

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

MASTER THESIS

**A Lutheran Theologian and National Socialism: A
Political Biography of Helmuth Schreiner between
1921 and 1945**

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	Research question and sub-questions	6
1.2	Methodological considerations	7
1.3	The source base	8
1.4	Chapter overview	10
1.5	Ethics statement	11
2	Helmuth Schreiner’s early life, secularism as the largest threat and critical engagement	12
2.1	Secularism as threat in struggle of confessions	12
2.2	<i>Kulturkampf</i> and Innere Mission as response to threats .	13
2.3	Helmuth Schreiner as nationalist, conservative Lutheran	16
2.4	Schreiner engaged critically with the NS-regime	20
3	<i>Völkisch</i> thought	22
3.1	Roots of <i>völkisch</i> thought and attractiveness for Protestant theologians	22
3.2	<i>Völkisch</i> thought among apologists	23
3.3	Helmuth Schreiner and <i>völkisch</i> thought	24
3.4	Alfred Rosenberg as <i>völkisch</i> mastermind and bogeyman	27
3.5	Schreiner’s opposition of <i>Heidentum</i> as continuity	31
4	Lutheranism, National Socialism and Bekennende Kirche	33
4.1	<i>Völkisch</i> thought and National Socialism	33
4.2	Schreiner’s position on Nationalism and National Socialism	35
4.3	<i>Kirchenkampf</i> and the Bekennende Kirche	37
4.4	Schreiner’s relationship to the Bekennende Kirche	40

4.5	Changes in Schreiner's traditionally Lutheran <i>Weltanschauung</i>	42
5	Schreiner and deeply rooted anti-Semitism in Lutheranism	49
5.1	Anti-Semitism in the Bekennende Kirche	49
5.2	Helmuth Schreiner and latent anti-Semitism	51
5.3	A change in his view on Judaism?	53
6	The question of eugenics	54
6.1	Lutheranism and <i>Rassenhygiene</i>	54
6.2	Schreiner's position on eugenics	57
7	Conclusion	60
	References	65

Abstract

This thesis produces a biographical account of an influential but often overlooked Protestant theologian Helmuth Schreiner and explores his political and theological views. In historical postwar literature, the binary perception of German Protestant theologians, distinct in either support or resistance to the NS-regime, was too superficial and neglected the multifaceted relationship of the clergy to National Socialism before and during the Third Reich. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, historians added more shades to the black and white picture of the theologians, drawn in historiography and began to examine the middle ground between the two extremes as well as looked into less prominent actors. By analyzing previously underutilized documents from the Schreiner archive, this thesis contributes to a more detailed picture as it illustrates the quandary in which especially traditional Lutherans found themselves. This thesis argues that, driven by the fear of menacing secularism and atheism, Schreiner was, on the one side, attracted to the *völkisch* idea and National Socialism, but on the other, was deeply concerned about the antichristian tendencies in these movements. Over the course of the war he changed his sympathy to National Socialism and understood himself in resistance to the antichristian regime.

1 Introduction

In a sermon from the winter of 1944/45 Helmuth Schreiner called National Socialism “brown Communism”¹ and condemned its godlessness as the main reason for the miserable situation of Germany. 11 years earlier, during the surge of National Socialists, he ascribed to the same

¹ULBM n.d., p. 15.039.

movement the potential to successfully liberate the German *Volk* from the existential threat of atheist Communism and secularism.² To understand the connection he made between National Socialism and Communism, it is crucial to examine how he perceived the threat of secularism and examine why National Socialism was so interesting for him and many other Protestant theologians. In this sense, this thesis contributes to the understanding of ideological ambiguities of the Protestant clergy during the Third Reich by creating a biography of an important theologian before and during the Third Reich by using undiscovered documents from the Schreiner archive in the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek in Münster. In postwar historiography the Protestant Church was depicted as split into two ideological extremes, the Deutsche Christen (DC, German Christians), a group with close ties to the Nazi-regime, and the Bekennende Kirche (BK, Confessing Church), which opposed the majority of Hitler's intentions. Closer inspection of this strict categorization showed that between the DC and BK a large middle ground existed, and the transitions were, in fact, fluid. Even within the Confessing Church, sympathy towards National Socialism and anti-Semitism were not uncommon. In 1972, historian Hans Tiefel assessed the body of postwar literature on the Protestant Church, the clergy, and their attitude towards National Socialism and ideological involvement with Hitler's action as one-sided. He has recognized that the prominent theologians were lionized as heroes in opposition to Hitler and overshadowed the involvement of Protestant clergy in the fascist state. Tiefel has traced this phenomenon, on the one side, back to the chaos in the postwar period and beginning of the cold war, and on the other, to the dominance of literature on the resistance of small groups of theologians.³ Over time, this interpretation was

²Schreiner 1931, p. 8.

³Tiefel 1972, p. 326.

gradually replaced in historiography. The majority of Protestant theologians did not publicly support or oppose Hitler or National Socialism. As historian Robert Ericksen has argued, the theologians in the middle ground were extraordinarily interesting and research is needed into these lesser known theologians, in order to provide a better understanding of the Protestant clergy.⁴ Many theologians shared ideals with Hitler and hoped for a reciprocally beneficial relationship with the National Socialist system. The perception that the majority was simply too intimidated by Hitler to oppose National Socialism, is too superficial.⁵ In retrospect, Tiefel has argued that the response to Hitler in the Protestant church varied in a spectrum from “inactive indifference to overwhelming support”.⁶ Especially Lutherans struggled to distance themselves from the *völkisch*, nationalist, and racial ideology of the Nazis. In contrast, the *Weltanschauung* of the National Socialists correlated in more than one point with pillars of conservative Lutheran theology.⁷

Helmuth Schreiner was an important theologian and belonged loosely to the Confessing Church movement but acted in the shadow of well-known actors like Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his biography on Schreiner, historian Franz-Heinrich Beyer has focused on the life of Schreiner until he lost his position in Rostock in 1937. For this time, Beyer has drawn a portrait of Schreiner, in which Schreiner developed a set of ideas for the role of religion, state and society, common among conservative nationalist Lutherans from Northern Germany.⁸ In the context of representative sets of belief, historian Jochen-Christoph Kaiser has identified Schreiner’s positions as untypical. Schreiner held

⁴Ericksen 1986, p. 556.

⁵Ibid., p. 556.

⁶Tiefel 1972, p. 326.

⁷Ibid., p. 326.

⁸Beyer 2019, p. 127.

a conservative nationalist Lutheran belief, which was characteristic for an older generation of theologians, while, at the same time, he opposed the Deutsche Christen, which would have been typical for theologians of his generation.⁹ To clarify Schreiner's view on topics like his attitude towards the Second World War and the relationship between Church and state, historian Kurt Nowak has suggested to analyze Schreiner's work during his time in Münster where he was chairman of the deaconry and postwar reinstated as professor for practical theology at the Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster.¹⁰ This thesis aims to fill this gap in the literature and provide, on the one side, to the understanding of Schreiner's relationship to National Socialism, and, on the other, to the a more detailed picture of the Protestant clergy.

1.1 Research question and sub-questions

Therefore, this thesis will create a political biography of Helmuth Schreiner with a focus on the period from 1921 until 1945 and investigate what the documents in the Schreiner archive in Münster can contribute to the understanding of him as a Protestant theologian and his political views. Here, this thesis answers the following sub-questions:

- How did Schreiner perceive the role of the Protestant Church, the threat of secularism, *völkisch* thought and the compatibility of National Socialism and Christianity?

- How did he position himself as a conservative, nationalist Lutheran towards the persecution of Jews and Judaism as well as towards Lutheran anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism?

- To which degree were his views altered by the war and practices of

⁹Beyer 2019, p. 127.

¹⁰Nowak 1982a, p. 65.

eugenics?

- How did Helmuth Schreiner position himself politically after his suspension in 1937?

1.2 Methodological considerations

Based on the nature of the archived data in the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, this thesis examines the documents in the Schreiner archive and compares his ideological positions after 1937 with former *Weltanschauung*. Qualitative document analysis is chosen, because it allows a systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of documents, which exceed simple summaries of their content. Moreover, the documents' content will be contextualized in its historical setting. To investigate Schreiner and his positions, this thesis will be split in five main Chapters, according to thematic areas. The first three tackle the main ideological influences on Schreiner and how he engaged with them over time: secularism, *völkisch* thought and National Socialism. Additionally to the three main areas of engagement, his position on Judaism and eugenics are included. Both topics inherited a stellar importance on the society and Protestant clergy, which was cornered under the perceived threat of secularism and a godless state and tried to fight these tendencies through apologetic work. During this time the disunity in the Protestant clergy became visible and showed how the situation of being stuck in a quandary affected the lives of an uncountable number of people. Each of the five Chapters contain a literature review on backgrounds of the situation for Protestant theologians during the Third Reich with a special focus on literature on Schreiner's work and his own publications. Hereby, the historical, social and political context in which his earlier work was placed will be provided, which will later be used as a basis for comparison or

indication of a possible development in his positions. Furthermore, the documents in Schreiner's archive will be analyzed and interpreted, and lastly, the findings will be discussed in order to outline the implications of the results on the understanding of the Protestant clergy in order to contribute to a more nuanced picture.

1.3 The source base

The documents analyzed for this thesis derived from Schreiner's archive in the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek in Münster (ULB). After consulting the ULB, the available list of contents were analyzed and more than 500 documents were requested over the course of several visitations. Irrelevant information was filtered out and a set of data was created, which allowed, after external and internal analysis including an interpretation, to answer the initial research question and sub-questions. In 111 capsules, over 4,000 documents are archived with different characteristics, backgrounds, purposes and origins. Besides copies of public speeches and scientific lectures, the majority of its content comprises personal records, like copies of correspondences, from which most were written after Schreiner's displacement to Münster as well as his sermons were available. Although the vast majority of available documents were carbon copies or typewritten letters, and therefore in a good, readable constitution, most of his sermons, however, were handwritten notes in stenographic symbols and hence not readable. Only few, selected, sermons for extraordinary purposes were available in printed form. For the analysis, the main focus lied on Schreiner's sermons from 1937 until his last appearances as pastor in 1953, as well as on selected correspondences with interesting recipients, from which the highest probability of success in finding relevant information about his stance on topics from the re-

search question like National Socialism, *völkisch* thought or eugenics can be expected. Against the background that the majority of the actors were in the one or the other way in conflict with the regime, especially because Schreiner himself was branded as trouble maker and had to retire due to his public critique of the policies, they had to act very carefully and restrained. They lived in a dictatorship, where the free speech was gradually revoked and theologians in proximity to the BK were under scrutiny. Over the course of the time under scrutiny (early 1930's until 1945), public critique in any form was increasingly dangerous. Denunciation for regime-critique was a ubiquitous threat and the possibility that the Gestapo read their letters and infiltrated their public speeches or sermons was realistic. Hence, not only was their profession in danger, their personal well-being depended on the ability to limit public critique. Especially against the background of Schreiner's personal repercussions for his critique of the regime and the oppression and persecution of non-conform clergy like in the case of Martin Niemöller, it was only logical that he limited his open critique increasingly after 1937. Therefore, the majority of communication was dismissed, because it tackled personal issues. Similar to the circumstances around Schreiner's correspondences, his sermons and theological essays were under the dictatorship's scrutiny. Schreiner suffered previously from the consequences of denunciation at least twice, one case, in 1933 which ended unpunished and another one second, which ended his career in Rostock.¹¹ Against this background, it is apparent that he was under suspicion for subversive behavior. Therefore, it is assumable that he had to be very cautious about his sermons and critique of the authorities. Hence, slightest indicators of critique showed a strong dissonance with certain themes, because thematization

¹¹Nowak 1982a, p. 65.

as such was already dangerous and not coincident or an unlucky choice of words. Despite these conditions, Schreiner published through his theological work his theological and political opinion with alternating distinctness. In this context, Schreiner wrote in a letter to Theodor Heckel, “we pastors are, relatively seen, the most free people in Germany”,¹² which reflected on the remaining remnants from former Church authority, because the NS-regime desisted from suppressing the clergy excessively to not risk rejection among the followers.

