

# SACRED CAUSES

THE CLASH OF RELIGION AND POLITICS,  
FROM THE GREAT WAR TO THE WAR ON TERROR



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## PREFACE

This is not a history of Christianity, of which there are many, nor a history of modern times, of which Paul Johnson has already written an outstanding example. Rather, the book operates in the middle ground between them, where culture, ideas, politics and religious faith meet in a space for which I cannot find a satisfactory label. Perhaps one should not try. Establishing that space has been one of the major challenges in writing this book. It is easy to recognise what one wants to avoid, for below my rope bridge snap such crocodiles as ‘ecclesiastical history’, ‘the history of ideas’ and ‘theology’. The general ambition has been to write a coherent history of modern Europe primarily organised around issues of mind and spirit rather than the merely material, although in no sense do I discount the material as an important factor in history, being as I am inordinately credulous towards simple displays of production statistics.

A previous book, *Earthly Powers*, began with the ‘political religion’ created during the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution with its Cults of Reason or the Supreme Being. These were not simply cynical usurpations of religious forms, but were what the Italian thinker Luigi Sturzo in the mid-1920s referred to as ‘the abusive exploitation of the human religious sentiment’. Like much earlier attempts to realise heaven on earth – vividly described in Norman Cohn’s classic account of medieval heresies *The Pursuit of the Millennium* – these resulted in hell for many people, as anyone who walks around the sites of Jacobin massacres in the bleak and depopulated Vendée can readily establish. This dystopian strain recurred in various guises throughout the nineteenth century, whether in the crackbrained schemes of Auguste Comte or Charles Fourier, the moral insanity of Russian nihilists, or the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, which was morally insane in other ways. Although Christianity was an integral aspect of many early socialist movements – and in Britain remains so to this day – in general the

Churches arranged themselves on the side of conservatism, partly as a result of their traumatic experiences at the hands of democratic mobs in revolutionary France and elsewhere.

This alliance of throne and altar duly broke down as the temporal power of the Churches was challenged by nation states which vied for ultimate human loyalties. A succession of popes, more or less gifted in public diplomacy, doggedly tried to shore up their powers in the face of this assault, whether from the combination of liberals and the reactionary conservative Bismarck in Germany, or from the anticlerical zealots of the French Third Republic. Meanwhile many of the Protestant Churches feebly accommodated themselves to the latest secular ideologies such as nationalism and scientism. These conflicts took place in conjunction with a broader series of changes – for which the label secularisation is unsatisfactory – whereby ‘science’, ‘progress’, ‘morality’, ‘money’, ‘culture’, ‘humanity’ and even ‘sport’ became objects of devotion and refocused religiosity. By the end of the century, when God was invoked by all sides in a catastrophic world war, the ‘strange gods’ of Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism were already discernible as alternative objects of religious devotion, those political religions being the initial focus of this book.

*Sacred Causes* begins amid the terrible trauma of the Great War, the shock that reverberated throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These were strange times. One of the assassins of the Weimar foreign minister Walter Rathenau, who was slain in 1922, claimed that he had been (spiritually) dead since Armistice Day (9 November 1918). Another extreme right-winger, depicted in a post-war play, says: ‘What does it matter whether I die of a bullet at twenty, or of cancer at forty, or of apoplexy at sixty. The people need priests who have the courage to sacrifice the best – priests who slaughter.’ There were many self-appointed priests (and prophets) in the 1920s, ranging from the strange individuals who briefly cropped up in Weimar Germany (the most successful of whom was Adolf Hitler) to the puritanical sectarians of Bolshevism. Rather than retell the over-familiar story of Fascism, Nazism and Communism, I have tried to evoke their pseudo-religious pathologies, ranging from the Nazis’ skilful manipulation of such notions as ‘rebirth’ and ‘awakening’ to the Bolsheviks’ bizarre resort to perpetual confession and remorseless search for heretics. Although there were important differences between these totalitarian regimes, they drew from a common well of enthusiasm, and shared such heretical goals (or rather temptations) as fashioning a ‘new man’ or establishing heaven on earth.

They metabolised the religious instinct. The thinkers who first identified and conceptualised these worrying developments lead on to the next part of the story, for many of the most insightful critics of totalitarian political religions came from a religious background, whether the Catholics Luigi Sturzo and Eric Voegelin, the Orthodox Nikolai Berdyaev, or the Protestants Frederick Voigt and Adolf Keller.

