiritual, ethical or divine element, is an intangible something which defies human organization. Germany has succeeded in building up a wonderfully well-ordered State Church. (She) has not succeeded in taming or organizing “the wind which bloweth where it listeth, and no man knows whence it cometh or whither it goeth.”<sup>2</sup>

It is futile to speculate as to what might have happened if, during the dark days of the Republic, the young enthusiasts of the Youth Movement, with their lofty idealisms and their untainted spiritual faith, could have joined hands with the Church and gone forth together, consecrated to fresh and chastened service for God and humanity. But the Church seemed to have at the moment no message. The young people saw in it merely the tool and partner of a materialistic State, whose policy of aggression and materialistic aims had brought their country to ruin and humbled the national pride. They turned their backs on what they believed to be a dead church, which had died because it had not been true to its mission nor sought to follow the teaching which it professed. They were repelled and depressed by the materialism of the Republic, rejected and rebuffed or discouraged by the youth of other lands; their enthusiasm was easily diverted into another channel when the voice of the *Führer* was heard in the land. Can the message which the Confessional Church is offering even yet prove strong enough to win back the youth who have left it? Or, to put the question more crudely, “Can either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic Church begin to compete with the attractive working programme of the Hitler Youth?” If they cannot, then their future in Germany is black indeed.

Let us listen for a moment to Niemöller’s message. He opened the New Year, 1933, with the petition:

2. Thomas F. A. Smith, *The Soul of Germany*, 1915.

May God be with us in the New Year . . . and may the Lord Jesus comfort us! For we shall have great need of His comfort in the year across whose threshold we have just stepped . . . What God's intentions are with regard to our nation or to ourselves . . . we do not and shall not know . . . May God be with us, and may the Lord Jesus Christ comfort us!

On the first Sunday in Lent of the same year, when Hitler had become Chancellor and *Führer*, and the German people, that had set him in that high place, was again holding its head high, conscious of new vigour, the voice of Dahlem was again heard in solemn warning and expostulation:

When our German nation became a nation, God gave it as soul the Christian faith . . . and from this Christianity of the German soul have come all the forces which made our nation develop and grow.

Our nation would not be our nation but for the Reformation; but for the denominational schism, which we oftentimes feel as a burden; but for the positive Christianity of the Lutherans and the Calvinists and the Catholics. Therein lives the soul of our nation, and it would literally be of no avail to us if we were to gain the whole world and in so doing lose our soul.

That is the real reason why there never has been and never will be for our German nation any national rebirth which is not inwardly based upon a revival of the Christian faith. This nation—our nation—will either be a Christian nation or it will cease to exist.

For that reason our German nation can and must ask its political leaders to take this vital interest into account, and not to be deluded into thinking that the question of religion can ever be a private matter for our nation . . .

Peter wants to dabble in Christian politics: with "Christ" as his slogan he wants to win votes; he wants to win men and women who will shout hosannah to his Lord . . . But take care, Peter . . . Christ wants no heralds to announce His coming. He wants no frenzied enthusiasm for His cause, and no acclaiming of His person. He treads the path that leads to suffering and to the cross, and His adherents must also tread it, following in His steps.

At the Reformation festival in the same year, the pastor, unable to separate his pride of country from the German religious tradition, declared:

Much is being said and written at the present time about the "Luther spirit." . . . But I . . . must seriously *warn* anyone against thinking that the struggle for existence between the Protestant Church and Rome and the neo-paganism of to-day could possibly be won by this Luther spirit . . . Luther himself

knew what he was doing when he opposed the idea of his followers naming themselves after him, and mockingly . . . called himself "an old bag of worms," in order to make this plain . . . There is absolutely no sense in talking of Luther and celebrating Luther's memory within the Protestant Church if we stop at Luther's image and do not look at Him Whom Luther is pointing out to us . . . I think that the best thing that has been said so far during the Luther Jubilee is the simple message which our Hindenburg gave to the present Reichsbischof: "See that Christ is preached in Germany."

A year later he said:

Church and nation, nation and Church, can and indeed dare no longer be regarded as one . . . "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you!"