1.4 Chapter overview

In the chapters two to six, five main areas of interest will be examined, which are relevant for the research on Schreiner’s positions. In the literature reviews of the chapters the circumstances Protestant Theologians were facing during the Third Reich and how Helmuth Schreiner was depicted in the scholarly discussion as theologian and person will be examined. Here, the focus will lie, on the one hand, on Protestant theologians under structural and ideological pressure between two opposing parties inside the Protestant Church, and, on the other, it will be examined how Schreiner positioned himself before 1937, but also how he argued in the question of compatibility of the Church and national Socialism. Afterwards, the results from analysis and interpretation of the document analysis will be provided and how they contribute to the understanding of Schreiner’s position until 1945. As a basis, the influence of secularism on Schreiner’s worldview will be examined. In this context, the fight against secularizing forces will be in the focus as a continuity in his life and characteristic for the formation of his positions and relationship to National Socialism. In chronological order, from the threat of

¹²ULBM n.d., p. 59.008.

Freidenker-Movements, over *völkisch* ideology, toward National Socialism, this framework will be applied. The *völkisch* ideology will be under investigation and how Schreiner perceived its relevance and potential as possible solution to many contemporary problems as well as a large threat to Christianity at the same time. Schreiner's relationship to the political system, the regime and his struggle during the *Kirchenkampf* will be illustrated as the aversion of secularism and atheism reached its climax and resulted in rejection of National Socialism. In the fifth chapter, Schreiner's attitude on deeply rooted anti-Semitism in Lutheran theology will be investigated, while in the sixth his position on practices of eugenics will be examined. In both contexts, his relationship towards an obligation to the race and his engagement in welfare-work will play a central role, as both were central issues for his worldview and Protestant theology. In the conclusion, the qualitative results will be discussed and illustrate, how they can contribute to a more detailed understanding of the Protestant clergy during the Third Reich.

1.5 Ethics statement

In this research, documents of Helmuth Schreiner, a theologian in the Protestant Church will be examined. In the context of analyzing and interpreting the meaning of written documents, ethical concerns like the critique of finiteness or the assessment of evidence will be kept in mind during the process.¹³ Possible findings, deriving from this research, could retrospectively change the work and view on ethical standards of this person. Since Schreiner is dead since 1962, he is unable to justify or rectify misinterpretations. Although this thesis aims to contribute to the historical understanding of the Protestant Church during the Third Reich

¹³Skarpelis 2020, p. 387.

and provide a better view on the theologians between two extreme poles inside the Church, the findings could have implications on Schreiner's and the Church's reputation.

2 Helmuth Schreiner's early life, secularism as the largest threat and critical engagement

2.1 Secularism as threat in struggle of confessions

Helmuth Schreiner was deeply concerned about secularizing forces, atheism and Freethought. In a report from 1930 "on the contemporary state and spiritual structure of the Freidenker-movement",¹⁴ Schreiner identified the movement as divided but nevertheless influential. He detected that economical and religious claims were central for the movement, and saw fundamental anti-clericalism as their main principle, which had parallels to Communism. Secularism was a long standing challenge to the Christian Churches in Germany, which faced major social, political, and organizational threats. Both, the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches acknowledged concerned that the secularist movements were emerging in Prussia from the 1840's onward. While the secular movements had different cultural backgrounds and goals, they all were aligned in their desire to challenge the existing state-church-relationship and in the case of the Free Religion movement, to bridge the confessional divide Catholics, Protestants and Jews from within Christianity, and developed in the course of the next decade "increasingly anticlerical, atheistic at-

¹⁴ULBM n.d., p. 24.053.

tacks against Christianity”.¹⁵ This was naturally perceived as a threat by the Churches. The relationship between the Christian Churches and secularist movements changed over time. During the early stages of the secularist upswing the center of discourse was mainly about the clash between secular liberalism, with close ties to *Kulturprotestantismus*. Protestant theologians increasingly warned in the beginning of the 20th century - also due to terminological difficulties - about parallels between secular movements and Communism.¹⁶ Hence, Protestantism was in interwar-Germany and later during the *Kirchenkampf* not only pitted against the Catholic Church and even occasionally aligned with secular movements against the Vatican, they were also opposing the same secular movements in fear of their nature as anticlerical and communist threats.¹⁷ An inclusion of secularism as one of the main threats of Protestantism indicates, on the one hand, that the perceived threat and fear of secularism was omnipresent, but, on the other, attests an influential role to secularism, mainly as spectre, in the interwar period in the sphere of established politics and religion.¹⁸

2.2 *Kulturkampf* and Innere Mission as response to threats

Helmuth Schreiner held a nationalistic, almost militaristic attitude, which he presumably built during his service during the First World War and British War captivity.¹⁹ In combination with his fighting spirit and strategic thinking he aimed to defend the Protestant Church against propa-

¹⁵Weir 2014, p. 2.

¹⁶Nowak 1980, p. 40.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁸Weir 2014, p. 23.

¹⁹Nowak 1982a, p. 62.

ganda and polemic publications of religious or political movements.²⁰ Therefore, he was interested in apologetics and engaged in the Innere Mission and Apologetische Centrale (AC, Apologetic Central). This organized defense derived from the clash between the two Christian antagonizing confessions in the 1870's, the *Kulturkampf*, when both Churches attempted to defend their influence in civil society and state.²¹ In offensive actions and campaigns, conducted by theologians and clergy, the Churches aimed to shape the public and political debate about religion. Although several institutions were developed for this purpose, the AC was the most prominent and influential one. Constituted in reaction to the threats of liberalism, secularism, and Communism, the fight against antichristian movements was added to the main goals of the Apologetische Centrale.²² Because apologetics were seen as platforms of spiritual fights over religious, cultural and party policies, the apologetic institutions were funded as missionaries of the own people (Volksmission) from overarching Church-organizations, like in this case the Protestant Innere Mission, which was managed and consulted in questions of theology by the Berliner Centralausschuß (CA, Central Committee).²³ Here, the Apologetische Centrale was responsible for the apologetic work, which included gathering information on other *Weltanschauungen* and sects as well as seminars for lay people, from 1921 until it's shutdown in 1937.²⁴ Although the AC fought for the needs of Protestantism, they were not representative for all strains of Protestantism, because, on the one side, they were not the only apologetic Protestant institution, even if they later

²⁰Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 22.

²¹Ibid., p. 21.

²²Pöhlmann 1998, p. 173.

²³Ibid., Preface.

²⁴J.-C. Kaiser 1989, p. 673.

became the most influential one,²⁵ and, on the other hand, mostly conservative Protestants engaged in apologetics and therefore their position was predominantly represented. Weir has described them as an organization of “evangelical, nationalist, conservative Protestants”,²⁶ which occasionally argued against liberal Protestants, and historian Wolfgang Tilgner has identified nationalist, almost *völkisch* tendencies, resulting in tensions inside the Protestant Church.²⁷ The main goal of the AC was the ideological fight against the religiously neutral Weimarer Republik and implemented cultural and religious pluralism.²⁸ Because the Protestant clergy saw the German Empire as God-given and its democratic successor as illegitimate, they condemned their new lack of influence, which was perceived as particularly wrong, due to their claim for sovereignty in matters of Christian and religious interpretation. Furthermore, the fear of a displacement of religion into the private sphere was driving. Hence, they intended to fight the rise of other religions, *en* and the secularisation of the society in particular.²⁹ As Characteristically for the “multidimensional struggle”³⁰ of religious actors at that time, the cultural clashes were fought both, between and within confessions. In the course of the Weimarer Republik, the AC engaged specially active with secularist movements, which were ascribed the status of *Ersatzreligionen* and therefore representatives of the threat to the Christian self-image of the AC.³¹

²⁵Pöhlmann 1998, p. 98.

²⁶Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 22.

²⁷Tilgner 1966, p. 65.

²⁸Pöhlmann 1998, Preface.

²⁹Ibid., p. 35.

³⁰Weir 2014, p. 14.

³¹Pöhlmann 1998, p. 36.

2.3 Helmuth Schreiner as nationalist, conservative Lutheran

The stations in Schreiner's life shaped his worldview significantly and he reproduced nationalist, conservative Lutheran positions. Early in his life, Schreiner was a member in the Christdeutsche Jugend, a youth organization, which desired an authoritarian state with privileges for the Churches and therefore contradicted the idea that democracy and Enlightenment were beneficial for the society.³² After his military service, he studied in Erlangen with influential Protestant theologians like Friedrich Gogarten and Paul Althaus. Historian Hans Tiefel concluded that the influence of the theology, deriving from Erlangen, tended to support National Socialism and lead to opposition of the Bekennende Kirche.³³ Additionally, during his theology studies in Erlangen, Schreiner was member of the student association 'Hallenser Wingolf', which was, in combination with many conservative teachers, critical for the development of Schreiner's conservative Lutheran imprint.³⁴ It was here that he built close ties to Friedrich Brunstäd, one of the most influential persons on Schreiner, who was later a leading figure in the DNVP until in 1933 the majority of members joined the NSDAP- fraction in the parliament.³⁵ These influences most likely have reaffirmed his existing political positions and contributed to this traditionally Lutheran advocate of an affinity to social order, respect of authority and aversion of democracy.³⁶ The separation of Church and state was seen as the only legitimate form of politics. In this worldly kingdom, the sovereignty of the state should remain intact.³⁷

³²Beyer 2019, 27 and 31.

³³Tiefel 1972, p. 332.

³⁴Beyer 2019, p. 26.

³⁵Niemann 2017, p. 27.

³⁶Beyer 2019, p. 26.

³⁷Honecker 1983, p. 477.

In general, Lutherans aimed to obey the duality of the “law and the gospel”, whereas the law refers to “social-political duties”³⁸ and should not be disrupted by the gospel, but rather be supported by it. They were traditionally loyal and held close ties to the authorities, theologically based on Romans 13:1, which refers to the worldly power, assigned by God.³⁹ Over the course of the past centuries, the relationship to the monarchy was seen as reciprocal beneficent. Because the clergy avoided critique of the authorities, they stood in the good grace of the monarchy, were granted autonomy in their religious sphere, and reproduced this in a codex of loyalty to the divine and earthly leadership.⁴⁰ Hence, the struggle against democracy was not only about religious or political aspects, but financial and power-related reasons played a role. Therefore, the promise of a ‘positive Christianity’ sparked hope among conservative Lutherans to restore their desired close relationship between Church and state, as Tiefel has formulated it, either as “throne and altar” or as “nation and altar”.⁴¹ However, Schreiner was not a hanger-on, but prudent and reflected. He was known for his rhetorical skills, his intelligence and drive, whereas Schreiner himself wanted to be understood as loyal.⁴² Carl Gunther Schweitzer, a valuable companion of Schreiner from Jewish decent and former leader of the AC, praised him for his empathy and courage to find surprisingly open and critical tone in terms of the *völkisch* questions before and throughout the Third Reich.⁴³ Schreiner’s field of interest was the theology, where he was an advocate of conservative Lutheranism in theory and practice, and organized in his position in

³⁸Tiefel 1972, p. 332.

³⁹Honecker 1983, p. 484.

⁴⁰Tiefel 1972, p. 329.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 330.

⁴²Niemann 2017, p. 28.

⁴³ULBM n.d., p. 90.032.

the Hamburger Stadtmission, he held since 1921, “swochen”⁴⁴ to discuss political questions critically.⁴⁵

Schreiner’s circumspect character and his interest in apologetics and the defense of conservative Lutheranism lead to a high position inside the Innere Mission. Next to his professorship in Rostock, he was as one of the leading members of the Apologetische Centrale, where he was assigned to fighting antichristian movements, *völkisch* groups, and sects. In this position he was known for his expertise on these movements, while he engaged in debates and publications, and defended his belief against perceived challenges for Christianity and Germany.⁴⁶ Therefore, Schreiner contributed significantly to the theological design of the AC with his approach for practical apologetic work, in which he defined the nature of apologetics as offensive in analysis and dispute, while tackling questions of foreign and domestic *Weltanschauung* with confession and compassion as points of departure.⁴⁷ Schreiner organized his work according to the traditional sectors of work inside the Innere Mission, which were the missionary work, diaconal work and public relations.⁴⁸ In retrospect, Schreiner dedicated different stages of his life to each sector. In 1926, Schreiner became chairman of the Johannesstift in Berlin Spandau and fought through his position in the Innere Mission against secular movements and thematized their ideology and lack of faith.⁴⁹ In this context, he linked the *völkisch* movement at least partially to the secularizing society, on the one, and engaged actively with National Socialism, on the

⁴⁴ULBM n.d., p. 90.032.

