

# Hitler the evolutionist; Hitler the pantheist (Hitler the atheist—Yes)

**Hitler's Religion: The twisted beliefs that drove the Third Reich**

Richard Weikart

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The author is a well-authored historian. He is Professor of Modern European History at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of five books, and has published scholarly articles in *German Studies Review*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and other journals. His work has been featured in various media outlets.

The author provides a rigorous analysis of Hitler's understanding of 'God'. He also examines all the arguments for and against the different ideas about Hitler's religious beliefs, or lack of them. Pointedly, Weikart warns against taking isolated statements of Hitler in order to draw conclusions about his beliefs. Instead, one must look at the *main* themes of Hitler's pronouncements, and with greater weight to his private than his public comments.

## The public Hitler and the private Hitler

What politicians say, and what they actually think, are often very different. Not surprisingly Hitler, dealing with a German nation that was still largely—if only culturally—Christian, also called himself a Christian. For the same reason, Hitler periodically invoked Christian themes, and generally refrained from

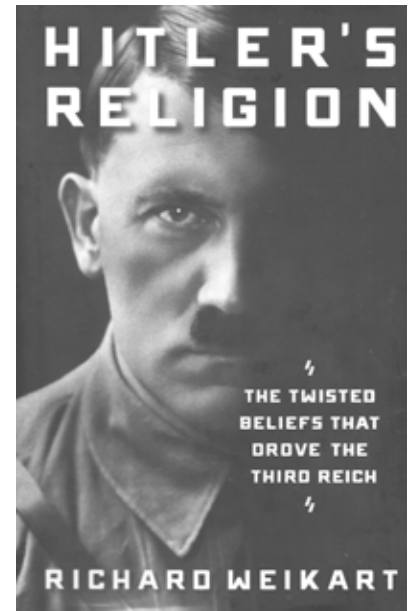
publicly making harsh statements about Christianity. Furthermore, some Nazis, including Hitler, retained church membership even if they did not believe.

In private, Hitler often verbalized his hostility to Christianity and the church. However, Weikart warns of the fact that Hitler often told people, of his circle, what they wanted to hear. For instance, owing to the fact that Martin Bormann, Hitler's personal secretary, was a hard-core atheist, it would hardly be remarkable if Hitler would posture as an atheist in discussions with Bormann.

On the other hand, Weikart's warning appears to be an overreach in other contexts. Hitler told Christa Schroeder, his personal secretary, that the church was an outdated and stifling institution. Hitler also told two of his close and high-ranking associates, Otto Strasser and Walter Schellenberg, that he did not believe in God. It is not at all clear why Hitler would think that these officials 'wanted to hear' that he was a church rejecter and an atheist. If anything, the exact opposite was the case. Note that Otto Strasser broke with Hitler, already in 1930, because Strasser believed that, without Christianity, Europe was lost, and because Hitler was an atheist (p. xi). Now, if Hitler was indeed consistently telling his close associates 'what they wanted to hear', he would have told Strasser that he was a devout Christian, and certainly not that he was an atheist!

## 'God' can mean many different things

In the West nowadays, most people are biblically illiterate, and have many different conceptions of 'God'. An atheist can even quip



that: "I believe in God, because God is humanity's greatest invention." However, this is nothing new. Even in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, there were many different notions of 'God', many of them quite at variance with the biblical teachings about Him. There were a number of reasons for this. For one thing, owing to the residual strength of theism, those who rejected God usually preferred to redefine Him rather than disavow Him openly. Second, the development of higher criticism and modernism, both pioneered in Germany, made it quite facile to de-literalize God and Christian elements. For example, the anticipated 'Second Coming of Christ' became repackaged as one's personal devotion to Christ at the time of one's death. This de-literalization and contrived flexibility of God and Christian elements, in turn, made it easier to co-opt them, under decidedly unconventional new meanings, for the purposes of what eventually became Nazi ideology.

Apart from the deliberate attempts to mislead the German people, it is unremarkable that Hitler sometimes inadvertently lapsed into Christian terminology, that he mixed Christian and Nazi memes, and that he

occasionally even seemed to hold Christian beliefs. After all, Hitler had been raised Christian. Weikart does not mention this, but one can think of famous American militant atheist Madalyn O’Hair, who indicated that, decades after having stopped believing, she could recall some Christian hymns in detail.

