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## Inventing ‘Paganists’: A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall’s *The Holy Reich*

Richard Steigmann-Gall challenges the dominant view that nazi leaders were hostile to Christianity in his book *The Holy Reich* through what he calls ‘a close reading’ of archival documents and other texts.<sup>1</sup> Although he never explains what ‘a close reading’ means, it is clear that his method of reading nazi-era historical sources provides him with a radically new perspective on German history. Essentially, Steigmann-Gall argues that many National Socialist leaders considered themselves Christians and therefore their ideologies must be reinterpreted in the light of their self-confessed Christian beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier authors, he contends, failed to distinguish between anti-clericalism and the rejection of Christianity itself. Thus, they wrongly assumed that at its core National Socialism was an anti-Christian form of neo-paganism, when actually most nazi leaders rejected ecclesiastical traditions but not the teachings of Christ.<sup>3</sup> To avoid what he sees as the failure of earlier scholars, Steigmann-Gall sets out to ‘explore the ways in which many leading Nazis in fact considered themselves Christian (among other things) or understood their movement (among other ways) within a Christian frame of reference’.<sup>4</sup>

This approach raises important issues about the appropriate way to read texts, particularly works of propaganda, which use religious or pseudo-religious language. Two questions come to mind in connection with his argument. Are novels and ideological speeches reliable as historical sources? What should historians do when they encounter views that are totally alien to their own? This article attempts to address these two questions by examining the way Steigmann-Gall uses sources in *The Holy Reich*, with reference first to Goebbels and then Alfred Rosenberg.

Early in his book Steigmann-Gall argues that ‘Goebbels’ reference to God was more than a simple deism divorced from Christian content. Christ held a central place in his worldview . . . Goebbels’ fascination with the person of Christ . . . bordered on a type of evangelism.’<sup>5</sup>

1 Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich. Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge 2003), 11.

2 *Ibid.*, 266.

3 *Ibid.*, 11–12, 261–6.

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 21.

According to him, Goebbels made the following statement which clearly demonstrates his deep Christian piety: 'I converse with Christ. I believed I had overcome him, but I have only overcome his idolatrous priests and false servants.'<sup>6</sup> Then he adds:

Through his esteem for Christ, Goebbels also displayed a positive attitude towards the New Testament: 'I take the Bible, and all evening long I read the simplest and greatest sermon that has ever been given to mankind: The Sermon on the Mount! "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"!'<sup>7</sup>

The problem with these passages is that they read as though they are direct quotations from Goebbels when in fact they come from the 1987 English translation of Goebbels' novel *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*, first published in 1929.<sup>8</sup> Rather than unambiguously expressing Goebbels' personal views about Christianity, they are opinions voiced by the main character Michael, who, like the German Christians, toys with the idea that Jesus could not possibly have been a Jew.<sup>9</sup> Relatively early in the story, Michael makes two telling remarks, that 'it is not important what one believes; only that one believes', and that he is in the process of 'demolishing his old faith world'.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Goebbels the author is encouraging self-reflection and asking his readers to reconsider their most basic commitments.

With respect to the novel *Michael*, Steigmann-Gall ignored the genre of his text that a hostile reviewer, Heinz Pol, called a 'confessional novel' (*Bekenntnisroman*) of a Party member.<sup>11</sup> It shows Michael overcoming his attraction to communism and bourgeois Christianity by converting to National Socialism. But Steigmann-Gall takes the often conflicting thoughts of the main character in the novel at face value, thereby distorting the text.

The ease with which it is possible to misunderstand this novel can be seen from the following passage where Michael reflects on the role of his main protagonist, a Russian émigré Iwan Wienurowsky.<sup>12</sup> Michael writes in his diary:

I wrestle with Iwan Wienurowsky who is as agile as a cat. But, I am stronger than he. Now I grab his throat. I hurl him to the ground. There he lies! Gasping, with bloodshot eyes. Snuff it, you carcass! I kick in his skull. And now I am free! . . . I throw myself on the ground and I kiss the earth. The hard, brown earth. German earth!<sup>13</sup>

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Joseph Goebbels, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, *Michael* (New York 1987), 120. Cf. Joseph Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* (Munich 1929), 224.

9 Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal*, op. cit., 88.

10 Ibid., 47.

11 Heinz Pol, 'Goebbels als Dichter', *Die Weltbühne*, 27 January 1931, 105ff.

12 Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal*, op. cit., 48.

13 Ibid., 198ff. The original German reads: Ich ringe mit Iwan Wienurowsky. Er ist gewandt wie eine Katze. Aber ich bin stärker als er. Jetzt packe ich ihn bei der Gurgel. Ich schleudere ihn zu Boden. Da liegt er! Röchelnd, mit blutunterlaufenen Augen. Verrecke, Du Aas. Ich trete ihm den Schädel ein. Und nun bin ich frei! . . . Ich werfe mich auf den Boden und küsse die Erde. Harte, braune Erde. Deutsche Erde!

To the casual reader this passage describes how Michael murdered Iwan Wienurowsky when, in fact, it dramatizes Michael's intellectual conflicts in an imaginative way. Actually, he did not kill Wienurowsky who was murdered by Bolsheviks after he returned to Russia.<sup>14</sup> The story of Michael's inner struggle, therefore, symbolizes a theoretical battle with, and liberation from, Russian ideas. As Michael says, 'I have liberated myself. Within me I freed the German human being.'<sup>15</sup>

In terms of Michael's reflections on Christianity, it is important to recognize that taken as a whole the novel is a testimony to the power of National Socialism. Its purpose is to highlight the path away from bourgeois life and Christianity through Nietzsche to National Socialism.<sup>16</sup> In it, Michael, a physically and psychologically wounded survivor of the first world war,<sup>17</sup> interacts with Russian ideas through Iwan Wienurowsky, and with bourgeois Christian thought through the love of his life Hertha Holk, from whom he is ultimately separated.<sup>18</sup> A key element in the novel is Michael's recognition that at heart he is a 'revolutionary' who rejects the bourgeois world 'inexorably and ruthlessly'.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with these commitments, Michael decides to write a drama about Christ. This decision comes after he reads Nietzsche's 'sermon' *The Gay Science*, which causes him to reflect that while 'Christ is the genius of love, He is the greatest tragic figure in history'.<sup>20</sup> Reflecting on Christ leads Michael to say, 'Christ cannot have been a Jew'.<sup>21</sup> Then Goebbels describes how Michael is repelled by Jews, making it quite clear to the reader that the source of this loathing is *völkisch* not religious or Christian.<sup>22</sup> As Michael says: 'What has that to do with religion or least of all with Christianity? Either they destroy us, or we make them innocuous . . . . That is how it is.'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the author, Goebbels, plays with various ideas such as the relation of Christ to Olympian gods. In the end Michael concludes that he has created a 'dramatische-Phantasie'.<sup>24</sup>

The above insights are followed by another. Using Christian form, but not Christian content, Goebbels describes how Michael goes through a life-changing spiritual experience brought about by listening to a political speaker who clearly represents Hitler. At the end of this revelatory encounter, Michael declares that he is 'born again' to commit his life to a political cause.<sup>25</sup> Now he

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14 Ibid., 233.