⁴⁵Fix 2007, p. 539.

⁴⁶Nowak 1982a, p. 64.

⁴⁷Pöhlmann 1998, p. 70.

⁴⁸ULBM n.d., p. 90.032.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 90.032.

other side.⁵⁰ Nowak has analyzed Schreiner's engagement, especially in the light of his publication "*Nationalsozialismus vor der Gottesfrage*", as coined by the struggle against secularization and generally open for "non-materialistic world views"⁵¹ like nationalism. Through his position in the Apologetische Centrale, he reproduced his worldview through his engagement with the surrounding world and contributed significantly to their work.⁵² The Apologetische Centrale was concerned about the rising number of secular and socialist movements, which in 1930 counted more than 500.000 members.⁵³ Because the Protestant Church was facing the challenges socialism posed for churches in Russia and communist campaigning against churches in Europe, for instance by the League of the Godless, Protestant theologians, like Schreiner, were eager to engage in apologetics.⁵⁴ During the interwar period, apologists argued for close ties between Communism and Jewish stereotypes, leading to the concept of Judeo-Bolshevism, which was broadly accepted due to broadly spread anti-Semitism and Judeophobia. Protestant apologists were strongly engaged in shaping a specific Christian *Weltanschauung*, however, they were concerned about emerging 'godless atheists' in general, referring to the threat of secularism, which many identified as the same secularizing forces as in the Freethought, Communism and National Socialism.⁵⁵

⁵⁰Fix 2007, p. 539.

⁵¹Nowak 1982a, p. 61.

⁵²Niemann 2017, p. 19.

⁵³Weir 2015, p. 280.

⁵⁴Greenberg and Miller 2021, p. 120.

⁵⁵Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 20.

2.4 Schreiner engaged critically with the NS-regime

Schreiner sympathized with nationalist ideology, which was typical for an entire generation of conservative Lutherans.⁵⁶ Despite his sympathy, he engaged critically with National Socialism, as he did with other world-views. Through his position in the Apologetische Centrale, the evaluation of theological and political developments was central. The document analysis indicated that Schreiner remained critical on the fringes of legality and with chances of personal repercussions throughout the years after Hitler's surge of power. As mentioned above, Schreiner held close ties with many theologians across the spectrum of Protestant clergy. One example for his critical attitude was a correspondence with Eugen Gerstenmaier, who was a student at the Faculty of Theology in Rostock when Schreiner was professor for practical theology. Gerstenmaier lead several protests during the 1930's against the NSDAP and the DC, and later joined the Pfarrernotbund and was close to the BK in opposition to the NS-regime, especially active against the implementation of the Aryan paragraph and the new Church law. For the NS-regime, he was branded as in opposition. Later, Gerstenmaier joined the resistance group Kreisauer Kreis and on 20th July 1944, he was involved in the attempted coup and assassination of Hitler.⁵⁷ Schreiner communicated regularly with Gerstenmaier during the late 1930's and early 1940's. In a letter from March 23, 1944, only months prior to the attempted coup, Schreiner thanked Eugen Gerstenmaier for a speech, he held earlier this month at an event in the Münster Diakonissenmutterhaus. Earlier, on February 28, 1944, Gerstenmaier responded to the initial invitation by Schreiner to hold an unspecified speech at the Schwesterntag, an assem-

⁵⁶Beyer 2019, p. 127.

⁵⁷Möller 2002, p. 118.

bly of the deaconry's nursing staff. Gerstenmaier accepted the invitation and proposed to hold his speech "unity of the Christian Occident?" (Einheit der abendländischen Christenheit?). Furthermore, he assumed that the topic of his speech might contain sensitive material, which tackled non-confessional topics, but situational problems (Situationsproblem), indicating critical engagement with the political situation. Therefore he required a non-public, "appropriate audience".⁵⁸ This correspondence with Gerstenmaier illustrated that Schreiner held a generally critical position against the National Socialist's and their policies. Although this correspondence was the only source that indicated at least slightly conspiratorial behavior, its nuances and the acceptance of Gerstenmaier's speech with possibly sensitive content indicated Schreiner's sympathy to resistance movements and sharpen the contours of his opposition. Against the background of Schreiner's status of under suspicion of critical behavior and the experienced ramifications of public critique, which led to his termination in 1937, this data indicated that he kept his intrinsic motivation to critically engage with the political situation during advanced stages of the Third Reich. In combination with an undated sermon, which is to be dated in 1944 due to its references to the air raids on Münster, Schreiner regained his belligerence and critical engagement despite his physical complaints and disillusion.⁵⁹ This critical engagement was an invariable throughout Schreiner's professional life, which started in the organization of "Weltanschauungswochen"⁶⁰ in 1921. Besides the personal characteristics of Schreiner, his fight against secularism, which he later detected in the *völkisch* movement and National Socialism, represented the struggle of several conservative Lutherans in

⁵⁸ULBM n.d., 71.126, 71.127 and 71.128.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 15.039.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 90.032.

the Innere Mission, because they engaged, after a stage of “disillusionment”,⁶¹ in different degrees against the political, church-political and theological threats.

3 *Völkisch* thought

3.1 Roots of *völkisch* thought and attractiveness for Protestant theologians

For Schreiner, *völkisch* thought consisted, on the one hand, of secularizing tendencies and was therefore in a threat to German Christianity, while, on the other hand, it fascinated him. It was one of the main themes in his work. The ideology was advocated and developed by *völkisch* thinkers like Wilhelm Stapel to implement a national-religious unity and was for large parts theologically linked to the *Schöpfungstheologie* and ascribed the German *Volk* the notion of a God-given nature and as such it required protection as a national and theological obligation.⁶² Stapel has proposed a divine will for the realization of the German *Volk*, which was characterized through the four main solutions of strong leadership, anti-Semitism, German Christianity and therefore rejection of Christian ethics.⁶³ During the Weimarer Republik, many *völkisch* movements evolved, which all incorporated idealism and neo-Romantic ideas like nationalism in opposition to democracy.⁶⁴ These characteristics were tempting for Schreiner and many others among the clergy, which favored a return to old order and principles. The desire for a creation theology on the basis of God-given purity of race and nationality appeared

⁶¹Ericksen 1986, p. 553.

⁶²Tilgner 1966, 71 and 103.

⁶³Ibid., p. 104.

⁶⁴Pöhlmann 1998, p. 47.

compatible with theological and political foundations, deeply rooted in Protestantism.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the combination of factors as the desire for bridging the confessional divide, a push back of secularism and the secularism-equating threat Communism and Socialism, and a restoration of a non-democratic state system with a strong leader in Germany led to the perception among Protestant theologians, and especially nationalist Lutherans, that Hitler's party was a suitable ideological and political partner.⁶⁶ This political ambition was fueled by the perception that the recently installed democracy was seen as inferior to a strong monarchy, and moreover imposed on Germany by an unfair treaty of Versailles, which was alleged to exploit the *Volk* and annihilate it.⁶⁷

3.2 *Völkisch* thought among apologists

Schreiner engaged through his position in the AC with different *völkisch* movements. As for Schreiner, the *völkisch* ideology was interesting for many of the conservative theologians in the AC, which mostly shared a nationalist background. Moreover, the AC shaped the idea of racial ideology as part of their own apologetic work and desired a conservative revolution based on *völkisch* principles.⁶⁸ Originating from the belief in God-given racial whiteness, which would forbid pollution of this purity as sin, the *Schöpfungstheologie* was popular among Lutheran nationalists.⁶⁹ For instance, theologian Walter Künneth, later leader of the AC, recognized legitimate foundations of the claim for a focus on *Volkstum* and a “divine demand for a völkisch-racial religion”.⁷⁰ Schreiner's background

⁶⁵Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 29.

⁶⁶Hanebrink 2018, p. 622.

⁶⁷Tiefel 1972, p. 327.

⁶⁸Beyer 2019, p. 44.

⁶⁹Tilgner 1966, p. 88.

⁷⁰Pöhlmann 1998, p. 241.

and early work fitted seamlessly into this ideal of Lutherans. Hence it was not surprising that he organized many of these meetings in his position in Hamburg.⁷¹ Examination of the links between conservative Protestant theology, Lutheran theology in particular, and racist *völkisch* ideology among National Socialists helped to explain the ideological proximity and initial attractiveness of Hitler's efforts for Protestant theologians. Hitler proposed the concept of 'positive Christianity' as crucial for the National Socialist's ideological position, where he recognized the importance and influence of the Christian belief in German society. Despite general acceptance of Christianity, he aimed to change the status of religion in his vision of Germany.⁷² He proposed to bridge the confessional gap between Catholicism and Protestantism, and ideologically combined racial ideology and esoterism. For many inside the AC, Hitler's promise for a unified Christianity under the concept of 'positive Christianity' was appealing because it unified the tempting characteristics of *völkisch* thought and soothed the fear of secularizing characteristics of it.⁷³

3.3 Helmuth Schreiner and *völkisch* thought

Due to his expertise with extremist movements, Schreiner engaged actively with upcoming *Weltanschauungen* like National Socialism. As one of the ingredients of National Socialism, *völkisch* ideas were early on omnipresent in his work. On the one hand, characteristically for conservative Lutherans, Schreiner showed sympathy for political ideals of *völkisch* thought, but rejected the racial absoluteness.⁷⁴ Nowak has characterized Schreiner as attached to Young Conservatism (Jungkonservatismus) and

⁷¹ULBM n.d., p. 90.032.

⁷²Steigmann-Gall 2003, p. 49.

⁷³Kaminsky 2020.

⁷⁴Fix 2007, p. 539.

sympathetic to *völkisch* and nationalistic thought, while at the same time he advocated strongly anti-secular positions.⁷⁵ Schreiner had an ambiguous relationship to *völkisch* ideas, which were traditionally rooted in conservative Lutheranism and therefore formative for Schreiner's thinking.⁷⁶ This ambiguity in attitude towards *völkisch* thought or acceptance as theologically problematic but socio-political desirable was the recurring theme in Schreiner's early work. For instance in his work from 1925 "*Das Christentum und die völkische Frage*", engaged intensively with the desirable drive and possible threat to Christian faith, the *völkisch* ideology inherited. Because he identified the German *Volk* under threat from foreign blood and mentality, especially against the background of the defeat in the First World War and overly oppressive repercussion post-war, Schreiner view the question of "how to (re-)create a united Volk"⁷⁷ (wie werden wir wieder ein Volk?) as the fundamental question of society. However, at the same time, Schreiner criticized the movements' lack and at times it's aversion of Christian faith. Hence he acknowledged the problem as following and assessed the movement's nature as:

"Das Ringen der lebendigen Gemeinde um eine neue Volksgemeinschaft und das Grundproblem der völkischen Bewegung haben ein- und dieselbe Wurzel. Wenn die völkische Bewegung versandet, sind wir verloren - und wenn die völkische Bewegung den Weg weiter geht, den sie gegenwärtig inne hält, dann geht sie unentrinnbar zu Grunde."⁷⁸

He recognized critical fallacies, which could end the movement's ex-

⁷⁵Nowak 1982a, p. 63.

⁷⁶Beyer 2019, p. 43.

⁷⁷Schreiner 1925, p. 7.