Owing to all the foregoing reasons, it is not surprising that Hitler’s statements about God seem contradictory. Still less surprising is his idiosyncratic reuse of theistic and Christian terminology for his own purposes. Let us examine some of them.

### Who (or what) was ‘God’ to Hitler?

Hitler frequently used the words ‘providence’ and ‘almighty’, but he was actually referring to fate. Such was the conclusion of fellow Nazis Alfred Rosenberg and Hans Frank, who were hanged at Nuremberg. (I recall that, when I first read *Mein Kampf* as a teenager decades ago, I was struck by Hitler’s frequent allusions to fate.) There are other Nazi usages of ‘god’, not mentioned by Weikart, and these are in the sense of blood and race.<sup>1</sup>

At times, however, Hitler did make it sound as though he believed that history had been predetermined. However, this does not imply theism, at least not necessarily. In fact, it is not uncommon for people, especially when in a desperate situation, to imagine some sort of predetermined outcome, involving God or not involving God, where there is none. One obvious example, not mentioned by Weikart, involves Hitler’s reaction to the news of the death of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945. Hitler deluded himself into concluding that ‘God’ had intervened on Nazi Germany’s behalf in the last minute, causing the impending collapse of the Allied war effort, and thereby enabling Germany to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Most of the time, when Hitler prayed, he did it in the sense that the one praying would be inspired to solve his own problems. (Nowadays, this is often verbalized as ‘God helps those who help themselves’.) At other times, however, it superficially seemed that Hitler was indeed praying, to a personal god, for deliverance. However, it is not rare for even atheists to pray to God when in difficult situations, wherein we get the saying that ‘there are no atheists in foxholes’. One might also think of the parallel Polish proverb, “*Kiedy trwoga to do Boga*” (when people are in fear, they turn to God).

Incredibly, some commentators have not only argued that Hitler was a theist, but also that he was a creationist—all because he sometimes referred to a creator of the universe. A close analysis of Hitler’s usage of this term disposes of this silly claim. In his infamous *Mein Kampf*, Hitler uses ‘creator’ with reference to nature. This is also consonant with his deification of nature in many other contexts. So when Hitler spoke that man was made ‘in the image of the creator’, he meant that man was made in the image of deified nature.

### Hitler was no Christian

At times, Hitler spoke that Jesus was ‘his lord and saviour’, and that he was ‘fighting for the work of the lord’. In context, it is obvious that Hitler was referring to deified nature. Weikart adds that, in Hitler’s twisted thinking, Jesus was the saviour in the sense that He came to save the world from the Jews. Hitler thought that Jesus Christ had stood up to the Jews and their avarice and materialism and, for this reason, the Jews had Him put to death.

There is no way that Hitler could have been a Christian as conventionally defined. Hitler entirely rejected the miraculous. Furthermore, Hitler rejected all the Christian doctrines, including the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and disbelieved in an afterlife

(except in the redefined sense of the persistence of the *Volk*), even weeks before his suicide.

The pattern of Hitler’s thinking is unmistakable. Weikart concludes that, “Most historians today agree that Hitler was not a Christian in any meaningful sense” (p. 69).

### Hitler the pantheist / Hitler the atheist

Author Weikart suggests that Hitler’s frequent usages of the term ‘god’ mean that Hitler cannot be considered an atheist. So what term best describes Hitler’s beliefs? Weikart concludes that Hitler is best understood to be a pantheist—a conclusion also reached earlier by several investigators.

Let us take a closer look at this. The pantheist believes that ‘everything is god’. Now, if everything is god, it means that nothing in particular is god. It also certainly means that no personal, transcendent Supreme Being exists. This, by definition, is atheism. As Christian apologist and legal scholar John Warwick Montgomery pointed out:

“Pantheism ... is neither true nor false; it is something much worse, viz., entirely trivial. We had little doubt that the universe was here anyway; by giving it a new name (‘God’) we explain nothing. We actually commit the venerable intellectual sin of Word Magic, wherein the naming of something is supposed to give added power either to the thing named or to the semantic magician himself.”<sup>2</sup>

Such was also the conclusion of Artur Schopenhauer, a philosopher widely read, and admired, by Hitler (figure 1). Therefore, and contrary to Weikart, Hitler indeed was an atheist.