15 Ibid., 227.

16 Ibid., 77, 243.

17 Ibid., 93ff.

18 Ibid., 35, 97, 149.

19 Ibid., 99.

20 Ibid., 77ff.

21 Ibid., 88.

22 Ibid., 86–8.

23 Ibid., 87.

24 Ibid., 76ff., 92, 103ff.

25 Ibid., 155ff.

sees things anew, and using an encounter with the art of Vincent van Gogh as a foil declares: 'The old temples must be destroyed and new ones created.'<sup>26</sup> After this insight he declares that he returns to the question of Christ, but this is not the Christ of any Christian denomination; rather he is the Christ of a new religious will inspired by a new God:

Once again I return to the issue of Christ. The issue of God in Germany cannot be separated from the question of Christ. . . . The Churches have failed. Totally failed. They no longer stand in the front line of the battle, but have been forced to resort to rearguard action. From there they terrorize with their resentment any formation of a new religious will. Yet millions await a new religion. Their yearning remains unfulfilled. Is our time not yet ready? One wants to believe it. Until then let each seek his own God in his own way (or in his race-specific way). But one should leave the broad masses their idols, until one can give them a new God.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, when Steigmann-Gall cites this passage he ends his quotation with the words 'and their yearnings remain unfulfilled', leaving out the final passage about a new God.<sup>28</sup> He also fails to notice the allusionary reference to van Gogh, who became an artist after he lost his evangelical Christian faith.<sup>29</sup> Also, ignoring the *völkisch* and *Deutsche Christen* context within which Goebbels wrote, Steigmann-Gall makes no attempt to explain to the reader why the German God question cannot be separated from the Christ question, and why either of them should be questioned at all. The answer is, of course, that Christ being Aryan, and a man, leaves Germans free to remake their German God. Just as it is commonly understood that when nazis talked about the Jewish question, they voiced a dislike of, and a desire to change, the role of Jews, so it is understood that when they talked about the Jesus question and the God question it is with the intent to change them.

Given the fact that this declaration comes in a novel, it is difficult to say with certainty whether this remark represents Goebbels' own thinking or not. What it shows is Michael thinking along neo-pagan and *völkisch* lines, something Steigmann-Gall conveniently ignores.

A similar disregard for genre occurs in Steigmann-Gall's use of Goebbels' speeches. For example, he quotes Goebbels as saying:

26 Ibid., 222.

27 Ibid., 223. The original German reads: Wieder komme ich zu Christus. Die deutsche Gottfrage ist nicht von Christus zu trennen. . . . Die Konfessionen haben versagt. Total versagt. Sie stehen nicht mehr an der Front, sondern sind längst schon in die Nachhut abgedrängt. Von da aus terrorisieren sie mit ihrem Ressentiment jede Bildung eines neuen religiösen Willens. Millionen warten darauf, und ihre Sehnsucht bleibt unerfüllt. Ob unsere Zeit noch nicht reif ist? Man möchte es fast glauben. Wir werden auch im Religiösen einmal herrlich erwachen. Bis dahin suche jeder seinen Gott auf seine Art. Aber man soll den breiten Massen selbst ihre Götzen lassen, bis man ihnen einen neuen Gott geben kann.

28 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 21.

29 Goebbels, *Michael*, op. cit., 222. Cf. Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At Eternity's Gate. The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh* (Grand Rapids, MI 1998).

Is it paganist to mount a winter food drive, thereby feeding millions of people? Is it paganist to give back to the *Volk* its inner freedom? Is it paganist to help poor brothers and neighbours? Is it paganist to restore the ethos of the family? And to give the worker a sense of purpose to his life? Is it paganist to erect a state upon moral principles, to expel Godlessness and purify theatre and film from the contamination of Jewish-liberal Marxism — is that *paganist*?<sup>30</sup>

Presented in this way, Goebbels appears to be endorsing Christianity. When read in the context of genre and situation, Goebbels' speech appears in a very different light. As the editor of Goebbels' *Reden* points out, Goebbels was a master of irony and rhetoric, making it very difficult at times to know exactly what he meant.<sup>31</sup> In the context of the speech cited by Steigmann-Gall it appears that Goebbels is being ironic. He began by mocking Christian criticism of National Socialism:

When our opponents say 'You are Heathens!', I can only say: 'Who knows? How so? (laughter and merriment). What about? Why? (laughter and merriment). Do we act heathen? Is it heathen to start a wint(er) — a winter relief programme that helps feed millions of people? Is it heathen to give back to the *Volk* their inner peace? Is it heathen to help one's poor brother and neighbour?'<sup>32</sup>

Then, after providing a long list of National Socialist accomplishments, he comments:

If these things are heathen then certainly we are grateful to a Christianity that has done the opposite! (calls of 'Bravo', stormy applause). The Churches say: It is written in your (Party) programme that religiously speaking you stand on positive Christian soil. Agreed! But we only want that just as *we* are religiously positive *Christian*, the churches be *politically* positive National Socialist (calls of 'Bravo' and applause).<sup>33</sup>

By including the audience's responses, the editor of Goebbels' speeches shows the reader that the audience understood and enjoyed the speaker's irony and

30 Ibid., 124ff.

31 Helmut Heiber (ed.), Joseph Goebbels, *Goebbels-Reden, vol. 1: 1932–1939* (Düsseldorf 1971), xviii.

32 Ibid., 274ff. The original German reads: Wenn man uns also von der Gegenseite entgegenhält: Ihr seid Heiden! -, so kann ich nur sagen: Soso -, wieso (Heiterkeit.) Worum? -, warum? (Heiterkeit.) Führen wir uns so heidnisch auf? Ist das heidnisch daß man ein Wint-, ein Winterhilfswerk aufzieht und damit Millionen Menschen ernährt? Ist das heidnisch, daß man einem Volke seinen inneren Frieden zurückgibt? Ist das heidnisch, daß man dem armen Bruder und Nachbarn hilft? . . .

33 Ibid., 275. Italics in the original. The original German reads: Wenn *das* heidnisch ist, dann allerdings bedanken wir uns für ein Christentum, das das Gegenteil getan hat! (Bravo-Rufe, stürmischer Beifall). Die Kirchen sagen: Es steht in Eurem Programm, daß Ihr religiös auf positiv-christlichem Boden steht. Einverstanden! Aber wir möchten nur wünschen, daß so, wie *wir* religiös positiv-christlich, die Kirchen *politisch* positiv-nationalsozialistisch sein möchten. (Bravo-Rufe, Beifall). N.B. 'Positive Christianity' is a nazi term found in Point 24 of the Party Programme. It asserts that the Party will not bind itself confessionally to any dogma and that the Party battles against the Jewish-materialistic *Geist* within and outside us.

sarcasm. To put it bluntly, the first sentence says: if good things are done by heathens, then we are certainly grateful that we reject Christianity which does bad things.

Goebbels continues in this vein with constant applause and shouts of agreement demonstrating that the meeting, held in Saarbrücken on 4 December 1935, was something of a revivalist event. He is speaking to the faithful who understand and agree with him. The impression created throughout is that Goebbels is being ironic and sarcastic and that in reality this is an attack on Christianity, not an affirmation of it.