⁷⁸For a better readability, long quotes will be inserted in German. *ibid.*, p. 8.

istence and relevance. As the answer to this problem Schreiner advocated for the necessity of a “profoundly religious answer to the *völkisch* question”.⁷⁹ However, he hoped that the movements were able to find the way to include Christian faith, because it advocated a legitimate effort to secure the German *Volkstum*. Furthermore, on an assembly of the Apologetische Centrale in 1931 on questions of race, Schreiner was among the speakers and rejected the National Socialists’ *Weltanschauung*, because it promoted the blood of the *Volk* as highest principle and tended to become an “Ersatzreligion”.⁸⁰ However, in the same speech, he acknowledged the high value of the *völkisch* heritage for the German *Volk* and responsibility before God to preserve this good. Nowak has interpreted Schreiner’s position as stuck between the acknowledgment of responsibility to *völkisch* ideals due to its God-given nature and rejection of racial absoluteness. In his work, Schreiner engaged critically with *völkisch* actors like the Tannenbergbund, Deutsche Glaubensbewegung or Alfred Rosenberg and rejected the religious organizations due to their aim to replace the belief in Christianity with an Aryan or Nordic faith. Here, he critiqued the rejection of the Old Testament and eventually the entire Bible, leading to a “neugermanisches Heidentum”.⁸¹ Schreiner did not only engage with the *völkisch* ideology as a whole, he examined the worldview in detail. In the context of the core of *völkisch* ideology, the superiority of the German race, he recognized the special characteristics of the *Volk*⁸² but at the same time criticized the reduction to race as superficial, unscientific and eventually against the faith in God.⁸³ Despite the critique, his response to *völkisch* thought was constantly ambigu-

⁷⁹Schreiner 1925, p. 9.

⁸⁰Nowak 1982a, p. 63.

⁸¹Schreiner 1925, p. 9.

⁸²Künneht and Schreiner 1933, p. 62.

⁸³Ibid., p. 65.

ous, because he upheld the need of the Church to be more accessible for the people and their *völkisch* desires.⁸⁴ As a possible solution he favored the “Christdeutsche Idee”,⁸⁵ which contained all benefits of the contemplation of the superiority of the German *Volkstum*, Christian faith and German piety at the same time.

3.4 Alfred Rosenberg as *völkisch* mastermind and bogeyman

Schreiner, who was, on the one hand open for “non-materialistic world views”⁸⁶ and, on the other hand, repelled the antichristian nature of *völkisch* thought, rejected the approach of one of the key thinkers of *völkisch* ideology, Alfred Rosenberg, and blamed him for corrupting generally good ideas like nationalism and *völkisch* identity. While philosophers like Houston Steward Chamberlain or Protestant theologian Friedrich Delitzsch developed the idea of rejecting the Old Testament for its Jewish nature and replacing it with scripture of German *völkisch Weltanschauung* to combine it with a modified Christian belief of the New Testament, it was Alfred Rosenberg, who developed this approach and isolated the *völkisch* religiosity from its Christian origin to create a ‘Mythus’ of German *völkisch* ideology.⁸⁷ Rosenberg worked as NS-Germany’s leading ideologist to subordinate Protestant theology to *völkisch* thought as well as the National Socialists’ ideology. The ideological entrance for intellectuals, including the Protestant clergy, was the idea of a “national regeneration”⁸⁸ after being suffering under a failed state, lack of leadership and de-

⁸⁴Beyer 2019, p. 119.

⁸⁵Schreiner 1925, p. 40.

⁸⁶Nowak 1982a, p. 61.

⁸⁷Hexham 2011, p. 158.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 158.

generation of values. These points of criticism were aligned with critique, common among Protestants.⁸⁹ Rosenberg incorporated the rejection of the Old Testament and pressed ahead the concept of *völkisch* religiosity, combining anti-Semitism and critique of Christianity. Although the National Socialist's officially distanced themselves from Rosenberg after massive critique from Church leaders, the National Socialist's *Weltanschauung* was characterized by Rosenberg's neo-paganist ideology and has consisted mostly of a replacement of Christian religion with an ancestral belief as part of an "life affirming religion arising out of a specific historical culture".⁹⁰ In this context, several points raised concern among the clergy. Hence, the engagement with Rosenberg's work was a central task of the AC, because the fear of overthrowing the autonomy of the Church, elevation of the race and blood to the highest ideological good and attempts to aryanize the Bible were the most critical points.⁹¹ While the fear of losing Church autonomy was rather politically motivated, the other points were primarily theological concerns. In a correspondence from January 1935 between Schreiner and Wilhelm Stapel, a strong supporter of the National Socialists, they came to the conclusion that despite certain sympathy for nationalism, both rejected Rosenberg's ideology.⁹² Schreiner, apparently in a quandary, weighing the benefits of the National Socialism as single hope for the German people against the doubt of a incomplete and fallible interpretation of the idea by Hitler, come to the conclusion that the version of National Socialism at hand is not compatible with Christianity, despite some theological points on the plus side. Therefore, Schreiner has pointed out in his book *Der National-*

⁸⁹Hanebrink 2018, p. 622.

⁹⁰Hexham 2011, p. 167.

⁹¹Pöhlmann 1998, p. 21.

⁹²ULBM n.d., 32.080, 32.081 and 32.082.

sozialismus vor der Gottesfrage:

“Hitlers religiöse Haltung ist bestimmt durch die Kategorie des Gehorsams gegenüber dem Willen Gottes. Rosenberg kennt keine Verantwortung vor Gott, keinen Willen, der ihm begegnet. Seine Haltung ruht in mystischer Gleichsetzung von Gott und der Seele.”⁹³

Hence, he was still able to recognize the beneficent nature of National Socialism in Hitler as person and ideology, compatible with Christianity. Nowak has analyzed this passage as general affirmation of *völkisch* thought and National Socialism as the cure for religion’s suffering of continuous secularization.⁹⁴ But, Schreiner has found to his dismay that Rosenberg’s “Blut- und Bodenideology”⁹⁵ ascribed a godlike imperative to racial superiority.⁹⁶ Although Schreiner has admitted a theological foundation for the important drive for purity of race and blood, which he has formulated as

“Der Kampf um Gesundheit des Blutes und Reinheit der Rasse ist also vom christlichen Glauben her gesehen ein Gottesbefehl”,

he has concluded, that the influence of Rosenberg on the version of National Socialism at hand was too large, resulting in an unbridgeable distance to God and his word, whereas the worship of the Blood is condemned as “Blutsschande” and unjustly “Ersatzreligion”.⁹⁷ Nowak has identified that Schreiner had ascribed to Hitler a general obedience to

⁹³Schreiner 1931, p. 31.

⁹⁴Nowak 1980, p. 49.

⁹⁵Beyer 2019, p. 39.

⁹⁶Schreiner 1931, p. 31.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 31.

God, while he blamed Rosenberg for planting the “poisonous seed of the deification of race”, which was doomed.⁹⁸ Schreiner has referred to the subtitle of his book, whether Hitler’s National Socialism has to be evaluated as illusion or gospel, and concluded for the future of the National Socialist movement that attempts of proving the compatibility of Church and National Socialism were a betrayal of the gospel.⁹⁹ With this statement, Schreiner has weighed general acceptance of National Socialism against the *völkisch*, unchristian tendency, which he ascribed to this ideology, and rejected the NS-ideology as incompatible. Beyer has analyzed Schreiner’s conclusion as consistent critique of National Socialism, which he has exemplified with Schreiner’s critical attitude in further publications and his recognition by NS-media as hostile to the system.¹⁰⁰ Slightly divergent, Nowak has identified Schreiner’s position in this book as explicitly critical, although he recognized a affinity to a “spirit of optimism in nationalism”.¹⁰¹ In contrast to both authors Scholder has interpreted Schreiner’s argumentation as proximity to National Socialism in general.¹⁰² Because Schreiner has argued that National Socialism was aligned with God’s “Schöpferwille” and the liberation of the German *Volk*, it is plausible that he, had close ideological proximity to National Socialism, even though he has observed it with critical distance. Beyer has illustrated that Schreiner responded to disloyalty-allegations with references to several engagements, for instance his honorary membership in the Nationalsozialistischer Studentenbund. Schreiner’s ambiguous relationship to National Socialism is supported by the reception of Schreiner’s book by DC-near publisher Friedrich Wienecke, who rejected Schreiner’s

⁹⁸Nowak 1982a, p. 63.

⁹⁹Schreiner 1931, p. 62.

¹⁰⁰Beyer 2019, p. 51.

¹⁰¹Nowak 1982a, p. 62.

¹⁰²Bethge 1986, p. 178.

critique of National Socialism's ties to "Blutmythus" but at the same time claimed that Schreiner, after being confronted with this critique, explicitly stated that he "welcomed the guidelines of the Deutsche Christen and their statements".¹⁰³ This substantiates Schreiner's generally friendly view on National Socialism, although he critiques Hitler and his imposed version of Nationalism openly and fought other *völkisch* or *gottgläubig* sects through his position in the AC, which led to several further allegations and eventually to his termination.¹⁰⁴

3.5 Schreiner's opposition of *Heidentum* as continuity

The results from the document analysis indicated that while Schreiner was driven in his early stages by the fear and rejection of secularism and the movements which inherited this good like the Freidenkertum and Communism, he later detected, throughout his work in apologetics and as an expert for sects and *Weltanschauung*, that the same antichristian threat derived from *völkisch* ideology. The rejection of secularizing forces and Freidenkertum were a central theme in Schreiner's opinions. In an undated essay "The Church's fight against paganism" (Der Kampf der Kirche wider das Heidentum)¹⁰⁵ Schreiner called for a fight of Christians against paganism, and the *völkisch* paganism in particular. This sermon was held around 1937, because Schreiner clearly referred to several events. For instance, he mentioned that "Rome is seeing the chaos and decay" of paganism, greed for power and idolatry, which referred most likely to the Catholic Church and the papal encyclical of Pius XI "Mit Bren-

¹⁰³ULBM n.d., p. 93.073.

¹⁰⁴Beyer 2019, 99 and 107.

¹⁰⁵ULBM n.d., p. 3.027.

nender Sorge” from March 1937, in which the National Socialist’s were blamed for neopaganism, worship of race, blood and state. Furthermore, Schreiner mentioned Carl Jung’s work “Wotan”, which was published in 1936. The temporal classification of Schreiner’s sermon is important, since a time-slot post 1937 indicates that he, against increasing repressive policies and the threat of further personal ramifications than his termination in Rostock wrote an utterly critical essay. In this essay, Schreiner accused the leadership of paganism for misery as he wrote “paganism is guilty” and further elaborated that “when there is a ‘Mythus’ instead of the divine gospel, when they try to ascribe worldly values to it, there is paganism”. Central for his critique was his rejection of *völkisch* thought, which followed on Marxism as the greatest threat to Christianity. The worship of race and blood equaled the deliberate opposition of the Church and was “antichristianity” and required combat as such.¹⁰⁶ He analyzed the *völkisch* ideology as a modification of secularizing forces, because the original movements decreased in their importance. In an opinion report in 1942, he identified that Freethought movements were since the early 1930’s predominantly busy in fighting themselves, which resulted in a marginalization compared with the *völkisch* ideology, which shared several characteristics like quasi-religious ideas and rejection of traditional religions.¹⁰⁷ This showed that despite the low social and political impact of the Freethought movement, Schreiner was almost fanatically concerned about their secularizing forces and still engaged with it in 1942, when the totalitarian claim of National Socialism replaced other ideologies for several years.

In comparison of Schreiner’s early work and his later stages in life, it became apparent that his critique and aversion of *Heidentum* and secu-

¹⁰⁶ULBM n.d., p. 3.027.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 10.010.

larizing forces was a continuity. Especially the fight against antichristian movements was like a red line in Schreiner's life, which is not surprising due to his talent and interest in apologetics and as priest, engaging continuously with contemporary issues. Because he constantly recognized critical fallacies like the lack of faith or the drive to exclude Christian faith of the *völkisch* movement, he view the downfall of National Socialism, which adapted these fallacies, as legitimate and logical. The rejection of all "Heidentum"¹⁰⁸ and blaming of "Ersatzreligion"¹⁰⁹ was a central theme throughout his professional life, which resulted in alliances with unwanted allies. For instance, later, in 1942 he even justified the war against atheist Bolsheviks with a holy war against antichristian enemies¹¹⁰ and aligned with a regime he criticized for its *völkisch* ideology,¹¹¹ while later, Schreiner averted the National Socialist's and Hitler for their antichristian attitude. Hence, the critique of secularizing threats to the Church was a continuity.