The complex responses of the Churches to these challenges are a major concern of this book. While how a national Church reacted certainly requires comment, it is also the case that these were international institutions, so that whenever one writes that ‘the’ Catholic Church did this or that, this generalisation does not hold, for example, for Britain, the US, Africa or the whole of Central and Latin America. Indeed, international events are indispensable for understanding this subject. The general predisposition of the Churches towards authoritarian (rather than totalitarian) regimes in the inter-war period is inexplicable without reference to the anticlerical atrocities that took place in Russia, Spain and Mexico – what Pius XI called the ‘terrible triangle’ in direct anticipation of contemporary talk of ‘axes of evil’. If one wants a sense of the sort of polity the inter-war Church supported, then it is a matter of looking at Austria, Ireland, and Portugal, rather than Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, although again British or US Catholics were perfectly at home in their respective democracies regardless of their external sympathies in particular conflicts. Moving on to the period of the Second World War, I have tried to treat Pius XII in a historical way, which means giving him credit for one of the most penetrating intellectual demolitions of Nazism – in the 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* – and by trying to evoke his personality and world, and hence the options that were realistically open to him as the Church grappled with a continent-wide conspiracy to murder Europe’s Jews. Very little of the cruder – Soviet inspired – ‘black legend’ survives close analysis, although legitimate questions remain about his hesitations and tone.

The intervention of the Churches in post-war politics – for their ‘good war’ facilitated this amid the collapse of other authorities – is an important part of the book, notably regarding the extraordinary success of European Christian Democrats in ensuring that Stalin’s surrogates did not achieve power in the western half of the continent. It is fashionable, on the left, to decry those aged French, German or Italian leaders, including Pius XII, as well as Adenauer, Bidault and de Gasperi; this is a view I do not share in view of the dizzy alternative prospect of rule

by a Marxist nomenklatura, a secret police, and trades union hacks. Turning eastwards, the book charts the state imposition of atheism on the intensely religious societies of eastern Europe, and the extraordinary heroism of persecuted churchmen in Hungary and Poland, who ensured the survival of a heavily restricted form of civil society amid the ambient corruption and darkness of Communism. That theme is taken up in connection with the role of Pope John Paul II (himself a protégé of cardinal Stefan Wyszyński) and the Catholic Church in Poland in the implosion of European Communism in the late 1980s, a role whose importance has been independently recognised by such leading historians of the Cold War as John Lewis Gaddis, and an Italian parliamentary commission unravelling the 1981 KGB/Bulgarian plot to kill the pope.

Three chapters of *Sacred Causes* deal with Europe's present and possible futures. I cast a rather dyspeptic eye over the 1960s, which in many ways were the chief motor of what then seemed like a highly secularised future, with Churches scrambling to articulate every evanescent secular gospel in a manner trenchantly analysed by Edward Norman. The politicisation of religion is as important in this story as the 'sacralisation' of politics. So are the forces that seemed to be turning Europe into a post-Christian desert, in which 'wisdom' would be represented by the lyrics of John Lennon.

There was one regional exception, that along with Franco's Spain seemed immune not just to the 1960s – although it certainly had its barricades – but to the European Enlightenment. No discussion of religion and politics would be complete without reference to the long war in Northern Ireland. Initially, I regarded this as an almost inexplicable, atavistic, tribal struggle fitfully audible as distant bombs rattled the windows of various places I've lived in London. However, in the long term, this squalid little conflict also anticipated the sinister surrender of power to so-called 'moderate' community leaders (and the creation of exceptional pockets where the law does not appear to apply) that is becoming evident in the responses of European governments to the much wider threat of Islamic radicalism. The spectrum of such responses ranges from the appeasement practised by the Spanish socialists – with their vain dialogue about a common 'Mediterranean' culture with people who think 'Andalus' belongs in a revived Caliphate – to the harder line of the Netherlands with its threats of compulsory Dutch and the banning of the burqa – an understandable reaction to the murder of Theo van Gogh, the prominent film-maker, and to the fact that some

of its MPs, notably the redoubtable ‘Infidel’ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, now have to sleep on army bases surrounded by bodyguards. Those Americans who disparage what they see as an emerging ‘Eurabia’ might bear a thought for the many Europeans who not only dread that prospect but are doing their best to avert it, sometimes risking their lives.