Later, when he comments on Goebbels' notes about a conference on Church issues, Steigmann-Gall writes:

Hitler spoke of the rift that by then had widened significantly with the Churches. 'Not party versus Christianity', Goebbels noted him saying, 'rather, we must declare ourselves as the only true Christians . . . Christianity is the watchword for the destruction of the (Confessing Church) pastors, as once was socialism for the destruction of the Marxist bigwigs.' This is not merely a conspiratorial Hitler adapting a Christian mantle better to undercut and attack clerical enemies, although such a consideration played a role. Rather, this was an attempt to claim ownership of a 'true' Christianity . . .<sup>34</sup>

This interpretation appears to be at variance with Goebbels' own reaction. He wrote:

Afternoon at the Führer's. Conference about the Church issue. The Führer again developed in broad outline the whole problem. The Confessing Church seems to want voting abstinence. Show them to be totally wrong there and keep a group with whom we can fight the battle against these traitors. Then separation of Church and state, break the Concordat to give us a free hand there in all eventualities. Not Party against Christianity, rather we must declare ourselves to be the only true Christians. Then, however, with the whole force of the Party against the saboteurs. Christianity is the slogan for the destruction of the priests, as once socialism was used to destroy the Marxist bigwigs.<sup>35</sup>

He concludes what is a relatively long passage with the comment:

A wonderful conference lasting two hours. In truth the Führer is a genius. With the power of a prophet he gives the present its meaning and its content. I am totally happy. May God preserve him for us for many years.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 118.

<sup>35</sup> Elke Fröhlich, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (Munich 2001), vol. 3/II, 389, 23.2.1937. The original German reads: Nachmittags beim Führer. Konferenz über die Kirchenfrage: der Führer entwickelt nochmal in großen Zügen das ganze Problem. Bekenntnisfront scheint Wahlenthaltung zu wollen. Sie darin ganz ins Unrecht setzen und eine Gruppe halten, mit der wir den Kampf gegen diese Verräter führen können. Dann Trennung von Kirche und Staat, Kündigung des Konkordats, damit wir da auch für alle Eventualfälle freie Hand haben. Nicht Partei gegen Christentum, sondern wir müssen uns als die einzig wahren Christen deklarieren. Dann aber mit der ganzen Wucht der Partei gegen die Saboteure. Christentum heißt die Parole zur Vernichtung der Pfaffen, wie einstmal Sozialismus zur Vernichtung der marxistischen Bonzen.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 389. The original German reads: Eine wunderbare Konferenz von 2 Stunden. Der Führer ist in Wahrheit ein Genie. Mit der Kraft eines Propheten gibt er der Zeit ihren Sinn und ihren Inhalt. Ich bin ganz beglückt. Gott erhalte ihn uns noch viele Jahrzeiten.

Why would Goebbels call Hitler a 'genius' and a 'prophet' if all he had said was that they were fighting against some particularly troublesome pastors? Surely, the meaning of the reference to eventually gaining a 'free hand' and the remark that 'Christianity is the slogan for the destruction of the priests, as once socialism destroyed the Marxist bigwigs', implies that eventually Christianity itself will lose all significance in German life.

Without knowing that Goebbels recorded such a comment, Kurt G. Ludecke published a book the same year in which he claimed that five years earlier Hitler had told him:

'Naturally, practical politics demands that, for the time being at least, we must avoid any appearance of a campaign against the Church.' He was careful to emphasize that he was a *Politiker*, with no ambition to become a prophet. But National Socialism, he said, was a *Weltanschauung* and in fact a religion which was now building itself up and disseminating itself, except that its forms of activity and propaganda were very different. . . . 'Yes, National Socialism, is a form of conversion, a new faith, but we don't need to raise the issue — it will come of itself.'

Taken by itself, Ludecke's account of Hitler's remarks may be questioned,<sup>38</sup> but when seen alongside Goebbels' own comments, and a hint dropped by Speer discussed in the next section, they form part of a general pattern suggesting that Hitler intended to destroy Christianity by slow attrition, replacing it with a new religion. These asides appear to confirm the view of Ernst Hanfstaengel that Hitler 'was deeply under the spell of Rosenberg'.<sup>39</sup> To this topic we now turn.

After acknowledging the importance of Rosenberg as a leading neo-pagan among the National Socialist élite, Steigmann-Gall minimizes his importance within the Nazi movement. He begins by arguing that in taking 'Rosenberg's self-promotion at face value' earlier scholars, particularly Church historians and theorists of political religion, 'greatly overestimated the importance of his ideas' when in Karl Bracher's words he was no more than 'the administrative clerk of National Socialist ideology'. Steigmann-Gall, citing Reinhard Bollmus, claims that even in this role Rosenberg was ineffective.<sup>40</sup>

After providing a brief biography of Rosenberg, Steigmann-Gall concentrates his argument on *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* which, he points out, was 'a private work, never becoming an official guide to Nazi thinking as *Mein Kampf* was'. He continues: 'Most of Rosenberg's opponents in the Churches assumed that it was nonetheless the *true* guide to Nazi thinking —

37 Kurt G.W. Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler* (New York 1937), 519ff.

38 Cf. Arthur L. Smith, Jr, 'Kurt Ludecke. The Man Who Knew Hitler', *German Studies Review*, XXVI, 3 (October 2003), 597–606.

39 Ernst Hanfstaengel, *Hitler. The Missing Years* (New York 1994), 41. First published in London 1957.

40 *Ibid.*, 91.

some people even supposed it was more influential in the NSDAP than Hitler's own book.' Steigmann-Gall then argues that *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* was ignored by the public and the Party alike, while Hitler and his close associates poured scorn on it, with Goebbels calling it 'ideological belch'.<sup>41</sup>

Before showing that the evidence does not support Steigmann-Gall's claims about Rosenberg, it is important to examine the sources Steigmann-Gall uses in his attempt to discredit Rosenberg. In introducing his argument, Steigmann-Gall relies on the works of Karl Bracher and Reinhard Bollmus.

Of the two, Bollmus is more dismissive of Rosenberg. In fact, Steigmann-Gall's assessment mirrors that found in the 1993 translation of an article by Bollmus.<sup>42</sup> The problem is that since Bollmus wrote, a large amount of research has appeared reappraising the role of ideology in specific National Socialist formations such as the SS, Gestapo, Youth Movement, and in what German scholars call *Täterbiographien*, biographies of perpetrators of nazi crimes.<sup>43</sup> Without invoking 'political religion', it is safe to say that many scholars now see ideology as an important element in motivating individual National Socialists.

Then, using the English translation of Bracher's book, Steigmann-Gall dismissively describes Rosenberg as 'the administrative clerk of National Socialist ideology'.<sup>44</sup> Actually, Bracher's German text describes Rosenberg as 'der Weltanschauungsprokurist des Nationalsozialismus'.<sup>45</sup> This is more accurately translated as 'world view authority' or 'the executive secretary of the National Socialist world view'. Either of these translations, or any of the possible alternatives, bestow a far higher status on Rosenberg within nazism than is suggested by the misleading translation 'administrative clerk'.

Steigmann-Gall fails to add that even in the English translation he used, Bracher concludes:

Whether he was actually read or taken seriously as a philosopher, Rosenberg has no reason to be disappointed. His printed revelations about Jews and Communists, Freemasons and Rome, and the *Protocols of Zion* which he unearthed anew in 1923 and oddly enough republished as late as 1940, were as important a contribution to the insane Jewish policy, to the annihilators and concentration camp executioners (Rudolf Höss, the first commandant

41 Ibid., 92ff.

42 Mary Fischer, trans. Reinhard Bollmus, 'Alfred Rosenberg. National Socialism's "Chief Ideologue"?' in Roland Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann, *The Nazi Elite* (New York 1993), 183–93. Cf. Reinhard Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner* (Stuttgart 1970).