4 Lutheranism, National Socialism and Beken- nende Kirche

4.1 *Völkisch* thought and National Socialism

Helmuth Schreiner's response to *völkisch* thought and National Socialism was characterized by sympathy and aversion at the same time. Similar to this, the response among the Protestant clergy to the *völkisch Weltanschauung* was in disunity, because it was observed as a possible

¹⁰⁸ULBM n.d., p. 3.027.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 3.027.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 15.022.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 3.027.

threat to Christianity by the AC, but the idea of German superiority, linked to its Christian heritage and exclusion of Judaism from this origin, was tempting for many theologians. Hence, the *völkisch* thought disseminated gradually among clergy, and was especially for conservative Lutheran theologians interesting, e.g. the group, which initially gathered as “Bund für deutsche Kirche” and later evolved to the Deutsche Christen. Despite at least partial sympathy among the entire spectrum of Protestant clergy, reservations and skepticism against the implementation of *völkisch* and National Socialist *Weltanschauung* by the NSDAP prevailed for large parts. The *völkisch* influence on the Church initially appeared to many among the Protestant clergy as incompatible with their belief. However, the threat of antichristian Communism, menacing from the east, was seen as more intimidating, while the National Socialist movement was identified as its antithesis and solution.¹¹² Hence, many arranged themselves, at least partially, with *völkisch* ideology as the lesser evil. Conservative nationalism, deeply rooted in Lutheran tradition, was here one of the major points of attraction for theologians. This form of political worldview was congruent with many desires of Lutherans at that time, because it provided answers to the defeat and humiliation in the First World War, aimed to unite the *Volk*, counteracted growing secularization and restored an authoritarian system. Here, the upcoming *völkisch* ideology was a key ideology for National Socialists and to a degree attractive and threatening at the same time to the clergy. The rising sympathy for Hitler in the population, while he simultaneously acted increasingly hostile to churches and their independence, created a dilemma for the theologians, and for Lutheran apologists in particular, because they had crossed through their former sympathy to

¹¹²Pöhlmann 1998, p. 174.

völkisch racial ideology a point of no return in their support and were in fear of losing more members. Hence, the apologists were mild in their critique of the NSDAP¹¹³ and their relationship to National Socialism was ambiguous, because they held ideological similarities, but also massive differences. Pöhlmann has illustrated that the work environment changed quicker for the AC than they had realized the threat deriving from National Socialism. While the public discourse was flooded from the fight between National Socialists and Communists, the AC dismayed that the “de-confessionalization evolved to privatization of the religious life”¹¹⁴ and therefore their hopes in re-Christianization through National Socialism vanished and they found themselves facing systematical suppression. Instead of the pluralism during the Weimarer Republik, the AC realized the rising confrontation with the “totalitarian claim of National Socialism”,¹¹⁵ which did not allow any other worldview besides their own “*Weltanschauungs*-conglomerate of Conservatism, Socialism, Scientism, *völkisch* ideology and Germanic mythology”.¹¹⁶

4.2 Schreiner’s position on Nationalism and National Socialism

The fear of secularism is important to Schreiner’s understanding of National Socialism. In line with the traditional conservative Lutheran position, Helmuth Schreiner was convinced that only a strong state was able to provide the society with the necessary structure, which represented the order God had imposed on the people.¹¹⁷ In this context, he was con-

¹¹³Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 29.

¹¹⁴Pöhlmann 1998, p. 193.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 195.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 195.

¹¹⁷Beyer 2019, p. 28.

vinced that a National Socialist state would have been an ally in the fight against secularism and for a re-Christianization. During the Weimarer Republik, the Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP) was the address for this political idea and attracted conservative Protestant theologians especially in Northern Germany. Especially in this part of Germany, where Schreiner eventually worked and engaged with *Weltanschauung* until 1937, the critique against democracy as inferior to a monarchy with a strong leader was popular among Lutherans.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Schreiner was also a party member, although he left the party in 1929 due to political dissonance.¹¹⁹ In Schreiner's book from January 1933, written together with Walter Künneth, the authors engaged with National Socialism. In the preface, both claim that "in clash against inner decomposition and against the threat from outside, the Reich Deutscher Nationen should be created, and this work calls all people, which love Germany, to unite in the front of the nation".¹²⁰ Additionally, in his work on the compatibility of National Socialism and Christianity from 1933, Schreiner has identified National Socialism as a *völkisch* movement of the masses. He has argued that it had the potential to successfully liberate the German *Volk*, because National Socialism was superior to a failed Socialism due to its origin out of existential threat for all German people, and not only a single class.¹²¹ As a reaction to the 25-point plan of Hitler's NSDAP, Schreiner acknowledged that the appreciation of the traditionally German, which he has referred to as "Urgegebenheit des Deutschen Volkstums" (ancient facts of the German national tradition) equaled the obligation to preserve God's will.¹²² Schreiner has argued

¹¹⁸Tiefel 1972, p. 327.

¹¹⁹Niemann 2017, p. 27.

¹²⁰Künneth and Schreiner 1933, Preface.

¹²¹Schreiner 1931, p. 8.

¹²²Ibid., p. 24.

himself:

“eine Analyse der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung findet als ihre tiefste Wurzel einen Lebenswillen vor, der sich als nationaler und sozialer Freiheitswille entfaltet. Er bricht mit der elementaren Wucht einer Naturgewalt hervor.”¹²³

Despite having recognized that Hitler’s National Socialism seemed in its version of 1932 incomplete and in some points questionable, he has concluded, in line with many other conservative nationalist Lutherans, that it may be the only hope for salvation from existential threat and slavery.¹²⁴ However, he continuously pointed to the impossibility of National Socialism as a successful system if it would deny the divine order or if unchristian tendencies would prevail.¹²⁵ In that case, although he has acknowledged the movement’s nature, he has predicted its downfall due to its lack of spiritual constitution, which would eventually betray the movement’s right to exist.¹²⁶

4.3 *Kirchenkampf* and the *Bekennende Kirche*

Schreiner’s relationship to *völkisch* thought and National Socialism was representative for the Protestant clergy, and for Lutheran theologians in particular, during the *Kirchenkampf*. After Hitler’s election, the umbrella organization Innere Mission and with it the Apologetische Centrale divided increasingly along the ideological lines of the acceptance of racial *völkisch* thought and compatibility with the gospel. In the ranks

¹²³Schreiner 1931, p. 25.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 25.

¹²⁵Künneht and Schreiner 1933, Preface.

¹²⁶Schreiner 1931, p. 9.

of the Innere Mission and its managing body, the Centralausschuß, the initial response to the *Kirchenkampf* was observant. For instance, the AC collaborated initially with the National Socialists in order to gather more information on the Freethought Movement with the intention to fight together the increasing secularization. Next to the fallacy that the National Socialists were their allies, one main factor for the reservations against opposition was the mixed composition of members in the CA, which was in the early 1930's infiltrated by the DC. On the one side, prominent supporters of the Deutsche Christen in the leading ranks prevented proximity to the BK or its predecessors, and, on the other, as Jochen-Christoph Kaiser has outlined, their largest motivation for their cautious reaction, despite theological and (Church-)political objections, was maintaining the functionality of the overarching welfare organization, which would have been under threat in case of political intervention.¹²⁷ Hence, the AC, which gathered almost unison in opposition to the National Socialists in 1933, suffered from structural and financial retaliations through their managing body, the CA, which in 1933 was adopted by the DC.¹²⁸ In 1933, the Apologetische Centrale commissioned to the Jungreformatrische Bewegung and Pfarrernotbund, which later evolved into the Bekennende Kirche,¹²⁹ representing at its apex approximately one third of Protestant theologians.¹³⁰

Following the surge of the National Socialists and involvement in Church-politics, the disunity among Protestant theologians divided them across the spectrum, ranging from full support, over a majority in the middle ground, up to the opposition forces, which eventually engaged

¹²⁷J.-C. Kaiser 1989, p. 674.

¹²⁸Pöhlmann 1998, p. 197.

¹²⁹Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 35.

¹³⁰Ziemann 2021, p. 74.

in the Bekennende Kirche. Especially conservative, nationalist Lutheran theologians struggled with their initial commitment to *völkisch* ideas and nationalism as the savior.¹³¹ The Lutheran theologians found themselves in a quandary, because criticism against authorities was deeply rooted in Lutheran faith as unjustly cabal, resulting in aversion against disloyalty. However, institutions like the Apologetische Centrale observed the National Socialists closely and feared their antichristian attitude, resulting in, at least, skepticism.¹³² For instance, the founding fathers of the Jungreformatorische Bewegung in May, 1933, by Martin Niemöller, Hanns Lilje and Walter Künneth acted in opposition to the *Gleichschaltung* of Church and state, but nevertheless felt attracted to the National Socialist Movement as such.¹³³ Hence, the position even inside the Confessing Church was characterized by an “ambivalence between opposition and support”.¹³⁴ The clash around the Church’s response to the National Socialist’s worldview resulted in a fragmented religious field on all organizational levels, deep down to the divide between conservative, Lutheran, nationalist theologians. The general will to cooperation even among theologians in proximity to the BK intensified the suspect of the radical wing of the BK.¹³⁵ It appeared that the fraction of the conservative, Lutheran, nationalist clergy, which could not fully commit to the compatibility of National Socialism and Protestant theology, had realized with Hitler’s seizure of power, that their hope in the process of rehabilitation of a Christian state vanished. Despite their struggle with the traditionally Lutheran virtue of loyalty, the majority of them saw the ability for re-Christianization only in opposition to Hitler, gathered as

¹³¹Weir and McLeod 2021, p. 35.

¹³²Tiefel 1972, p. 326.

¹³³Fix 2007, p. 539.

¹³⁴Baranowski 1999, p. 91.

¹³⁵Kaminsky 2020.

the Pfarrernotbund and later as Bekennende Kirche.¹³⁶

4.4 Schreiner's relationship to the Bekennende Kirche

In May 1933, Schreiner, who was among the co-founders of the Jungreformatrische Bewegung and later among the theologians that gathered in 1933 as the Pfarrernotbund, which later evolved into the Bekennende Kirche.¹³⁷ However, he avoided close proximity to the radical wing of the Bekennende Kirche due to his contacts in the Lutherischer Rat.¹³⁸ After the installation of the *Vorläufige Kirchenleitung (VKL)* in November 1934 as opposition to the NS-structures inside the Protestant Church, the BK consisted of various wings, ranging from radical positions of the *Dahlemiten* to moderate forces of conservative clergy. In 1936 the original VKL dissolved and so did the BK fall apart, divided into fragments of former groups like the *Dahlemiten*. Schreiner, as an advocate of Jungkonservatismus, maintained the distance to radical adherents of the Notbund around Bonhoeffer and Barth. In a correspondence from November 1938, he and Brunstäd, both emphasized their refusal of the radical positions and complain about a boycott of Brunstäd's work by BK-clergy.¹³⁹ Later, in July 1944, Schreiner affirmed his distance from Barth over the past years and partially blamed the *Dahlemiten's* radicalism for the gridlocked and misdirected situation since the early years of the BK.¹⁴⁰ Schreiner kept for most of the 1930's his reservations against a full opposition to Hitler, which is illustrated in his rejection of the Barmer Theologische Erklärung and Dahlem Bekenntnissynode while criticizing the BK

¹³⁶Kaminsky 2020.

¹³⁷Nowak 1982a, p. 61.

¹³⁸Fix 2007, p. 539.

¹³⁹ULBM n.d., p. 46.028.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 71.063.

as self-righteous Pharisees and declared that the Barmer Theologische Erklärung was from a Lutheran angle unacceptable.¹⁴¹ This correlated with Schreiner's support of the Erlanger counter-proposal to the Barmer Theologische Erklärung, which advocated a recognition of a special responsibility of the Church for the order of the *Volk*.¹⁴² Despite this degree of skepticism, the fight against the unchristian regime was a priority for Schreiner and reason for his support of the BK. This opposition was hope for Schreiner against Hitler's godless, misguided National Socialism, which was represented by the Deutsche Christen. For instance, in a correspondence with Paul Althaus from June 1934, he expressed his disgust for being lumped together with DC-theologians Fezer and Rückert, as well as noted that his differences to the DC was his respect for the Ten Commandments, indicating the unchristian nature of the organization.¹⁴³ Therefore, he continued his collaboration with the BK and stood in opposition to the NS-regime.¹⁴⁴ Despite Schreiner's distance, disciplinary proceedings were taken to suspend Schreiner due to critique in his publications and in speeches. Although this first attempt of the authorities to suspend Schreiner failed, he was under constant suspicion, and eventually compelled to retire involuntarily in 1937 due his statements in questions of race and politics.¹⁴⁵ Hence, Schreiner can be placed into the group of resistance against the NS-regime, especially against the background of his continuous critical engagement, during a time, in which the slightest critique caused massive retaliation.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ULBM n.d., p. 98.009.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 97.007.

