

Excursus on the position of some Lutheran theologians before Hitler

Luther's stance on the obedience to power, and more specifically his doctrine of the two kingdoms would be called upon in Germany between 1933 (Hitler's accession to power) to 1945 (end of World War II). Some Lutheran theologians made a stand against Nazism. This was for instance the case of Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) who was interned in a concentration camp from 1937 to 1945. It was also the case Dietrich Bonhoefer (born in 1906) who was close to some of the plotters against Hitler and who was secretly active in undermining the Nazi regime: he paid it with his life, being executed in 1945 a few weeks before German capitulation.

However a large number of Protestants, among whom some eminent theologians, fell back on Luther to support the Nazi regime. Like Luther, they set much store by this doctrine of the two kingdoms which enabled them to separate the spiritual realm (domain of personal faith in which no power may intervene) and the temporal realm (the law, politics and the military's domain). Though not all of them belonged to the Nazi party, most acknowledged the label of *Deutsche Christen* ("*German Christians*"), a powerful Protestant movement which supported the regime. Those theologians considered that obedience to the Hitlerian regime (established by God like all political regimes) was not something objectionable in respect of their faith. Those followers of Luther under the Wehrmacht uniform could say as the reformer had in 1526 that "*The hand that carries the sword and exterminates is no longer a human but a divine hand*" (Whether Soldiers can be in a *State of Grace* in *The Christian in Society*. III Schultz, Robert Editor, 1967).

Confronted with this positioning The German Confessing Church sought, notably through the theological declaration of Barmen (1934) to denounce the idea according to which "*there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ*" and according to which it would therefore be acceptable blindly to obey the Hitlerian regime.

On these questions, cf. Robert P. ERICKSEN, *Theologians under Hitler*. Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985; *Confessions de foi réformées contemporaines*, éd. Henri MOTTU et al., Genève, Labor et Fides, 2000 (citation from the Barmen declaration @ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>).