43 Cf. Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg 2002); Jens Banach, *Heydrichs Elite. Das Führerkorps der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1936–1945* (Paderborn 1998); Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn 1996); Michael Grüttner, *Studenten im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn 1995); also overlooked are older works like Wolfgang Horn, *Führerideologie und Parteiorganisation in der NSDAP, 1919–1933* (Düsseldorf 1972).

44 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 91.

45 Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die deutsche Diktatur* (Cologne 1969), 307.



of Auschwitz, has specifically said so) as the orders of the rulers . . . But he, with greater perseverance than any other National Socialist, conceived and prepared the theory for the annihilatory programme of the Third Reich, that 'noblest idea' which he still spoke of with enthusiasm at Nuremberg after 1945. He did not succeed in becoming either a leading power-political figure or founder of a religion; but he contributed more than any of the old and new fighters to the pseudo-scientific and pseudo-religious justification of these power politics.<sup>46</sup>

From this passage it is clear that Bracher's understanding of the influence of Rosenberg's *Weltanschauung* is quite different from what Steigmann-Gall suggests.

In addition to using the work of Bollmus and Bracher, Steigmann-Gall cites statements by leading National Socialists to support the view that Rosenberg's ideas were rejected by Hitler and his closest aides. The problem with these comments, as Steigmann-Gall recognizes, is that Hitler 'was known for tailoring his remarks to please his audience'.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, any remark made by Hitler needs to be judged alongside contradictory remarks he made and judged in the light of his actions.

Further, when Steigmann-Gall says 'Goebbels heaped enormous scorn on' Rosenberg's *Mythus*, calling it 'ideological belch', he presents a distorted version of Goebbels' actual views. In his *Tagebücher* Goebbels' attitude to Rosenberg is far more complex. Early in his career, Goebbels expressed admiration for Rosenberg whom he described as 'very relevant', commenting:

Rohde along with Professor Kretschmann came lunchtime, to discuss the founding of the 'Struggle Society' with me. In the evening Rosenberg speaks at the National Economic Council. I will get him over to my side, in order to see whether I can improve my relationship with him. I don't know what he has against me, I quite like him, especially because he is so relevant.<sup>48</sup>

46 Cf. Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 91, and Jean Steinberg, trans. Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship. The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism* (New York 1970), 281–2. The German original, *Die deutsche Diktatur*, op. cit., 307–8, reads: Ob er nun wirklich gelesen oder als Philosoph ernst genommen wurde, Rosenberg hatte in dieser Hinsicht keinen Grund, enttäuscht zu sein. Mit der abseitigen Enthüllungsliteratur über Juden und Kommunisten, Freimaurer und Rom, mit den Protokollen der Weisen von Zion, die er 1923 erneut ausgegraben und groteskerweise 1940 noch einmal veröffentlicht hat, war sein Beitrag zu den besessenen Maßnahmen der Judenpolitik, zur Schulung der Vernichtungsplaner und KZ-Henker — Höß bekennt das ausdrücklich — so wichtig wie die Befehle der Machthaber . . . Aber ausdauernder als alle anderen Nationalsozialisten hat er dem Vernichtungsregime des Dritten Reiches die Theorie konzipiert und zubereitet, jene »edelste Idee«, von der er noch im Nürnberger Gefängnis schwärmte. Er hat es weder zum Machtpolitiker noch zum Religionsstifter gebracht; zur pseudowissenschaftlichen und pseudoreligiösen Rechtfertigung jener Machtpolitik hat er mehr als die alten und neuen Kämpfer beigetragen.

47 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 93.

48 Elke Fröhlich, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels. Samtliche Fragmente, vol. 1; 27.6.1924–31.12.1930* (Munich 1987), 356, 7.4.1929. The original German reads: Mittags kam Rohde mit Professor Kretschmann, um mit mir die Gründung des 'Kampfbundes' zu besprechen. Abends spricht Alfred Rosenberg im Reichswirtschaftsrat. Ich werde mir ihn mal kaufen, um zu sehen, ob ich mit ihm nicht ein besseres Verhältnis bekomme. Ich weiß nicht, was er gegen mich hat, ich mag ihn ganz gerne, gerade weil er so sachlich ist. (The reference to *ihn mal kaufen* is ambiguous.)

Shortly afterwards he wrote: 'Evening with Rosenberg to his talk. He spoke fabulously. Full of lashing coldness. Rosenberg really is a brain. Perhaps the opposite of me, but he impresses me.'<sup>49</sup> In his view 'Rosenberg is a Baltic fox. At the same time, very intelligent and ambitious.'<sup>50</sup> Then, even though he had earlier said 'Rosenberg is my deadly enemy',<sup>51</sup> he decided to study the *Mythus* carefully, writing: 'Reading: "The Myth of the 20thC" by Rosenberg. I believe, very good, have to immerse myself.'<sup>52</sup>

That Goebbels made nasty remarks about Rosenberg is without question. He made nasty remarks about everyone except Hitler. Nevertheless, as the above comments show, and many more like them exist, sharp criticism and cynical comments do not mean that he completely rejected Rosenberg's ideas.

Similarly, Albert Speer told the War Crimes Tribunal, and consistently maintained throughout his life, that Hitler had nothing but contempt for Rosenberg. A number of others like Baldur von Schirach and later the former Gauleiter Albert Krebs supported this claim.<sup>53</sup> There are, however, several problems with these, and similar, statements that are overlooked by Steigmann-Gall.

First, because the Prosecution at the War Crimes Tribunal attempted to use Rosenberg's *Mythus* to show that the defendants were influenced by genocidal ideas, few were prepared to admit to having read the book unless, like von Papen, there was no doubt that they had strongly rejected its teachings. Since this use of the *Mythus* set a precedent, no German who could possibly stand trial for war crimes was going to admit to having read the *Mythus*, or to having been influenced by Rosenberg's ideas.

Second, in the case of von Schirach it is clear that he lied to the Tribunal when he said that he had not encouraged the use of the *Mythus* by the Hitler Youth. After his death, undeniable evidence emerged that in fact he had promoted the *Mythus* and in all probability read it very carefully.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, although Albert Speer denied that Rosenberg had influenced Hitler's thought and constantly claimed that Hitler had had no interest in 'mysticism', he wrote that Hitler commissioned him to design a great hall that was intended to serve as the spiritual and physical centre of the new Berlin. Speer wrote:

49 Ibid., 362, 21.4.1929. The original German reads: Abends mit Rosenberg zu seinem Vortrage. Er hat fabelhaft gesprochen. Voll aufpeitschender Kälte. Rosenberg ist schon ein Kopf. Vielleicht das Gegenteil von mir, aber er imponiert mir.

50 Ibid., 498, 9.2.1930. 'Rosenberg ist ein baltischer Fuchs. Dabei sehr klug und ehrgeizig.'

51 Ibid., 502, 21.2.1930. The original German reads: 'Rosenberg ist mein Todfeind.'

52 Ibid., 611, 1.10.1930. The original German reads: Lektüre: 'Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhdts' von Rosenberg. Ich glaube, sehr gut, muß mich noch hineinlesen.