¹⁴³Ibid., 29.006, 29.007 and 29.008.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 71.063.

¹⁴⁵Nowak 1982a, p. 65.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 64.

4.5 Changes in Schreiner's traditionally Lutheran *Weltanschauung*

The results of the document analysis indicated Schreiner was at least partially in resistance in the latter years of the Third Reich. It seemed that Schreiner emancipated himself from traditionally Lutheran views and consolidated his opposition to the regime. During the war, Schreiner held several sermons, in which he requested support and prayers for the German soldiers. For instance, in an undated sermon on the honor of soldiers in war, Schreiner has preached that the war of the Wehrmacht is holy and legitimized, because it fought enemies, which “roar in hatred for Christians”.¹⁴⁷ In a comparable sermon on February 15, 1942 on the sacrifice of the life, Schreiner preached that the eternal victory over unchristian Bolshevik enemies required the willingness of the soldiers to give the ultimate sacrifice. Here, Schreiner has preached for the holiness of the war to provide *Lebensraum* for the *Volk*, but at the same time admonished a “cult of personality” (*Persönlichkeitskultus*).¹⁴⁸ In both sermons, Schreiner preached for support of the Wehrmacht in war. He has combined his support of the army for political and ideological reasons, but also included the religious sphere and legitimized the war as holy against an unchristian enemy, which posed a risk for the German *Volk* and Church. This generally supportive nature of his sermons changed significantly in the course of the war. On October 8, 1944, Schreiner held a sermon in Münster on the “acceptance of death” (*Bereitung zum Sterben*). Here, he noticed that the German *Volk* can expect the arrival of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. He preached that due to God's wrath, the German people will suffer and the un-

¹⁴⁷ULBM n.d., p. 15.010.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 15.022.

certainty of survival can only be alleviated by faith. But, more than simple faith, Schreiner demanded the willingness to die, because it represented the ultimate acceptance of God and the divine promise.¹⁴⁹ In contrast to earlier exhortations to hold on the holy war and support the legitimate fight of the German army due to its entitlement to sufficient *Lebensraum* for the God-given *Volkstum*¹⁵⁰ and against the background of the advancing stage of war and increasing destruction of Germany, the biblical symbol of the Four Horsemen, which represent death, famine, war and conquest, Schreiner changed the sermon's message. Instead of emphasizing the theological legitimization of a holy war against unchristian enemies, he emphasized the wrath of God, which has the potential to destroy Germany. Only three months later, on New Year's Day in 1945, Schreiner held a sermon in Münster on perspectives for the German people during the times of war and called it "still confident and joyful!" (Dennoch getrost und freudig!). Here, Schreiner concluded that all deeds from the past were unchangeable, which eventually will result in "dark hours of decision", in which they "will have to give account of the misdeeds". This indicated an early theological analysis of war guilt. Furthermore, he determined that "no human, no Volk, is alone in time".¹⁵¹ Over the course of the two sermons, their names became increasingly more hopeful and provided a positive outlook for the parish. In contrast to the last sermon ("acceptance of death"¹⁵²), the sermon then focused on providing a perspective, which referred to both, either a heavenly judgment, or a worldly judgment by victorious powers. His emphasis on upcoming accountability, like in the last sermon from October

¹⁴⁹ULBM n.d., p. 15.045.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 15.010 and 15.022.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 15.053.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 15.045.

8, 1944, indicated that he assessed the divine legitimization differently, he ascribed to the war against unchristian enemies in his sermon from February 15, 1942. Furthermore, he mentioned explicitly that “no Volk, is alone in time”, which reproduced his newly developed negligence of the German *Volkstum*’s superiority. He changed his attitude towards the war during this time. Because he prepared the parish to lose their worldly estates and probably their lives, the purpose of his sermons changed from uniting the *Volk* behind it’s soldiers and acting out of Lutheran loyalty to the Führer, towards providing a response to the imminent defeat in the war to relieving the parish’s fear of death and defeat. This indicated a shift in Schreiner’s political and theological attitude towards the authority and a focus on Christian welfare, which was important for him since his early engagement in the Johannesstift. The context of the sermons showed factors, which contributed to the change in Schreiner’s sermons. As mentioned earlier, he suffered around this time in 1944 under a typhus infection, which may affected his general state of well-being. In combination with the omnipresent death of friends,¹⁵³ this created the context, in which he has interpreted the situation of war differently. A further sermon with similar content is undated, but due to it’s context of the state of war and the reference to “iron and fire hailing from the sky”¹⁵⁴ on July-days in Münster, it was held, most likely, in late 1944 or early 1945. In this sermon with the name “Everything is lost! Really everything?” (Alles verloren! Wirklich alles?), he concluded that “everything worldly is lost” and furthermore elaborated:

“Und wenn wir an unser Vaterland denken, an das Land, wo uns Gottes Sonne zuerst schien, an das Land unserer Kinder? Wenn wir den

¹⁵³ULBM n.d., 39.076 and 39.077.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 15.039.

Zusammenbruch seiner Wehrmacht vor Augen haben, wenn wir sehen, wie es zerstückt ist und zerstückt wird, wenn wir hören, wie der Hunger durch die zerstörten Städte schleicht- , kommen wir nicht zu einem ähnlichen Erlebnis? Alles verloren!”¹⁵⁵

Despite this fatalistic paragraph, he noted that God gave the people a will to live, an “ineradicable urge”. This continued his new view on the theological and political circumstances of the war and at the same time lied in continuity to his attempts to propose hope to the suffering people instead of blind loyalty to the authority. Moreover, he asserted that “old parties seek to raise their heads, which infertility and impotence is evident”. These parties, he furthermore described, as “old tin gods” besides the “lively God” with “empty and dead words”, which will lead the German people into “a unity without love, love without faith and faith astray from God and against him”. Schreiner recognized that for this form of idolatry, people will suffer from the wrath of God, who used other “people and nations as his instruments” and rhetorically asked

“does anyone want to claim that the downfall of the Third Reich and its brown Communism is not linked to God’s work? Is there someone, who dares to claim that Germany was just unlucky in the past years?”¹⁵⁶

Here, Schreiner elaborated that the German people were misguided by it’s Führer, but are at least partially at fault. To ensure the *Volk’s* existence, it has to claim at least partially the responsibility and renew. In this context, Schreiner demanded that the *Volk* can only be preserved by system with fear of God to overcome the disappointment and decep-

¹⁵⁵ULBM n.d., p. 15.039.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 15.039.

tion. This accumulation of theses and explicit critique of the NS-regime is evidence for his ideological opposition to it. Schreiner did not limit his critique to godlessness of National Socialist's *völkisch* ideology, which he ascribed the reason for the wrath of God to, moreover, he identified the entire leadership and National Socialism as wrong. Furthermore, he intensified his vision of a near end of war and engaged intensively with the future and possibilities to ensure the existence of the German people. Schreiner wanted to overcome the godlessness and false ideology, which is also indicated by the usage of the phrase "the testimony of God, deriving from the Old Testament, is guiding our way". Here, he referred to the aspiration, which derived from Rosenberg's *völkisch* ideology and later was central for *Gottgläubigkeit* among National Socialist's vision for the German *Volk* to dismiss the Old Testament for its Jewishness, and rejected it symbolically to propose a Christian basis for the preservation of German people.

The increasing degree of open critique of the regime and National Socialist's ideology, the war, and the evilness in the German state is remarkable against the background that he held the sermons publicly during the last years of the dictatorship, while oppositions was punished with critical repercussions. Schreiner realized over the course of the last two years of war the need to change the purpose of his sermons from exhortations to hold on and critique to unify the *Volk*, towards strong critique of the godless and false leaders. Hence, a significant change in his attitude is detectable. While he upheld the traditionally conservative Lutheran characteristic obligation to loyalty during the first years of war, he later focused on spiritual support for the parish. For instance, in an undated sermon with the name "Our sermon during the war" (Unsere Predigt im

Kriege),¹⁵⁷ which was, due to its references to war events outside and bombing inside of the Reich, most likely, held in 1942, Schreiner elaborated on the question how preachers should create their sermons in relation to the on-going war. Here, Schreiner concluded, that, first, preachers were not allowed to make “the war itself, its reason, its progress, its outcome, its purpose” part of the gospel’s proclamation, because they would only reproduce erratic assumptions or ideals. Neither negative nor positive ideals should’ve been proclaimed, because war was, in either way, be a divine instrument. Second, Schreiner found that preachers were indeed encouraged to “pray for the victory of our Volk, thus its honor and its ensured existence. We pray for Führer and Volk.”¹⁵⁸ Both points were later interpreted differently. Before 1944, Schreiner upheld this ethos partially. In his sermons from 1942, he created partially an ideal of the war and proclaimed the gospel to provide the guidance of God to soldiers, which fought a holy war against unchristian enemies. While violating his first point, he indeed acted according to his second and prayed for the *Volk’s* “honor and its ensured existence”.¹⁵⁹ In the later sermons, however, he made the war, progress and outcome part of the gospel’s proclamation, and moreover, assessed these aspects negatively by expecting defeat.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, he doubted heavily the *Volk’s* victory, its misleading Führer and his false, godless ideology, but also identified taking responsibility after defeat and a different system as only option for preservation of the *Volk’s* honor and existence.¹⁶¹ A significant change in his attitude towards traditionally Lutheran values is apparent. On the one hand, Schreiner re-assessed the superiority of the German *Volkstum*,

¹⁵⁷ULBM n.d., p. 3.030.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 3.030.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 15.010 and 15.022.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 15.039.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 15.039, 15.045 and 15.053.

which he initially ascribed a god-given nature¹⁶² and come to the conclusion that “no Volk alone in time”,¹⁶³ which illustrated a submissive view on race and *Volk*. On the other hand, he changed his view on National Socialism and its legitimacy. While in the years before and after Hitler’s surge of power Schreiner was at least sympathetic to tendencies of National Socialism and rejected a full distancing from Hitler,¹⁶⁴ partially due to his Lutheran obligation to loyalty, he changed his attitude over the course of the final years of war and critiqued the authority openly, which would have been assessed earlier as unjustly cabal.¹⁶⁵ Against the background of Schreiner’s initial assessment of National Socialism in his book “*Der Nationalsozialismus vor der Gottesfrage*” from 1933, where he has acknowledged the movement’s nature, but at the same time has predicted its downfall due to its lack of spiritual constitution, which would eventually betray the movement’s right to exist, this aversion of loyalty to the unjust leadership was only consistent and represented the Ericksen’s observation of “disillusionment”.¹⁶⁶ With these results, it is possible to contribute to the analyses of Schreiner’s attitude towards National Socialism from Beyer,¹⁶⁷ Nowak¹⁶⁸ and Scholder¹⁶⁹ that his attitude developed over the course of the Third Reich, in contrast to a strict consideration of Schreiner in full opposition or with significant proximity to National Socialism.

¹⁶²Schreiner 1931, p. 24.

¹⁶³ULBM n.d., p. 15.053.

¹⁶⁴Schreiner 1931, p. 25.

¹⁶⁵Tiefel 1972, p. 326.

¹⁶⁶Ericksen 1986, p. 553.

¹⁶⁷Beyer 2019, p. 51.

¹⁶⁸Nowak 1982a, p. 62.

¹⁶⁹Bethge 1986, p. 178.