And more recently:

There is talk among us to-day of a "positive" Christianity, or recently also of a "positive" religion; which means that even in the domain of religion we consider anything to be *positive* which helps us to realize and to stabilize our great aim of a united, strong and proud nation. Anything that does not serve that aim is of no interest to us; anything that opposes it must be eliminated . . . A man to whom hundreds of thousands of people listen to-day—an upright, devout man, who is thoroughly bent upon establishing a "positive" religion and piety—has bluntly declared that "Jesus Christ is not to be taken over into the new German faith." Friends, can we trust ourselves to go our way with our nation without forgiveness of sins, without that so-called negative Christianity which, when all is said and done, clings in repentance and faith to Jesus as the Saviour of sinners? I cannot and you cannot and our nation cannot. "Come, let us return unto the Lord."

Pastor Niemöller knew that the easier and, in the eyes of the world, the safer way is to come to an agreement with the State, to hand over the souls as well as the bodies of Christians to its safe-keeping. He knew that in the testing time there will be many who have yielded lip service who will fall away and turn and deny their Lord:

Satan swings his sieve and Christianity is thrown hither and thither; and he who is not ready to suffer, he who called himself a Christian only because he thereby hoped to gain something good for his race and his nation, is blown away like chaff by the wind of this time . . .

We see it daily, and it makes our hearts heavy within us. One needs only to listen, and to question those who—as we thought



—had found their way back to the Church and to its Lord: disillusionment set in long ago, and is daily increasing. After all, what has Jesus of Nazareth, of whom men say that He is the Christ, really to offer us? "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee, both into prison and to death."

. . . The earthly path of the Church lies through the wilderness, and the path is full of temptation; and in these temptations it is not a matter of this individual or that, but of the whole company, of the people of God, of the Gospel, of the right faith and hope . . .

We are told that the Lord Jesus Christ will of course be given His rights beside the golden calf, and that Christian brotherly love will of course also continue to be recognized along with the fellowship of the nation, which is held together by blood, and that there will also be room for eternity when this time is over. But in that "also" lies the devilish temptation which is seeking to win the victory for the world over the Church of Christ . . . Everything is at stake: Heaven and Hell and the end of the world, which must choose between God and Satan. And so "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!"

Preaching on Passion Sunday from Psalm xliii, he drew this poignant sketch of the suffering of the brethren:

To-day all the bells of the German Protestant Churches are silent, and at the same time in every divine service a prayer of intercession is being said for the five Protestant pastors from Hesse and Saxony, who have been taken away from their congregations and put in the concentration camp, in spite of the remonstrances made by the interim church management to the authorities concerned. And so the only course left open to us is for us to act according to the words: "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it!" and we turn, seeking justice and help, to the supreme and highest court: "Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an unholy nation!"

But alas! that does not cause the affliction to be removed; the question "Why?" continues to torment and oppress us, and seeks to endanger our faith.

I am thinking of a dear young colleague in the neighbourhood of Frankfurt, who was arrested almost three weeks ago; his mother is lying in hospital, where she has had a dangerous operation for cancer; his old father had a severe paralytic stroke when he heard the news, and is still hovering between life and death; and what has caused the distress up till now? The mere fact that the pastor, in opposition to the order of the unlawful bishop, which was contrary to the creed of the Church, refused to leave his congregation and his congregation refused to leave him! Injustice carries the day and is victorious . . . The great temptation of this moment, when violence and injustice—falsely practised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ—have destroyed the outer structure of the Protestant Church, is for the congrega-

tion, powerless as it is to resist all this injustice, to fall away into bitterness and silent hatred, and thus to let in death, which will sooner or later rob it of its life.

Is it to be wondered at that the Nazi Government should have looked upon Pastor Niemöller as "Public Enemy No. 1", and that they should at last have ordered his arrest? Is it greatly to be wondered at that, after being set at liberty by the civil courts, he should have been immediately interned in a concentration camp? No compromise between him and his enemies is possible. And Niemöller, who is of the stuff that martyrs are made of, will endure until the end—whatever that end may be—trusting that, should he fall, another will catch the torch from his failing hand.