There are a few grounds for hope in this present ‘age of anxiety’. Most obviously, Islamist terrorism is not the same order of threat as that of the thermonuclear destruction that overshadowed the planet during the Cold War. Furthermore, whether in Britain or once-liberal Holland, there are definite signs that the worm has turned, suggesting that ordinary people – as opposed to politicians with inner-city Muslim constituents – are not ready to tolerate indefinitely those who wish to eradicate homosexuals, reduce women to second-class citizens, or openly call for the murder of Danish cartoonists, Dutch politicians or Jews and Israelis, activities that may be acceptable in Saudi Arabia or Iran, but which are not all right here. Anyone with those views is irreconcilable with our civilisation and should take the opportunity to leave before Europe’s history repeats itself. There are encouraging signs that the Churches – and in particular the Catholic Church of Benedict XVI – are ready to make certain non-negotiable positions clear rather than to mouth the platitudes of a discredited multiculturalism that only exists in the Left university and within local government, neither of them at the cutting edge of European thinking.

Finally, what of the long-term relationships between religion and politics? Atheists and anticlericals (many regarding themselves as ‘liberals’) like to rehearse the rote of Crusades and Inquisition, wars of religion and US evangelical Christians to extrude the Churches from any involvement in politics. Insofar as there is a debate, this is conducted on the level of alarm aroused when a British prime minister casually mentions that he is accountable to God, a rather unremarkable admission in a broad sweep of European history from Louis the Pious to Gladstone. Historically, of course, as has been pointed out by such thinkers as Marcel Gauchet and George Weigel, Christianity had much to do with the notion of the autonomous, sacrosanct individual, with the preservation of a sphere beyond the state that anticipated civil society, with the notion of elected leadership, and with holding rulers accountable to higher powers. It is almost superfluous to add that Christianity played an integral part in Europe’s high culture, and in such campaigns (or crusades) as abolishing the slave trade or ameliorating the social evils

of industrialisation. How many atheistic liberals run soup kitchens for homeless drug addicts? Is the culture of guns and gangster rap, which thrills progressive cultural commentators, a better alternative to the thriving black Pentecostal churches? More controversially, the Churches upheld necessary inhibitions and taboos, without which we seem degraded, judging by much of what TV commissioning editors regularly inflict upon us in an obsession with sex that they share with some clergy. Christianity's historical achievements deserve more notice than they customarily receive. Interestingly, it is increasingly secular intellectuals, like Régis Debray or Umberto Eco, who are mounting the defence of Christianity against silly politically correct attempts to deny or marginalise it.

There also seems no rational reason to exclude Christians – to range no further – from political debate, any more than there is to deny the vote to people with blue eyes or red hair. That is particularly so where they speak with authority, namely regarding the aged, imprisoned, sick and disadvantaged whom bureaucratised welfare has done little or nothing to help. Whether they have anything relevant to contribute to, for example, foreign policy seems more dubious, especially when they simply replicate the predictable views of the progressive intelligentsia regarding, say, Israel and Palestine. Matters become more complex regarding such issues as the creation or expansion of faith schools, with all their potentialities for consolidating antagonistic ghettos through what amounts, in the worst scenarios, to monocultural indoctrination, whatever lip-service is tactically paid to a self-serving multiculturalism. That a cardinal archbishop of France, of Jewish extraction, has become one of the main defenders of the separation of Church and state or that Bavaria has banned Muslim head-scarves while making crucifixes mandatory on school walls, illustrates the complexity of current developments that radical Islam has been largely responsible for.

A number of people have helped in the writing of this book and it is a pleasure to thank them. My friend Andrew Wylie has been a great 'pit-stop boss', of a team that includes Katherine Marino and Maggie Evans. HarperCollins in New York and London have been amazingly sympathetic publishers, notably Tim Duggan, Arabella Pike, Kate Hyde and Helen Ellis, who have all brought a great deal of thought to bear on the entire project. Peter James deserves my special thanks for his careful work on what is now his third manuscript by an author who can almost anticipate his learned queries.