53 Cf. Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Berlin 1970); Digitale Bibliothek, vol. 20, *Der Nürnberger Prozeß* (Berlin 1999), 17898; Albert Krebs, *Erinnerungen an die Frühzeit der Partei* (Stuttgart 1959), 179.

54 George P. Hutchinson, *The Nazi Ideology of Alfred Rosenberg* (Oxford 1977), 51ff. This is an outstanding and overlooked thesis that deserves to be published; Michael Wortmann, *Baldur von Schirach* (Cologne 1982), 53.

This structure, the greatest assembly hall in the world ever conceived up to that time, consisted of one vast hall that could hold between 150 and 180 thousand persons standing. In spite of Hitler's negative attitude towards Himmler's and Rosenberg's mystical notions, the hall was essentially a place of worship. The idea was that over the course of centuries, by tradition and venerability, it would acquire an importance similar to that which St Peter's in Rome has for Catholic Christendom.<sup>55</sup>

Is it conceivable that Hitler discussed his plans to build a religious building with mystical significance without explaining the basis of his views or saying something to Speer about their relation to Rosenberg's ideas? This seems very unlikely.

If Speer's report is reliable, then his comment confirms the idea that Hitler planned to destroy Christianity by attrition. Why else would he plan such a building? Further, Speer's *Erinnerungen* are increasingly coming under scrutiny and found wanting by German and other scholars on the grounds that he was far more deeply involved with Hitler and National Socialist ideology than he cared to admit.<sup>56</sup>

Steigmann-Gall also cites evidence that Hitler rejected Himmler's mysticism and in 1935 told him 'that he intended to take action against Rosenberg's *Mythus*'. Then in a footnote he adds:

There is no indication whether Hitler followed up on this particular threat. Judging from the continued publication of *Mythus*, he made no serious effort to do so. However, Rosenberg's book was occasionally banned lower down the ranks of the Party, for instance by the Breslau branch.<sup>57</sup>

What Hitler actually said to Himmler is unclear from the available fragmentary evidence. Contrary to Steigmann-Gall, his source Ackermann interprets the statement as part of the 'Struggle against Christianity'.<sup>58</sup> What is clear is that once again, contrary to Steigmann-Gall's claim, around the same date as Steigmann-Gall mentions various police departments began to persecute anyone who criticized the *Mythus*.<sup>59</sup> A short time earlier German Christians had been warned:

55 Speer, *Erinnerungen*, op. cit., 167. English translation by Richard and Clara Winston, Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich. Memoirs* (London 1970), 152ff. The original German reads: Die größte bis dahin erdachte Versammlungshalle der Welt bestand aus einem einzigen Raum; aber einem Raum, der 150,000 bis 180,000 stehende Zuhörer fassen konnte. Im Grunde handelte es sich, trotz der ablehnenden Haltung Hitlers zu den mystischen Vorstellungen Himmlers und Rosenbergs, um einen Kultraum, der im Laufe der Jahrhunderte durch Tradition und Ehrwürdigkeit eine ähnliche Bedeutung gewinnen sollte, wie St. Peter in Rom für die katholische Christenheit.

56 Cf. Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer. His Battle with Truth* (New York 1995); 'Albert Speer und Sein Führer. Der Manager des Bösen', *Der Spiegel*, No. 18, 2.5.2005, 74–88.

57 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 131, citing Josef Ackermann, *Heinrich Himmler als Ideologe* (Göttingen 1970), 90.

58 Ackermann, *Heinrich Himmler*, op. cit., 88–96. The original German reads: Der Kampf gegen das Christentum. Ibid., 88.

59 Hutchinson, *Nazi Ideology*, op. cit., 55.

... no criticism of the works of National Socialist leaders is allowed. Everyone who engaged in such criticism is to be reported. There is no place for them in the Party, nor in the Movement of the Deutsche Christen. Rosenberg's work may only be dealt with during indoctrination evenings (*Schulungsabende*).<sup>60</sup>

Turning to the treatment of the *Mythus* itself Steigmann-Gall says 'Rosenberg's *magnum opus* remains untranslated to this day.' Actually, an English translation appeared over 20 years ago and in the last 10 years a version of this translation has been freely available on the Internet. Steigmann-Gall ought to have mentioned these even if only to criticize them.<sup>61</sup>

Steigmann-Gall repeatedly claims to be using the first, 1930, edition of the *Mythus* and bases some key arguments about its intent and reception upon this fact. Actually he uses a later edition. The page numbers given in his footnotes do not correspond to the pages in the original 1930 edition as preserved in the National Library of Canada in Ottawa. For example, Steigmann-Gall places two quotations from Rosenberg at the beginning of Chapter 3. The first quotation he says occurs on page 365 of the 1930 edition when it really occurs on page 426. The second quotation he says is from page 391 of the first edition when it actually appears on page 369. It does, however, appear on page 391 of the 1935 edition.<sup>62</sup> Mistakes like these raise the question of which edition of the *Mythus* did Steigmann-Gall use in his research. This is very important for his argument because he claims:

Indeed, in the same book that put forth a new religious doctrine, Rosenberg felt compelled to assure his readers that he was not trying to resurrect a dead religion and that it should not be nazi policy to engage in religious matters.<sup>63</sup>

This statement, he says, is from pages 5–7 of the 1930 edition. Actually, pages 5–7 of this edition contain the title page and table of contents.<sup>64</sup> Rosenberg's apology for his work, which Steigmann-Gall sees as a reflection of his insecurity within the Party, first appeared in the third edition of 1931, where it is part of a new introduction written to defend the *Mythus* against hostile criticism by Christians. The fact that it was not included in the original published text invalidates some of Steigmann-Gall's claims about the relationship between Rosenberg and his party colleagues.

60 BMG, Braun, Miss. Inspector Walter, BdI, AbtII, Fach 4, Nr. 14, 1918–1938; BMG, Braun, BdI, AbtII, Fach 4, Nr. 14, 1918–1938, Protestantblatt, Nr. 37, 1934, in Karla Poewe, 'Liberalism, German Missionaries, and National Socialism' in Ulrich van der Heyden and Holger Stoecker, *Mission und Macht* (Stuttgart 2005), 633–62. See also Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (Oxford 2005).

61 Ibid., 94, note 40. Cf. Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (Torrance, CA 1982); the Internet version is available at: <http://www.ety.com/HRP/booksonline/mythos/mythos-introduction.htm> — accessed 22 March 2005.

62 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 86, 92.

63 Ibid., 92ff.

64 Ibid.

In the introduction to the first edition, Rosenberg merely said that his book was a 'personal confession not the creed of the political party to which I belong'. He then explained that it was not the task of a political party to dictate aesthetic styles in architecture, painting, literature or religion, although he suggests that these may be encouraged through the work of progressive thinkers like himself.<sup>65</sup> This statement is significant because it tells us nothing about the attitude of National Socialist leaders to the *Mythus* before popular opposition to Rosenberg's ideas became clear to all.