On the conclusion of the Conference of the Confessional Church held in Cassel in August, 1937, the provisional leadership issued the following message:

There are many who say that man needs only to seek God in nature, that He is in us, that He is in the community of blood, soil, and race. The created is wrongly placed above the Creator. Christ is opposed by them for His blood, His origin, and His teaching. They dispute that he is the Son of God, but between man and God there is no other bridge but Christ alone.

The leader of the neo-pagan movement in Germany is Professor Wilhelm Hauer, of the University of Tübingen. Hauer was born in Württemberg in South Germany, studied in Basle and became a missionary in India. Later he went to Oxford in order to qualify himself for the principalship of a Christian college in that country; he took a First in "Greats." After being for a time pastor in Frankfurt and Strasburg, he began gradually to drift away from the Christian position, which he finally abandoned. Later he was appointed to a chair in Tübingen, which he still holds.

Neo-Paganism is, in its last analysis, simply the rationalization of race worship. It is a product and manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*; it fits in with the *credo* and practice of Nazism. It does not seek to reintroduce the worship of Nordic deities, as many suppose it does; it is a political movement which is more than a political movement, a religion which is at the same time not a religion at all, because, while it has, it has not a God to worship. But, far from being an atheistic movement, the German Faith Movement "claims to be a counter-religion to Christianity,



and to worship a more than human God.”<sup>3</sup> The German Faith Movement is the product of the Immanentist school of philosophy of Meister Eckhart of Strasburg, the fourteenth century mystic, and of the peculiar race-consciousness of the German. Eckhart, the German mystics of the fifteenth, the Pietists of the seventeenth, Goethe, Fichte, Nietzsche of the nineteenth century, and now Hauer and his school find God immanent in the world, that is to say, only in nature and the human genius. In its crudest form, the God of the “German Religion” is simply the force and strength of the German people. God, Hauer believes, reveals and manifests Himself in the history not only of the Jewish, but of the German race as well. In his own words:

We believe in God’s immanence in the world, and therefore in his presence in history. God has not revealed himself only in the past, certainly not only in a Chosen People in a far-off land; he reveals himself everywhere in every great event, and especially when nations are molded by the achievements of great leaders . . . Our piety is a faith in the realities of this world, in contrast to the other-worldly piety of Christianity . . . The nature of Christianity, its form of spirituality, does not fit the creative genius of the German nation . . . The spiritual plight of our people is due to the alien influence of Near-Eastern and Semitic elements. We are therefore carrying on a pitiless battle against them. We are convinced that there is no power capable of exercising the evil except German Faith. It will show Germany the way of salvation.

In other words, race-consciousness is the basic factor of Hauer’s religion. In religion, he says:

There is a fundamental factor which is universally present . . . The believer is laid hold of by that ultimate reality of which we have spoken. But the way in which he experiences it, and especially the way in which he speaks of it, and expresses it in words and symbols, his reaction to it, depends on the disposition which he inherits in his blood.

That is to say, the faith of all who belong to the German race must be steeped in the traditions of their own blood and feeling. The religion of Hauer rejects the idea of mediation, of approach to God through Christ. Man is already in contact with God by virtue of the divine spark within him: God is revealed to us by our native genius.

3. Introduction to *Germany’s New Religion*, by Wilhelm Hauer, Karl Heim, and Karl Adam. Translated by T. S. K. Scott-Craig and R. E. Davies, 1937.

No one can enter Christ's presence, unless blinded with prejudice, without being filled with reverence for his human greatness, for his unparalleled power of loving, for his readiness to give his life for his cause . . . Many of his words and deeds touch a chord deep down in our hearts. But we protest against his being imposed on us as a leader and pattern . . . The general impression that he makes does not suit our genius. Despite all its height and depth, it is and remains alien . . . A man . . . can take root in no other soil than the religious creativity of the German spirit . . . We have had the experience that this suffices us for the mastery of life, and that we need no other way to the ultimate deeps of existence, that is, to God.

The very essence of the Christian religion is that man is not capable of goodness without the help of God; Neo-Paganism asserts that he is. But Neo-Paganism is more than a mere negation of the Christian position; it asserts that Jesus is not only not the true way, but actually the way of error. Not only has He not got any message for modern Germany, he is actually in the way, and must be banished "before the divine light can again be mirrored in our souls."