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William Doyno was generous with his knowledge of Pius XII, sharing the latest archival findings and his own publications. Rabbi David Dalin, Karol Gadge and Ronald Rychlak also kept me abreast of their work. In Rome, fathers Peter Gumpel SJ and Giovanni Sale SJ gave encouragement and advice, while in London father James Campbell SJ explained an especially opaque biblical prophecy that made more sense to Max Weber than it initially did to me. John Cornwell, who reanimated the debate about Pius, kindly commented on the entire manuscript, which helped clarify the few remaining areas where we may disagree. Professor Gerhard Besier kept me supplied with his stream of books on the Churches in the former German 'Democratic' Republic and on cognate subjects, while Professor Hans Maier has been a constant source of wisdom and encouragement as a leading historian and philosopher of religion. I am also grateful to Denys Blakeway and James Burge for helping turn some of these ideas into the programme *Dark Enlightenment*, and for such memorable experiences as sheltering from a mini-tornado while filming in Mussolini's Foro Italico. The editors of the *Sunday Times*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Evening Standard*, as well as Nancy Sladek at the *Literary Review*, encouraged me to write about Islamist terrorism after 9/11, thereby liberating me from the ghastly prospect of writing about Nazis for the next twenty years.

The book's dedication is divided three ways. My wife Linden has been a constant source of love and encouragement despite health problems not made any easier by Islamist bombers striking near her workplace on two occasions in 2005. Martin Ivens is both a fund of knowledge – on

anything ranging from St Augustine to City churches – and someone who thinks deeply about contemporary issues. Finally, Adolf Wood has been a true and wise friend for twenty years now, reading every page of my work when I suspect he'd rather be in the company of Conrad, Dickens, James or Eliot. He has always been ready with a point of style or literary allusion, all delivered with his characteristic reticent firmness. None of them are responsible for my conclusions – the chief of which is that clearly identifying a problem takes one halfway to its resolution, the viewpoint that accounts for the qualified optimism with which I end the book.

Michael Burleigh  
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## CHAPTER 1

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# *'Distress of Nations and Perplexity': Europe after the Great War*

### I 'HAVE YOU NEWS OF MY BOY JACK?'

Some future archaeologist, should all written records vanish, may speculate that early-twentieth-century Europe witnessed a regression to the age of megaliths and funerary barrows before it succumbed to a more general primitive fury. The extent of this commemorative enterprise can be gauged from the fact that each of France's 35,000 communes erected a war memorial, mainly between 1919 and 1924, as did most of the parish churches, with a special chapel, plaque or stained-glass window dedicated to local representatives of the two million French war dead.<sup>1</sup> Such memorials proliferated across the continent and beyond, with memorial arches, cenotaphs, obelisks, ossuaries and crosses, and plinths peopled by eyeless poilus and tommies in bronze or stone. At Douaumont, Hartmanwillersdorf or Lorette, imposing memorials marked these vast necropolises for the dead. The continent's culture was more generally permeated by the loss of nine million men in a conflict that had become maniacal in its relentless destructiveness. There were a further twenty-eight million wounded and millions too who had experienced captivity. The dead left three million widows, not including women they might have married, and, on one calculation, six million fatherless children, not to speak of tens of millions of grieving parents and grandparents, for the war burned its way up and down the generations with heedless ferocity. Total war also struck directly at civilians, whether in the form of burned villages, reprisal shootings and the sinking of

merchant ships, or as naval blockades gradually decimated entire populations through calculated starvation.

Myriad individual griefs welled into a greater sense of public loss, in some quarters sentimentalised as a culturally significant ‘lost generation’ – although plenty of butcher’s boys and postmen were ‘lost’ as well as minor painters and poets. The querulous homosexual Oxford don A. L. Rowse remembered an encounter from his schooldays during the unveiling of a war memorial:

A little man came up to me and started talking in a rambling way about his son who was killed. I think the poor fellow was for the moment carried away with sorrow. He said ‘Sidney Herbert – Sidney Herbert – you know they called him Sidney Herbert, but really he was called Sidney Hubert: he was my boy. He was killed in the War – yes: I thought you would like to know.’ And he went on like that till I dared not stay any longer with him.<sup>2</sup>

Rudyard Kipling lost his son John, a subaltern in the Irish Guards, at the battle of Loos in 1915. John’s (or ‘Jack’s’) body was never found; it was presumed to have disappeared during a German bombardment, along with half of the British war dead, whose bodies remained unrecovered. Kipling wrote ‘My boy Jack’ to express his desolation:

‘Have you news of my boy Jack?’  
Not this tide.  
‘When d’you think that he’ll come back?’  
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide . . .  
‘Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?’  
None this tide,  
Nor any tide,  
Except he did not shame his kind –  
Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.