5 Schreiner and deeply rooted anti-Semitism in Lutheranism

5.1 Anti-Semitism in the Bekennende Kirche

Although one of Schreiner's closest friends, Carl Gunther Schweitzer, was from Jewish descent, Schreiner reproduced anti-Semitic stereotypes throughout his life. Antipathy towards 'the Jew' was far-spread in the German interwar-society and therefore also omnipresent among the clergy. While the majority accepted assimilated and baptized Jews, 'the Jewry' was accused of being a subversive influence on society, financial market, art, press and politics. While it was possible to differentiate the contemporary aversion of 'the Jewry' between 'hostility to Jews', anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, all three types provided reasons and prejudices for the rejection of 'the Jewish' and were to different degrees prevalent among confessions and (Church-)political groups.¹⁷⁰ The response of German Protestantism to the NS-regime and its policies concerning Jews was far from unified. In 1933, the implementation of the *Arierparagraph* not only evoked mostly benevolent reaction among Protestant clergy, it was also the first time, the clergy was actively and theologically confronted with anti-Semitism, which was adapted for large parts without reflection.¹⁷¹ Anti-Semitism, race and *Volkstum* were traditionally rooted in the common *Weltanschauung* among Lutheran clergy that the extreme anti-Semitism of the National Socialists was for the majority not apparent.¹⁷² Even among theologians in proximity to the BK, which included Schreiner in the AC and at that time for large parts the CA of the Innere

¹⁷⁰Smid 1988, p. 39.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 38 and 55.

¹⁷²Thamer 1988, p. 220.

Mission, the response was not allied in opposition.¹⁷³ Anti-Semitism was far spread among theologians, however, the reason for the rejection of Jews was depending from the individual's opinion and interpretation of theology. Paul Althaus, for instance, did not refer to reasons of blood or faith, but blamed a "demoralizing urban spirituality".¹⁷⁴ Theologians like Martin Niemöller recognized a suffering of the German *Volk* under the influence of Jewish life, while they were aligned in opposition to Hitler. As a reaction to the authority's attempt to take over the power inside the Protestant Church by utilizing the *Deutsche Christen* and install the *Arierparagrafen*, Niemöller and others gathered in resistance with reference to the Apostles' Creed and the obligation to recognition of baptism, which would have been undermined by the exclusion from any people with Jewish background regardless their contemporary confession.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, the *Arierparagraf* evoked clashes inside the clergy. Beyond theological themes, the semi-theological and semi-power-related response to the attack on Church autonomy by the National Socialists provoked skepticism and partial rejection, which was theologically based on the defense of the church-autonomy securing concept of Luther's two kingdoms as well as the fear of an enforced replacement of Christianity with as 'antichristian' unveiled *Deutschgläubigkeit*, and structurally based on the fear of losing power.¹⁷⁶ Hence, the Lutheran clergy was in disunity in the response, fluctuating between support and rejection of the paragraph, but in the least cases based on the intention to protect or defend Jewish life as such. Historian Marikje Smid has outlined that especially Lutheran theologians inherited a *Weltanschauung* of latent

¹⁷³J.-C. Kaiser 1989, p. 678.

¹⁷⁴Ericksen 1986, p. 561.

¹⁷⁵Ziemann 2021, p. 74.

¹⁷⁶Tiefel 1972, p. 333.

anti-Semitism, which was consolidated in their political view in combination with their theological point of view.¹⁷⁷ As Schreiner, the majority of the Lutheran clergy was affiliated with the DNVP or later with the DVP, which both represented national solidarity as savior from all crises. Here, ideological hostility towards Jews was prevalent, which did not reflected solely on biological differences but saw 'the Jewish' as a representation of everything evil, modern, and democratic in society. Additionally, the *Schöpfungstheologie*, in particular present among nationalist Lutheran, cemented 'the Jewish' as the enemy of German *Volkstum* and race, and contributed to the latent aversion among the clergy, which was typically reproduced in anti-Judaistic schemes like the Jewish decay from God.¹⁷⁸ In this context, conservative Lutherans, and especially representatives from the Erlanger Lutheranism, were the fiercest advocates of this anti-Semitism, which believed in the necessity of the elimination of Jewish life as impurity to protect the *Volkstum* in order to serve a divine obligation.¹⁷⁹

5.2 Helmuth Schreiner and latent anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was common among Protestant theologians and lead to the established perception among conservative nationalist Lutherans that Jews were, unless assimilated, unwanted members of the society, which required theological and social combat. This thought was common among people affiliated with Erlanger Lutheranism and great influence on Schreiner like Brunstäd and Althaus, who professed socio-cultural anti-Semitism.¹⁸⁰ Schreiner acknowledged the contribution of Judaism in form of the Old

¹⁷⁷Smid 1988, p. 48.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 52.

Testament as the shared origin and rejected attempts of aryanizing this part of the Bible, while at the same time, he reproduced anti-Judaistic stereotypes and indicated that Jews were at fault in their own misery.¹⁸¹ On the one side, he recognized similarities of Jewish and Christian piety, like the values of heroism and bravery.¹⁸² On the other side, Schreiner has found theological justification of anti-Semitism and has argued for its naturalness.¹⁸³ In 1925 Schreiner identified in his book on the *völkisch* question, that “in no other country than Germany, the threat of decomposition to the Volkstum by modern Judaism is so obvious”.¹⁸⁴ Hence, he identified the legitimacy of anti-Semitism, and as Beyer has outlined, Schreiner noticed in a Easter-sermon that Jews were suffering rightfully for repelling and killing Jesus.¹⁸⁵ In his work “*Der Nationalsozialismus vor der Gottesfrage*” (1932), Schreiner has excluded non-German *Volkstum* from God-given German *Volkstum*, and continued to plead that the intention to exclude Jewish influence from all public life was sacrosanct, and moreover the obligation of German people, even though the realization appeared as difficult.¹⁸⁶ However, Schreiner was in a moral-theological dilemma. On the one side, he felt obligated to “Gottes Schöpferwille” (God’s creative will), which established a *völkisch* responsibility to preserve the German *Volkstum* and eventually exclude Jewish influence.¹⁸⁷ On the other side, despite recognizing the alleged fallacy of Jews to redeem their own race, he rejected the reduction of all German problems to ‘the Jewry’, because it would overlook all other political and

¹⁸¹Beyer 2019, p. 37.

¹⁸²Schreiner 1925, p. 38.

¹⁸³Schreiner 1931, p. 25.

¹⁸⁴Schreiner 1925, p. 12.

¹⁸⁵Beyer 2019, p. 77.

¹⁸⁶Schreiner 1931, p. 24.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 25.

social defects.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, while he rejected the participation of baptizes Jews in ecclesiastical office,¹⁸⁹ one of his closest companions, Carl Gunther Schweitzer, was a Protestant theologian from Jewish descent.¹⁹⁰ This indicated that Schreiner's anti-Semitism was mainly based on reasons of theology and stereotypes instead of sheer rejection of Jewry and hatred.

5.3 A change in his view on Judaism?

The results of the document analysis indicated that until the last years of the war, Schreiner's position on Judaism was continuously hostile. However, against the background of the detected tendency of disillusionment and developed antipathy against the own authorities and their misguided ideology (Chapter 4), it became apparent that he altered his general hostility towards Judaism. Initially, he expressed his antipathy for Judaism: He was co-founder of the Jungreformatrische Bewegung, which explicitly did not oppose Hitler in ideological questions,¹⁹¹ he appreciated Hitler's intention in 25-point plan to protect the "Urgegebenheit des Deutschen Volkstums" (ancient facts of the German national tradition)¹⁹² as obligation to protect God's will, excluded non-German *Volkstum* and continued to plead that the intention to exclude Jewish influence from all public life is sacrosanct, and moreover the obligation of German people.¹⁹³ However, in the last years of the war, the degree of anti-Semitism was declining, presumably caused by his altered attitude towards the divinity of the German *Volkstum* and in expectations of God's punishment for misdeed

¹⁸⁸Schreiner 1931, p. 44.

¹⁸⁹Beyer 2019, p. 77.

¹⁹⁰ULBM n.d., p. 90.032.

¹⁹¹Ibid., p. 99.022.

¹⁹²Schreiner 1931, p. 24.

¹⁹³Ibid., p. 24.

in idolatry of racial ideology.¹⁹⁴ In this context, he determined that “no human, no Volk, is alone in time”¹⁹⁵ which referred, on the one hand, to crimes against the Jewish *Volk*, and on the other, to a re-assessment of the divinity and superiority of German *Volkstum* over others like the Jewish *Volk*. Because he ascribed the reason for the expected wrath of God to the elevation of race and racial superiority,¹⁹⁶ it indicated that he interpreted the misdeed against Jewry as sin. Moreover, in a sermon on August 12, 1948, postwar, he answered on the question on who was entitled to compassion and help in need that “it is irrelevant if you are from the same Volk or same faith”¹⁹⁷ and not depending on worthiness. Although, Schreiner did not mention Jewish life, their suffering and his position towards Judaism explicitly, which showed his remaining reservations against Judaism, based on his notoriously high degree of aversion to atheist thought (see Chapter 2), he ultimately ascribed to Judaism,¹⁹⁸ this reference to universal help through an annulment of the German *Volkstum’s* superiority and obligation to compassion with people from other beliefs or heritage illustrated a friendlier view on Jews.

6 The question of eugenics

6.1 Lutheranism and *Rassenhygiene*

Welfare based on Christian values was next to apologetics the main area of interest for Schreiner, in which he engaged in over various stations in his life. Hence, eugenics and *Rassenhygiene* were extremely important

¹⁹⁴ULBM n.d., 15.045 and 15.053.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 15.053.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., p. 15.045.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., p. 15.007.

¹⁹⁸Schreiner 1931, p. 25.

themes for his political and theological view. Since the turn of the century, the idea to maintain or shape racial-hygienic aims circulated in the predecessors of the Third Reich.¹⁹⁹ In the course of the Prussian State, the Weimarer Republic and the German Reich, racial biology and eugenics were recurring desires to create a higher standard in the genetic material for financial, political or ideological reasons. Here, the jurisprudence differentiated between practices of eugenics, e.g. the sterilization, and *Euthanasie*, which defined the “extinction of unworthy life”.²⁰⁰ Kaiser et al. have documented in detail, how the demand to regulate the life of ‘inferior’ developed through the decades and political systems.²⁰¹ In the context of the Protestant Church, they illustrated that different bodies of the Church engaged actively with this topic. The clergy weighed freedom of will and the obligation for compassion and care against responsibility for genetic health and superiority of the *Volk*.²⁰² For instance, the Central-Ausschuß für Innere Mission generally welcomed and accepted the need to ensure genetic superiority and therefore the *Volk’s* existence, and responded in the 91. Treysaer Resolution in 1931 to the questions of eugenics and welfare, elimination of unworthy life, sterilization and abortion. The tenor here was that they rejected the intentional killing of living people, while they advocated for passive measurements like the sterilization to avoid further spreading of ‘defect’ genetic material and they noticed differences between sterilization and abortion of living fetuses.²⁰³ In 1934, the Centralausschuß of the Innere Mission affirmed this position, partially against the will of the authorities, because they

¹⁹⁹J. Kaiser, Nowak, and Schwartz 1992, p. 55.

²⁰⁰Ibid., p. 200.

²⁰¹Ibid.

²⁰²Ibid., p. 104.

²⁰³Ibid., p. 106.

upheld the refusal of eliminating unborn life.²⁰⁴ Based on the law of sterilization (Sterilisierungsgesetz), initialized in 1932 and implemented in 1933, *völkisch* genetic material (Erbmasse) was supposed to be a sensitive good and required juridical protection from degeneration (Entartung).²⁰⁵ Hence certain physical deficits were defined with the intention to forestall further genetic transmission by sterilization.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, individual theologians expressed their opinions on the practices of eugenics, e.g. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, who generally supported in 1929 compulsory sterilization and implemented them later on more than thousand patients in his family's own sanatorium, due to his general support of *Rassenhygiene*,²⁰⁷ while he later rejected the idea of *Euthanasie*.²⁰⁸ The law of sterilization, as a product of the broader *völkisch* ideology of *Rassenhygiene*, had far-reaching consequences and eventually lead from 1939 onward to the systematic killing of approximately 200,000 people through several activities like the "Kindereuthanasie" "Aktion T4" and "Aktion 14 f 13".²⁰⁹ In 1940, the Innere Mission responded to observations of regularly and systematically deported patients and suspected an expansion of the endeavors to eliminate 'unworthy life' and stated that "the inviolability of human life is a pillar of the state order" and that a violation of this principle had to be stopped.²¹⁰ Although the Protestant clergy with proximity to the BK, such as Schreiner, protested against this procedure, but especially among Lutheran theologians reservations were detectable, because they referred to Luther's *Tischrede* 4513 and

²⁰⁴J. Kaiser, Nowak, and Schwartz 1992, p. 175.