It is not because Jesus was a Jew ("although the possibility cannot be ruled out that He had Aryan blood in His veins") that the "youth of to-day who are aiming at a German Faith . . . are not deeply moved by him." It is because He has no message for them; He does not touch their hearts, the hearts, that is to say, of Herr Himmler's Black Guards, and of Baldur von Schirach's Hitler *Jugend*.

The two other contributors to this little volume,<sup>4</sup> Professor Heim and Professor Adam, are colleagues of Hauer at Tübingen. Heim is a Protestant, Adam a Catholic theologian, and they join direct issue with Hauer. They can do so with impunity, because their contributions are rather an academic exposition of the subject than a practical application of it to the polity of the State. Heim points out the danger of Hauer's rejection of the theory of individual moral responsibility, and contends that, without the operation of grace and the mediation of Jesus Christ, it is impossible for man to achieve union with God. Adam denies that Jesus has any special message for modern Germany, refutes the Nietzschean thesis that Christianity is "a typical product of decadence, an ideology fed on disillusionment; a religion of the 'small people,' who introduced a cowardly, mean-spirited transformation of values into the world in order to defend themselves against the healthy, strong, proud

4. *Germany's New Religion*.

'supermen'." To be a Christian is to be the very opposite of a weakling. On the contrary, it calls for the very highest types of courage, moral and physical; for the type of man who is idealized in Germany to-day, where physical fitness has developed almost into a religious cult:

Jesus's message takes anything but an antiphysical turn . . . Jesus was too great, too mature and free, to tolerate an unhealthy, oppressive asceticism . . . It is not His will to exterminate sensuous, feeling in His disciples, but to release it and transfigure it in the service of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore His disciples, as far as we know them, are in no way warped and thwarted half-men or quarter-men, but full-blooded whole men . . . There is no apostle who stresses the heroic manliness of the Christian attitude to life more strikingly than Paul . . . This is Paul: "Quit you like men, be strong." . . . The ideal of the healthy, virile, brave, disciplined man is not the ideal of Nietzsche and his school alone . . . "To believe in Christ the Redeemer" means, properly speaking and in the last resort, to enter inwardly and personally into the redeeming heroism of Christ, to set it up as the guiding and decisive force in the centre of our will-to-live and of our personal existence; it means to merge our little life in the greatness of the Redeemer's life, that they become one life.

But, so long as the leaders of the German Faith Movement, who have captured the youth of the country, maintain that in order to be a "German Christian" one must be an Aryan, and that the true spirit of Christianity is to be found in the primitive religion of that race; so long as they reject the Pauline teaching that in Christ "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free," so long can there be no hope of a better understanding between Church and State in Germany. Such "discoveries" as that of von Wendrin, who declared as far back as 1914 that Christ was none other than the Scandinavian deity, Baldur, would be laughable if they did not reveal the idea of race on which the German Faith Movement is based. And how can a people that claims a racial superiority over all other races admit the Christian doctrine that all men are equal in the sight of God? That is the root of the quarrel between the Confessional Church and the "German Christians," for the "German Christians" must from the very nature of things reject the healing teaching of Paul and of Christ.

What does the ordinary cultured German, who does not belong to the Hitler Youth, believe? It is not easy to say. They have their old loyalties to which they cling in secret; they see

and listen to the forward march of youth without taking part in it. They know that they could not; they know that they are not expected to do so. They are perhaps not wanted, for in no other country in the world to-day has so much emphasis been laid on youth while the protagonists themselves are young. Presently the men who took leading parts in the Revolution must feel the approach of middle age, and be forced to admit to themselves that their enthusiasm no longer glows so brightly as it did a few short years ago. And if they have not acquired an enthusiasm for the neo-pagan religion of the Youth Movement when they were in it themselves, are they not likely to return to their old loyalties, and to begin to wonder what the strange power could have been that once moved them so mightily? And perhaps there will be a little sense of shame mixed with the pride they take in recalling what they did when the blood coursed madly through their veins, and when they fondly believed that they had discovered the elixir of life which presently, alas! turned out to be nothing better than a specious empiric. Ah! that wonderful Street of the Alchemists where all is to be turned to gold and where the riddle of life is to be solved! Many have wandered thither, and found themselves in the dull of the evening still questing vainly the magic formula.