Then Steigmann-Gall tells the reader, 'Some people even supposed that it was more influential in the NSDAP than Hitler's own book.' In doing so he makes the claim that Rosenberg's *Mythus* was 'more influential' than Hitler's *Mein Kampf* sound like the paranoid delusion of churchmen. Yet when Steigmann-Gall's source for this claim Jonathan Wright is checked, a different picture emerges. What Wright says is that a book published by a Church group demonstrated that an examination of 'the Nazi press showed that Rosenberg's views were more widely held in the party than Hitler's'.<sup>66</sup>

There is an enormous difference between reporting the views of 'some people' and saying that a study of the German press showed that National Socialist newspapers reflected Rosenberg's views more often than they did those of Hitler. Interestingly, even though he strongly denied that Rosenberg had any influence on Hitler's views, Albert Speer confirmed the correctness of this analysis when he wrote that 'the public regarded the book as the standard text for party ideology'.<sup>67</sup>

Although Steigmann-Gall claims that 'Hitler and Goebbels heaped enormous scorn'<sup>68</sup> on Rosenberg's writings, the truth is far more complex. Most of what we know about Hitler's attitude towards Rosenberg's writings and *Weltanschauung* comes from anecdotal comments by people who knew Hitler. Two key pieces of documentary evidence, however, provide direct information about Hitler's personal attitude towards Rosenberg's work. One is Hitler's decision to make Rosenberg the first recipient of the National Prize for Art and Science that he received at the Party Congress in 1937. The official citation approved by Hitler, which Goebbels read to a mass meeting, states:

On 30 January 1937, you, my Führer, founded by decree the National Prize for Art and Science . . . The first living person to receive the Führer's prize is Party Comrade Alfred Rosenberg. In his works, Alfred Rosenberg distinguished himself because he helped establish and stabilize the world view of National Socialism both scientifically and intuitively. He especially distinguished himself because he fought untiringly to maintain the purity of the National Socialist world view. Only future generations will be able to assess accurately just

65 Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich 1930), 22ff.

66 Jonathan Wright, 'Above Parties'. *The Political Attitudes of the German Protestant Church Leadership 1918–1933* (Oxford 1974), 89.

67 Speer, *Erinnerungen*, op. cit., 110. English translation by R. and C. Winston, *Memoirs*, op. cit., 96. Translation of: 'Das Buch wurde in der Öffentlichkeit weithin als Standardwerk der Partei-Ideologie angesehen . . .'.  
68 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 93.

how deeply this man influenced the spiritual shape and world view of the National Socialist state. The National Socialist Movement, and with it all the German people rejoice with deep satisfaction that the Führer awarded this prize to one of his oldest and closest comrades.<sup>69</sup>

The other is a personal letter sent by Hitler to commemorate Rosenberg's fiftieth birthday in 1943. He writes:

I still remember the day I met you in the home of Dietrich Eckart. Since then you have become the first spiritual and intellectual co-builder of the party. One day history will record how much you did to clarify and stabilize the world view foundations of the movement . . . Today, however, I want to thank you especially for your unquestioned faithfulness and great loyalty that you have extended to me and my work and person these many years. I know that you are one of the most distinguished personalities that Fate has granted me to meet.<sup>70</sup>

No doubt Hitler was uncomfortable with Rosenberg's personality, was prepared to distance himself publicly from Rosenberg's views when it served his purpose, and made snide remarks about him to some party colleagues. Nevertheless, these two documents, both of which were the direct result of Hitler's personal decision to honour Rosenberg when he could easily have sidelined him, show a remarkable appreciation for Rosenberg's views and role in creating the Party's *Weltanschauung*.

While some reports are contradictory, a surprising number of observers from many different backgrounds and ideological positions commented on the widespread interest in, and acceptance of, Rosenberg's ideas by Hitler, and their propagation throughout German society. For example, Otto Strasser claimed that during a meeting early in 1928 Hitler told him:

69 Walter Schmitt (ed.), *Der Parteitag der Arbeit* (Munich 1937), 49ff. The original German reads: Am 30. Januar 1937 haben Sie, mein Führer, durch einen Erlaß den Deutschen Nationalpreis für Kunst und Wissenschaft gestiftet . . . Als ersten unter den Lebenden hat der Führer den Deutschen Nationalpreis dem Parteigenossen Alfred Rosenberg verliehen. Alfred Rosenberg hat in seinen Werken in hervorragendstem Maße die Weltanschauung des Nationalsozialismus wissenschaftlich und intuitiv begründen und festigen geholfen. In einem unermüdlichen Kampf um die Reinerhaltung der nationalsozialistischen Weltanschauung hat er sich ganz besondere Verdienste erworben. Erst eine spätere Zeit wird voll zu ermessen vermögen, wie tief der Einfluß dieses Mannes auf die geistige und weltanschauliche Gestaltung des nationalsozialistischen Reiches ist. Die nationalsozialistische Bewegung und darüber hinaus das ganze deutsche Volk wird es mit tiefer Genugtuung begrüßen, daß der Führer in Alfred Rosenberg einen seiner ältesten und treuesten Mitkämpfer durch Verleihung des Deutschen National Preises auszeichnet.

70 Archives du Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, Document LXII, 9, Letter from Adolf Hitler to Alfred Rosenberg, 11.1.1943. Archivist Mme Karen Taieb kindly provided a copy of this document. The original German reads: Ich erinnere mich noch des Tages, als ich Sie in der Wohnung Dietrich Eckarts kennenlernte. Seitdem sind Sie zum ersten geistigen Mitgestalter der Partei geworden. Was Sie in diesen langen Jahren zur Klärung und Festigung der weltanschaulichen Grundlagen der Bewegung beigetragen haben, wird dereinst in die Geschichte eingehen . . . Besonders danken möchte ich Ihnen aber an diesem Tage für die unentwegte Treue und große Loyalität, die Sie meinem Wirken und meiner Person die langen Jahre hindurch entgegengebracht haben. Ich weiß, daß Sie eine der vornehmsten menschlichen Erscheinungen sind, die mich das Schicksal finden ließ.

'The ideology of Rosenberg is an inalienable component of National Socialism', he shouted stressing every syllable . . . 'At the moment, Christianity is one of the points of the party programme as I formulated it. But, one must look beyond. Rosenberg is a forerunner, a prophet: his theories are the expression of the German soul.'<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, Kurt G.W. Ludecke, an early confidant of Hitler, records this exchange with him:

'You haven't met Rosenberg yet?' Hitler asked me abruptly. I replied that I knew him but slightly. 'You must get to know him better, get on good terms with him. He is the only man whom I always listen to. He is a thinker.'

Then Ludecke adds: 'Rosenberg, the twenty-five-year-old Baltic German, became Hitler's closest thinker, and more than anybody else, in his later writings, shaped the Nazi "Weltanschauung" — a word somewhat inadequately translated "world-outlook".'<sup>72</sup>

Others who made similar comments include Martha Dodd, a journalist and daughter of the American ambassador; George Frederick Kneller, an American PhD student writing on German education; Denis de Rougemont, a French university professor teaching in Frankfurt-am-Main; Theodor Heuss, who later became State President of the Bundesrepublik; the Jewish professor of Romance languages and literature Victor Klemperer; and the former Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolph Hoess. The German-Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith also commented on Rosenberg's influence upon German students and even claimed that Rosenberg's work was popular among Japanese Nationalists.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, it is possible to discredit each of these writers, and others, by questioning the reliability of their observations individually. Thus, support for the view that Rosenberg exercised great influence within both the National Socialist movement and German society dies a death by a thousand qualifications. Taken together, such testimonies present a remarkably unified picture from a wide spectrum of opinions and circumstances over many years.