²⁰⁵Ibid., p. 120.

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 121.

²⁰⁷Ibid., 103 and 192.

²⁰⁸Klee 2005, p. 57.

²⁰⁹J. Kaiser, Nowak, and Schwartz 1992, p. 236.

²¹⁰Ibid., p. 306.

5207 and endorsed this approach as Christian obligation and necessary evil to ensure the purity of the German *Volk*.²¹¹

6.2 Schreiner's position on eugenics

The analysis of documents indicated that Helmuth Schreiner's position differentiated between eugenics and euthanasia. While he initially rejected both ideas to contribute to *Rassenhygiene*, he altered his view on the need for eugenics but maintained his fundamental rejection of euthanasia. Schreiner has initially opposed the 'negative measurements' like sterilization of 'inferior humans' (Unterwertige) and reasoned this with the Christian obligation to compassion, especially for the ill and disabled. However, both, Beyer²¹² and Nowak²¹³ have interpreted Schreiner's contribution to the topic (Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Eugenik)²¹⁴ and illustrated that in 1933, Schreiner has acknowledged a stellar importance of genetic excellence of the German race, resulting in substantial doubts to allow reproduction of disabled genetic material. In a contribution with the title "Possibilities and Limits of Eugenics" (Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Eugenik) to his book "*Die Nation vor Gott*" from 1933, Schreiner recognized the need for sterilization as necessary means to an end. He argued that the situation of the German population was delicate and under the threat of a "rule of the inferior",²¹⁵ because nearly 700,000 invalid or 'inferior' people, with 'defective' genes and disproportionate reproduction drives contributed to a "process of degeneration" (Entartungsprozess).²¹⁶ As a result, he demanded to regulate and al-

²¹¹Honecker 1983, pp. 473–498.

²¹²Beyer 2019, p. 87.

²¹³Nowak 1977, p. 121.

²¹⁴ULBM n.d., p. 110.086.

²¹⁵Künne and Schreiner 1933, p. 77.

²¹⁶Ibid., p. 79.

low eugenics juridically, which referred in the broader context to the law of sterilization from the same year, based on the obligation to ensure future generation on costs of the contemporary generation.²¹⁷ Because he attempted to weigh the obligation to care for the 'inferior', deriving from the Christian ethos, against the needs of the German *Volk*, he came to the conclusion that sterilization would preserve the general quality of life for the patients and at the same time would benefit the genetic material of the *Volk* and therefore ensure its existence. Since his early years in the Johannesstift, Christian welfare was, next to *Weltanschauungen*, Schreiner's main field of interest. Throughout his stations in the Innere Mission, the Protestant Welfare organization, and his position in the Münster Diankonissenmutterhaus, this was apparent. Hence, welfare and its foundation in the gospel were a red line through his work. Radical approaches to eugenics and euthanasia interfered with his view on Christian ethics and, therefore, saw these attempts as corrupted by the secular influence on *völkisch* ideology. Hence, Schreiner often tackled topic areas around eugenics and euthanasia. On January 25, 1942, Schreiner held a speech on the question of assisted suicide in cases of terminally ill people. In this context, he recognized that the support of life was a divine duty of all people, and care staff in particular. In contrast to sterilization as a soft intervention and service to the *Volk*, Schreiner rejected the idea of murder for reasons of compassion, because "suffering is part of part healing process", either for the individual or for the community. Therefore, he rejected the idea of assisted suicide.²¹⁸ Furthermore, Schreiner elaborated in an undated meditation "Are we allowed to kill 'inferior human beings'?" (Dürfen wir 'wertlose Menschen' töten?) the question of compatibility of euthanasia with the gospel. Due

²¹⁷Künne and Schreiner 1933, p. 80.

²¹⁸ULBM n.d., p. 15.026.

to its broader context of eugenics and 'Aktion T4', this document might derive from 1939 or 1940. Here, Schreiner rejected the question for compatibility of eugenic-practices and the gospel with an "unambiguous and unreserved no".²¹⁹ He argued that welfare and care were the highest obligation of the state and the political demand to relieve the state coffers by disposing 'unworthy life', wrong. He based his argumentation on the Fifth Commandment and the Lutheran understanding of the Fourth Commandment, which allowed killing in the authority's name to protect the own existence against enemies but was explicitly not applicable in the case of eugenics. With this passage, he referred to "grotesque fallacies", some theologians made when they referred to Luther's *Tischrede* 5207 as theological legitimization for these practices. In a sermon from August 12, 1948, the day of the Innere Mission, on the question of eternal life (Wie gewinnt man das ewige Leben?), Schreiner proposed the importance of compassion and the mission statement of the Good Samaritan for church welfare. Against the background of omnipresent death in the aftermath of the Second World War, Schreiner has preached the unconditional obligation to help and care for all individuals, regardless of belief or national affiliation. In this context, Schreiner has elaborated that it is irrelevant whether a person in need is "rich or poor, superior or inferior, honored or scorned". In the same sermon, Schreiner emphasized that the Churches' door remain open even for a murderer.²²⁰ On the one hand, this statement reproduced Schreiner's understanding of Protestant Church welfare based on the gospel. On the other hand, Schreiner responded to the circumstances in postwar Germany, where the entire country was deeply affected by the years of war and accompanying symptoms like poverty, hunger, destruction and suffering. While enlarg-

²¹⁹ULBM n.d., p. 3.011.

²²⁰Ibid., p. 15.007.

ing upon the irrelevance of suffering individuals' affiliation in terms of faith, nationality, worthiness or social status, Schreiner invited formerly oppressed groups like Jews, disabled persons and also people, who abandoned their Christian belief for a *völkisch* faith like *Deutschgläubigkeit*. Schreiner upheld his affiliation to the Christian welfare. While he maintained his compassion-focus approach on the protection of 'unworthy life', it seemed that he has increased his focus on compassion in questions of general welfare, which is indicated by formerly unthinkable inclusion of people from non-German *Völker*.

7 Conclusion

This political biography of Helmuth Schreiner examined that the fear of atheism and secularization was central in his self-image as a theologian Schreiner and was a red line through his work. While Schreiner initially saw elements of *völkisch* thought as justified by a divine obligation to the German *Volkstum* and National Socialism as basically compatible to Christianity, he later realized that both ideologies were successors of secularism and forms of *Ersatzreligion*, and therefore a threat to the German people and incompatible with Christianity. In this context, he assessed that only parts of the deeply fragmented Protestant Church were true representatives of Christianity, while he rejected extreme positions, including the DC and radical *Dahlemiten*. Although Schreiner experienced a disillusionment in sympathy to *völkisch* and National Socialistic ideology, the research did only indicate partial changes deeply rooted anti-Semitism, which was one of the main points of interest in this research. He recognized in later days of the war that the superiority of the German *Volk* may have been a misjudgment, but he did not deal with the

atrocities committed to Jewish life explicitly. In this context, he upheld a certain degree of anti-Semitism. A further important theme in his life, which was examined in this thesis was his view on practices of eugenics. He continued to endorse sterilization as means to the end of racial hygiene but he resolutely rejected practices of *Euthanasie*, which became a relevant question from 1939 onward. In this context, his dedication for care work based on a perceived divine obligation to compassion did not allow any considerations of financial expanses or genetic superiority.

This thesis was able to fill a gap in the literature and provide insights into the middle ground (with a tendency towards the BK) of the spectrum of Protestant theologians in the *Kirchenkampf*. Sympathies for both extremes, the DC and the BK, were detectable, which made the analysis of the 'rather unaffiliated' body of theologians so interesting, because it demonstrated the alternating support in theological and political key points. Next to ambivalence, the examination illustrated processes of weighing (Church-)political desires against theological considerations in close consultation with the own world view and consciousness. Hence, the process of reevaluation of the own position on theological and political developments as well as the reassessment of made compromises for the greater good was a continuity and was representative for the Protestant clergy in a quandary between desirable developments and incompatible detriments. For Schreiner, the eventual rejection of the *völkisch* ideals were the logical conclusion, but for many others, especially nationalist Lutherans, their value was assessed differently. These differences in assessing the compatibility of *völkisch* ideology and Christian faith show the variety of positions among the Protestant clergy. In contrast to full opposition towards National Socialism, like it was detectable in the radical wing of the BK, Schreiner kept distance and emphasized the positive

nature of National Socialism as such, also in the light of it as the lesser evil compared to the threat of Communism. While Schreiner engaged critically with National Socialism, many other Lutherans committed to this ideology. Over the course of the chronological appearances of the perceived threats to Christianity (secularism, *völkisch* ideology and National Socialism), the examination of Schreiner's position contributed to the understanding that the individuals' opinions and the weighing of goods was part of the multidimensional struggle, the clergy was facing. The analysis of latent anti-Semitism among Protestant clergy in Chapter 5 made it apparent that certain groups formed around similar worldviews. In contrast to the group around Karl Barth, the rather radical *Dahlemiten*, Schreiner was a representative for a group of theologians, principally engaged in Northern Germany, linked to the theology of the Erlangen faculty and members of the student fraternity Hallenser Wingolf. Additionally, an early affiliation to the *völkisch* party DNVP during the Weimarer Republik and an advocating of the *Schöpfungstheologie* with belief in a God-given obligation to preserve the German race could be seen as typical. Theologians with sympathy for nationalistic ideas were rarely in opposition after Hitler's surge of power and the violation of the Lutheran *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*. Here, Schreiner's critical engagement showed that there was an inner conflict in this group in the formation of political and theological positions, and the group was far from homogeneous. Schreiner's engagement in the Münster deaconry and his obligation to maintain the functionality of the institute shaped his later work, which made his development deferring from other theologians with the same worldview but less responsibility for others. Typical for theologians of the Innere Mission with responsibility to welfare organization, he aimed to keep the welfare-work functioning, because he

emphasized the importance of compassion and Christian obligation for welfare. He saw the radical approach to eugenics and euthanasia as antichristian because it violated his understanding of Christian ethics and interpreted these intentions as corrupted by secular currents of *völkisch* ideology. However, his dedication stood in competition with his commitment to the divine responsibility of the people for the genetic purity of the German *Volkstum*. In the question of sterilization, Schreiner made concessions in favor of the *Volk*, but the practice of euthanasia crossed a line for him. Here, Schreiner was representative for many inside the Innere Mission, which generally upheld the welfare work above racial aspirations, even against the will of the NS-regime or the DC. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, Schreiner was a typical representative of a certain group of conservative Lutheran theologians, but, in this point, Schreiner deviated from the predominant position in 'his' group in the Lutheran clergy, because the dedication to welfare created individual circumstances. Overall, he emancipated himself from the traditionally Lutheran loyalty to the authority and eventually was, against the expectation of massive repercussions, open in his critique in public sermons or engaged with plotters like Gerstenmaier. Against this background, the examination of Schreiner lead to the conclusion that he was in "Teilwiderstand" (partial resistance).²²¹

With these results, it was possible to contribute, on the one side, to the analyses of Schreiner's attitude towards National Socialism from Beyer,²²² Nowak²²³ and Scholder²²⁴ that his attitude developed over the course of the Third Reich, in contrast to a fixed consideration of Schreiner

²²¹Nowak 1982b, p. 270.

²²²Beyer 2019, p. 51.

²²³Nowak 1982a, p. 62.

²²⁴Bethge 1986, p. 178.

in full opposition or with significant proximity to National Socialism. And, on the other side, this observation contributed to the broader understanding of the Lutheran clergy, and confirmed the theory of Ericksen, who has recognized that formerly proponents of National Socialism underwent a process of “disillusionment”²²⁵ in the latter years of the war. However, in literature, the nuances inside the Protestant Church are still drawn undifferentiated and blurry, while the pictures of the radical wing of the BK and prominent actors like Bonhoeffer are partially overdrawn. It will be productive in further research to define the group of conservative, nationalist Lutherans around Schreiner more differentiated by applying the specific *Weltanschauung* as an essential characteristic in prosographic case studies to contribute to a more detailed view on the Protestant clergy. Hence, I plan to use the results from this thesis as a point of departure for a deeper research in my dissertation.

²²⁵Ericksen 1986, p. 553.

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