Modern definitions of atheism only reinforce this point. In the past, atheism was usually understood as a conscious and deliberate decision to disbelieve the existence of God. Nowadays, however, merely an absence of belief in God suffices to

make one an atheist (in a self-serving definition to remove their burden of proof). On this basis, it is said that every child is born an atheist, and remains so unless or until he or she is indoctrinated in belief in God. (Actually, research shows that children's default position is to see the world as design, and indoctrination is needed to reject that.<sup>3</sup>) Since Hitler had an absence of belief in a personal, transcendent supreme being, he was, by the new definition, an atheist.

### Hitler, the occult, and neo-paganism

There is, first of all, no contradiction between being an atheist, and being involved in the occult or in neo-paganism. In fact, being an atheist does not mean that one believes in nothing. It means that one can believe in anything (except God, of course).

Weikart does not support the importance of the occult in Nazi thinking. He points out that the early, proto-Nazi racist movements in Germany *intersected* with mysticism and the occult, but were not centred on them. The same can be said of Hitler. He had books on the occult in his library, and at least once engaged in dowsing, but there is no systematic body of evidence that Hitler was deeply involved in the occult. As for other leading Nazis, Hess and Himmler showed a sustained interest in the occult, while Goebbels and Bormann frowned upon the occult. Around 1941, the Nazis banned many public manifestations of occultism, including astrology, spiritism, theosophism, and parapsychology.

The author's downplaying of the occult, in Nazi attitudes and actions, may be excessive. In fact, the Nazi outlawing of public occult practices does not necessarily mean that Nazism was anti-occult. The Nazis may have actually opposed the public's use of the occult for elitist reasons: they wanted to monopolize the occult power for themselves, and not share it with the

unwashed masses. In addition, the Nazi authorities perhaps feared that widespread public use of the occult could become an end in itself, thus reducing the hold of Nazi ideology upon the minds of the masses. (Note that this parallels the accusation of many occultists, who assert that the real reason that the church opposes the occult owes to the fear that the masses could come to feel that they can develop their own private spirituality, and that they no longer needed the church or its institutions.)

Support for the premise that the Nazis wanted to monopolize the occult, and not eliminate it, is found in the actions of Heinrich Himmler. Weikart quips:

“One of the more bizarre aspects of this anti-occult campaign is that it was directed by Himmler's police forces, despite Himmler's own fascination with the occult. Indeed, Himmler released the astrologer, Wilhelm Wulff, from custody, under the condition that he ply his occult art for Himmler. Thus he became Himmler's personal astrologer at the same time other

astrologers were being persecuted” (p. 192).

All in all, Weikart downplays the neo-pagan aspects of Nazism. Again, it appears that Nazism *intersected* with Nordic neo-paganism, but was not centred on it. As with the occult, there was no monolithic Nazi position on this subject. Rosenberg and Himmler wanted to resurrect ancient Germanic gods, rites, and shrines, while Hitler did not. The rationalist side of Hitler came to the fore (pp. 189–190). This meant that modern science and reason was what should animate the German people, and not a return to long-defunct habits. In addition to this, Hitler believed that Nazism should stress action, and not contemplation and mysticism.

Finally, since neo-paganism was repulsive to many Germans, Hitler had the following tactical reason for distancing himself from neo-paganism: It was unnecessarily divisive of the German people. In fact, Weikart could have made this consideration stronger by pointing out that Munich Bishop Michael von Faulhaber, who had a relatively good standing with Hitler, had been emphasizing the dangers of Nazi neo-paganism to German Christendom.<sup>4</sup>

### Hitler was unquestionably an evolutionist

A commentator has argued that *Entwicklung* can mean development, and not evolution and, on this slender reed, tries to undermine Hitler's belief in evolution. (Not mentioned by Weikart, the English word evolution can also have multiple meanings—for example, the evolution of gases in a chemical reaction—even though it normally refers to organic evolution unless it obviously does not. And its Latin root *ēvolvere* means to unroll, unfold, or expand out. Note that Darwin himself didn't use the word in his *Origin of Species* until the very last word.) The usage, in each case, depends upon context. In addition,

### PANTHEISM IS ONLY A POLITE FORM OF ATHEISM



ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

**Figure 1.** Author Weikart identifies Hitler as a pantheist. However, semantics aside, pantheism is indistinct from atheism. Such is also the conclusion of famous atheists, such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Dawkins. Therefore, Hitler was an atheist.

the default meaning of *Entwicklung* is in fact organic evolution, as had been the usage of this term by German biologists of the 1920s and beyond (pp. 227–228). Thus, claims that *Entwicklung* had fallen into disuse in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a term meaning organic evolution, are totally fallacious.