Further, George Hutchinson meticulously documented a mass of evidence to show that Rosenberg exercised considerable influence over German intel-

71 Otto Strasser, *Hitler und Ich* (Constance 1948), 125. The original German reads: 'Die Ideologie Rosenbergs ist ein unveräußerlicher Bestandteil des Nationalsozialismus', schrie er und betonte jede einzelne Silbe . . . 'Das Christentum ist für den Augenblick einer der Punkte des Parteiprogramms, so wie ich es ausgearbeitet habe. Aber man muß weiter sehen. Rosenberg ist ein Vorläufer, ein Prophet, — seine Theorien sind der Ausdruck der deutschen Seele.'

72 Kurt G.W. Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler* (New York 1937), 79, 84.

73 Martha Dodd, *Through Embassy Eyes* (New York 1940), 241; George Frederick Kneller, *The Educational Philosophy of National Socialism* (New Haven, CT 1941), 194ff.; Denis de Rougemont, *Journal aus Deutschland, 1935–1936* (Vienna 1998), 75; Theodor Heuss, *Hitlers Weg* (Tübingen 1968), 109ff.; Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum Letzten. Tagebücher 1942–1945* (Berlin 1995), vol. II, 291, 318, 385ff.; G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York 1947), 267ff.; Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933* (Stuttgart 1986), 11, 118.

lectual life and popular belief during the National Socialist era. This includes Rosenberg's personal travel itinerary involving numerous speeches to crowds of up to 100,000, frequent newspaper reports proclaiming him the intellectual spokesperson of National Socialism, and a large collection of letters from individuals expressing gratitude for his work especially his *Mythus*. Letters and other documents show that at times top National Socialist leaders such as Bormann, Frick, Frank, Goebbels, Hess, Himmler, Ley, Schirach and Göring, praised and promoted Rosenberg's work while soliciting his support.<sup>74</sup> The latter tendency was particularly important in the formative years of the Hitler Youth. Rosenberg, as prophet of a new 'Myth of the Twentieth Century', became the liaison between the Hitler Youth and the dozens of *völkisch* youth groups. Thus already in the 1920s, Rosenberg's influence reached far beyond the Party into the religio-racial *völkisch* movement.<sup>75</sup> The fact that most of these people had disputes with Rosenberg, could criticize, ridicule, and distance themselves from him does nothing to change the reality that from the beginning until the end of the Party's power they acknowledged him as the main theorist of National Socialism.<sup>76</sup>

Further evidence demonstrating the popularity of Rosenberg's ideas is found in the impressive sales figures of Rosenberg's *Mythus*, which became a runaway best-seller long before Hitler's election victory in 1933. When the book appeared in 1930 it was said to have caused 'a great sensation'<sup>77</sup> and went through seven editions before Hitler's election victory in 1933. After that, sales of the *Mythus* increased until it had sold between 1 and 2 million copies by 1945.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars in the English-speaking world, like Steigmann-Gall, persist in insisting that sales are 'not a real reflection of its popularity'.<sup>79</sup> This refusal to take the sales figures at face value probably springs from the fact that from the time of its publication English-speaking commentators inevitably dismissed the book as absurd 'drivel'<sup>80</sup> that 'no English reader would voluntarily read' because of its 'meaningless bombast'.<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, German observers noted that the *Mythus* was 'being "devoured" by German Students'.<sup>82</sup> Later, in 1935, when Rosenberg res-

74 Hutchinson, *Nazi Ideology*, op. cit., 33–58.

75 Hans-Christian Brandenburg, *Die Geschichte der HJ* (Cologne 1968), 61, 74–5.

76 A positive reappraisal of Rosenberg's influence is found in Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism* (Cambridge 2005).

77 Heinrich Hüffmeier, Foreword by Rev. Sidney M. Berry, *Rosenberg's German 'Mythus'* (London 1935).

78 Hutchinson, *Nazi Ideology*, op. cit., 63; cf. Hermann Weiß, *Biographisches Lexikon zum Dritten Reich* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1999), 386.

79 Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, op. cit., 93.

80 John Arendzen, 'Mythus' II. *The Character of the New Religion* (London 1936), 2.

81 E.O. Lorimer, *What Hitler Wants* (Harmondsworth 1939), 101.

82 Friends of Europe, Foreword by G.K. Chesterton, *Germany's National Religion* (London 1934), 9.



ponded to critics in his *An die Dunkelmänner unserer Zeit*,<sup>83</sup> this polemical tract sold 300,000 copies in the first month and over 900,000 by 1942.<sup>84</sup> No wonder that after studying the impact of the *Mythus*, Joachim Petzold concluded that 'hundreds of thousands of copies were circulated and drummed into the heads of new fascist leader recruits through systematic indoctrination'.<sup>85</sup>

The truth is that Rosenberg knew exactly which audience to target and why. As he explained in his 1930 Foreword, his *Mythus* was not composed for those who were firmly rooted in existing faith communities, but for those millions who were unbound and searching for 'new world view commitments'.<sup>86</sup> To them he offered a new faith based on a new mythology that would create a new type of human being.<sup>87</sup>

This article began by asking two questions: are novels and ideological speeches reliable as historical sources and what should historians do when they encounter views that are totally alien to their own?

Steigmann-Gall's use, or misuse, of Goebbels' novel *Michael* answers the first question. Clearly, we cannot take the statements of fictitious characters as expressions of the personal views of an author as he does. The folly of such an approach can be seen by considering Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South*.<sup>88</sup> In it the Reverend Hale brings misfortune upon his family when he decides that he can no longer subscribe to Anglican beliefs and must leave the priesthood. Throughout the novel his daughter Margaret remains a faithful Anglican and all works out well for her in the end. From this one can imagine some fundamentalist schoolteacher using the novel in an American Christian school to argue that Elizabeth Gaskell was teaching the moral lesson that disbelief leads to social and economic decline and creates great unhappiness. But belief, as Margaret illustrates, has its own reward. Then it is a logical step to see Elizabeth Gaskell as a champion of Christian orthodoxy and Anglicanism. Actually, whatever the moral of the novel, its author was a Unitarian who rejected Anglicanism.<sup>89</sup>

From this example, and that of *Michael*, it is clear that novels are novels and do not necessarily tell us anything about their author's personal beliefs. The

83 Alfred Rosenberg, *An die Dunkelmänner unserer Zeit* (Munich 1935).

84 Hutchinson, *Nazi Ideology*, op. cit., 63.

85 Ibid., 215.

86 Here works on recruitment to new religious movements throw light on Rosenberg's techniques which are no different from the examples discussed by William Sims Bainbridge in *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley, CA 1985) and Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley, CA 2000). In this respect Anson Shupe and David Bromley's use of resource mobilization theory in *The Making of a Moonie* (Los Angeles, CA 1979) is also enlightening.

87 Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., 1-3.

88 Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London 1961, first published 1854).

89 Edgar Wright, *Mrs. Gaskell. The Basis for Reassessment* (London 1965).

presupposition that an author's personal beliefs are indirectly expressed through their fictional characters is a shallow reading by any standard. While novels may illustrate the social background of a time they are not a reliable source for the beliefs of their authors nor do they necessarily present views with which an author personally identifies. Therefore, novels, regardless of their real or imagined historicity must be used with great care by historians.

The second question is more complex and clearly something that troubles many people writing about Nazi Germany. The scholarly consensus is that Rosenberg wrote 'rambling and inconsequent . . . verbiage' that 'seems almost willfully obscure'.<sup>90</sup> Therefore many historians appear to conclude that there is no need to take his work seriously because it makes no sense. The problem here is that while Robert Burns's line 'what is not sense must be nonsense'<sup>91</sup> may be good satirical poetry, it fails to grasp the dynamics of the sociology of knowledge.

Most historians and writers who discuss the works of Rosenberg and National Socialist ideology appear completely unaware of the vast sociological literature on the sociology of knowledge. Therefore, they mistakenly assume that the popularity of a book is to be judged by the rationality of its contents without realizing that the popularity of a book largely depends on the community that reads it.<sup>92</sup> That the *Mythus* became a best-seller ought to come as no surprise. Nor should we doubt that young defeated Germans carefully studied a work that promised to liberate their race-specific local culture from, as Rosenberg expressed it, a 'bastardized, orientalized, and Jewified Christianity'.<sup>93</sup>

While such obnoxious ideas may appear nonsense to most people today, it is important to recognize that they made good sense to many young Germans in the 1920s and 1930s. As Peter Drucker pointed out in 1939: 'Clearly, nobody

90 Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race* (London 1972), 82.

91 *The Kirk's Alarm*

Orthodox! Orthodox!

Wha believe in John Knox —

Let me sound an alarm to your conscience:

A heretic Blast

Has been blawn i' the Wast,

That what is not sense must be nonsense

Orthodox!

That what is not sense must be nonsense.

James Barke (ed.), *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (London 1987), 393.

92 Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion. Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA 1985) and Rodney Stark, *Exploring the Religious Life* (Baltimore, MD 2004); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London 1967); Irving Hexham and Karla O. Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures* (Boulder, CO 1997); Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults. The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Toronto 1998); cf. Geoffrey J. Giles, *Students and National Socialism in Germany* (Princeton, NJ 1985), 189.

93 Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., 75; cf. Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (Oxford 2005).

would have been a Nazi if rational belief in the Nazi promises had been a prerequisite.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, to look for normal rationality in Rosenberg, or any other National Socialist writer, is futile. Rather one needs to recognize, as Evans-Pritchard did with Zande witchcraft, that such works have their 'own logic' and their 'own rules of thought'.<sup>95</sup>

Scholars who claim that the *Mythus* sold well but was not read overlook the fact that numerous other works written by founders of new religions are equally obscure and seemingly impossible to understand. Mark Twain, for example, described the *Book of Mormon* as 'chloroform in print', yet it is the key text for a movement with over ten million followers.<sup>96</sup> Others whose works are regarded by many outsiders as 'unreadable' and 'drivel' include: Madam Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, L. Ron Hubbard, who created Scientology, Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church, Sri Bagwan Rajneesh, whose Osho movement continues to flourish long after his death, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation Movement.<sup>97</sup> Members of the so-called 'anti-cult movement' explain the avid devotion of converts to such works as the result of 'brainwashing' because, like English-speaking critics of Rosenberg, they cannot accept that anyone can possibly read and study books that they scorn.<sup>98</sup>

Yet in reality there is an internal logic to Rosenberg's work that functions in terms of a comprehensive *Weltanschauung*.<sup>99</sup> Once the basic premises of such a world view are accepted, a totally convincing and internally coherent argu-

94 Peter F. Drucker, *The End of Economic Man* (New York 1939), 19.

95 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford 1937), 79.

96 Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, CT 1891), 102; for current statistics on the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints see: [http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na\\_191.html#1060](http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na_191.html#1060) accessed 7.8.2005.

97 Cf. Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (Point Loma, CA 1910). Membership of Theosophy is estimated at around 35,000 although the influence of the movement and its role in creating other movements is far greater than this figure suggests. L. Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics. The Modern Science of Mental Health* (New York 1950), estimates for the true size of Scientology vary from around 10,000 core members to 8,000,000. Sun Myung Moon, *The Divine Principle* (Washington, DC 1974), this is one of the more intelligible of such works. The Unification Church has about 3,000,000 members mainly in Asia. Bagwan Sri Rajneesh, *Beyond Enlightenment* (Zürich 1986); the followers of Rajneesh number around 200,000. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being and Art of Living. Transcendental Meditation* (New York 1963), today the Transcendental Meditation Movement claims around 3,000,000 members and at its height in the 1970s attracted over 10,000,000 participants. Statistics on the membership of various religions are to be found on the Internet at:

<http://www.adherents.com/>

98 Cf. David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, *Strange Gods. The Great American Cult Scare* (Boston, MA 1981); and *The New Vigilantes. Deprogrammers, Anti-cultists, and the New Religions* (Beverly Hills, CA 1980).

99 The internal logic of Rosenberg's *Mythus* is demonstrated by Albert R. Chandler in his *Rosenberg's Nazi Myth* (Ithaca, NY 1945). Chandler, who was a philosopher, shows that Rosenberg presents a coherent system once his basic premises are admitted and that the book is far more powerful than most writers want to admit.

ment falls into place creating its own rationality.<sup>100</sup> In approaching works like those of Rosenberg, the task of the historian is to reconstruct the social constructions of reality and *Weltanschauung* that made such ideas come alive to believers, not simply dismiss them as absurd.<sup>101</sup> Given the horrors of the second world war and the Holocaust, this is no easy task because it calls for a suspension of disbelief about beliefs most people find morally repugnant. Nevertheless, such an approach is needed if we are to understand the logic of evil and the web of deception created by nazi theorists like Rosenberg. Here, studies by scholars of religion like Ninian Smart, and anthropologists like John Beattie are valuable to historians because they show how we can approach and understand totally alien belief systems.<sup>102</sup>

It is here that Steigmann-Gall's approach fails. Rather than enabling the reader to understand how and why people accepted nazi logic he dismisses it as illogical and vainly seeks an alternative explanation that leads him to deny that anyone could possibly have read Rosenberg's work. To deny the significance of the sales figures for Rosenberg's *Mythus* and argue that the book was not read as so many scholars do is to avoid asking the much harder questions of why people read this book, how they understood it and how it affected their thinking.

In conclusion, there is no easy answer to the questions raised by Steigmann-Gall's book. National Socialism still sends shivers of horror through most people today. All we can do is plot its progress and attempt to understand how such evil was sold to the world. Unless we face the full horror, including its intellectual and mythical appeal to both the masses and scholars through works like *Michael* and the *Mythus*, we will have failed to understand the true rhetorical significance of nazism and its literature.

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100 Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford 1970).

101 Cf. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth 1966); David K. Naugle, *Worldview. The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI 2002); Helmut G. Meier, 'Weltanschauung'. *Studien zu einer Geschichte und Theorie des Begriffes* (Münster 1970).

102 Cf. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews* (New York 1983) 1–36, and *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London 1978); John Beattie, *Understanding an African Kingdom Bunyoro* (London 1965); Ralph Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London 1952).