Now consider the context of Hitler’s pronouncements. It seals the deal. In his *Mein Kampf*, and in the chapter “Nation and Race”, Hitler was obviously using *Entwicklung* in the sense of organic evolution. He could not possibly be referring to embryological development. Weikart elaborates:

“Hitler has just described a struggle between living organisms that leads to the victory of the stronger and the elimination of the weaker. In that context, what would the ‘higher development of organic beings’ mean? ‘Higher development’ certainly implies that a change is transpiring. Further, just two paragraphs later, Hitler maintained the ‘struggle is always a means for improving a species’ health and power of resistance, and, therefore, a cause of its higher development (*Hoherentwicklung*).’ Again, ‘improving’ a species and bringing about its ‘higher development’ is not a language of one committed to a fixity of species. Hitler used the term ‘higher development’ (*Hoherentwicklung*) yet again in the following paragraph when discussing biological organisms. Thus, even if we do not translate *Entwicklung* as ‘evolution’, it is still clear that evolution is exactly what Hitler meant” (p. 227).

Even stronger, in this regard, is the Nazi government’s manual on the official biological curriculum. It requires an “overview of the *Entwicklung* of life in the course of geological history” (p. 228). So *Entwicklung* is something that is taking place over the course of geologic time. Without a shadow of a doubt, this term can only be referring to organic evolution! In addition, this element of the official curriculum in

Nazi Germany debunks the bizarre argument that the Nazi regime had outlawed the teaching of organic evolution. Precisely the opposite is the case.<sup>5</sup>

Hitler left no doubt that he did not believe in any form of Adam and Eve. Exactly the opposite was the case. Weikart comments:

“As always, Hitler stressed that humans were no exception to the laws of nature. He stated, ‘In the process of evolution humans arose, just like animals, and their vocation was struggle for their existence.’ In a speech later that year, Hitler again expressed his belief that humans were descendants of animals. ... Hitler thus thought that the forefathers of humans were animals and humans would still be animals if they had not been elevated by the struggle for existence” (p. 234).

### Hitler uses evolution as a rationalistic weapon against Christianity

Hitler was not only an evolutionist, but also one who eagerly repeated the standard old atheist arguments against theism. Weikart comments:

“On October 24, 1941, Hitler spoke at great length to his entourage about the controversy between science and religion, and specifically between evolution and Christianity. Hitler opened this lengthy monologue by claiming that the church’s teachings are contrary to modern research. In fact, as Hitler expounded on this science-religion controversy, he clearly came down on the side of science and bashing the church. ... In addition, Hitler praised the French Enlightenment thinkers’ anticlericalism and the progress of science. After expostulating on the glories of science and the ignorance of the church, Hitler pronounced his belief in the evolution of humans. ... Hitler clearly accepted evolutionary theory, including human evolution,

and rejected religious teachings to the contrary. Nor was this an isolated statement. ... Two other associates of Hitler testify that belief in Darwinian evolution was integral to his ideology” (pp. 224–225).

### Conclusions

The preponderance of evidence is clear: Hitler was not a Christian. Isolated statements by Hitler to the contrary, and then said mostly for public consumption, do not invalidate this conclusion.

Weikart rejects the notion that Hitler was an atheist, and instead identifies Hitler as a pantheist. However, owing to the fact that pantheism and atheism are functionally identical, it follows that Hitler was indeed an atheist, Weikart notwithstanding.

There is no doubt about the fact that Hitler was a convinced evolutionist. Moreover, Hitler used evolution as a rationalist-style weapon against Christianity.

### References

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4. Faulhaber, M., *Judaism, Christianity, and Germany*, MacMillan Company, New York, 1934.
5. Elsewhere Weikart has explicitly refuted that charge: Was Darwinism Banned from Nazi Germany? *Evolution News*, evolutionnews.org, 21 November 2016.