Possessed even in old age of indefatigable energy, fuelled by implacable hatreds not exclusively exhausted by the Germans, Kipling became a leading member of the Imperial War Graves Commission, overseeing the creation of decorous cemeteries and memorials to John and his kind. They include the Tyne Cot Memorial, where twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant James Emil Burleigh MC of the 12th Battalion Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders is remembered ‘with honour’, while my other uncle, Lieutenant Robert Burleigh, twenty-three years old, of the Royal

Flying Corps, lies in Knightsbridge Cemetery at Mesnil-Martinsart. For others the war left no mortal remains to bury.

Powerful emotions once accompanied monuments experienced nowadays in a blur of traffic – such as the Artillery memorial in London’s busy Marble Arch or the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Others are too modest to attract a second glance unless one consciously seeks them out, or they have disappeared into the uncertainty that eventually disperses the material effects of even the most scrupulous. For years after the war, reminders of this colossal tragedy lay in drawers or were displayed on mantelpieces and sideboards: photographs of sons, brothers, husbands, uncles in uniform; bundles of letters and field postcards; civilian clothes and juvenilia, augmented by fragments of the soldier’s life – perhaps a ring, wristwatch or lucky charm that had brought no luck – if relatives were so fortunate.

The final British war memorial was unveiled in July 1939 at the seaside resort of Mumbles in Wales, the last summer before Europe’s civil war resumed on a larger scale. Memorials included simple stone markers in obscure villages; plaques in Oxford college chapels and public schools (at Repton alone 355 alumni had perished) or on the walls of metropolitan stations, recalling 19,000 dead railwaymen; and last, but not least, the two and a half thousand cemeteries that transformed French hectares into permanent corners of England and its dominions.<sup>3</sup>

Memorialising the dead evolved from practices that initially accompanied armies of the willing. In Britain, rolls of honour, recording the names of pre-1916 volunteers, mutated into lists of the dead, whose names appeared on separate tablets, or proliferated below an ominous black line separating them from men still alive. Primitive street shrines were created in the East End of London, often at the prompting of the same Anglo-Catholic clergy who had introduced settlements into those dismal areas. These were simple affairs of names, illustrative kitsch clipped from the newspapers, and arrangements of wilting flowers, to which more puritanically minded clerics would object at their peril, for the shrines protected men at the front. Permanent memorials, intended to focus mass bereavement, superseded these impromptu shrines, although resort to spiritualists, to which modern technologies had given an enormous fillip since the late nineteenth century, suggests a reluctance to accept that the dead were beyond human contact regardless of disapproval by the Church of England.

In purely artistic terms, the greatest of these shrines was Edward

Lutyens's Cenotaph in London's Whitehall, a stark 'empty tomb' that replaced a plaster and timber affair erected to focus the marching veterans' salute on Peace Day in July 1919. The randomly selected Unknown Warrior was interred in Westminster Abbey, an interior already so cluttered with illustrious dead that it could provide no clear focus as the Arc de Triomphe did in Paris, in a ceremony involving the king walking to Westminster from Whitehall. A representative war widow, a father who had lost a son, and a child who had lost its father accompanied the French unknown soldier to his final resting place. The Cenotaph reaches its considerable affective power not only through its emptiness, but by inviting the spectator to project his or her thoughts and emotions on to its largely unadorned surfaces. Quiet reflection was encouraged by the accompanying Great Silence – the culminating point of Armistice Day – although surrounding the Cenotaph with a section of rubber road to enhance the silence did not prove a success. Well into the 1930s men doffed their hats as they passed. Respect was something owed to other people, not something on demand. Remembrance Sunday was, and remains, one of the few occasions when the Church of England – in the form of the Bishop of London – is at the centre of national affairs, addressing matters of import to most citizens.

The Cenotaph, copied up and down the country where people did not opt for chapels, crosses or non-denominational obelisks, became the focus for a very British, reticent form of public grief, in which, as the newspapers reported, sobs were muted, voices cracked, and tears flowed silently. Some places opted for more utilitarian reminders of the war, in the form of memorial bowling greens and hospital wings, a solution much favoured in the US too. In Paris, enterprising clergy constructed a memorial housing estate, where the children of the war dead would be raised surrounded by their memory. War memorials, which were the outcome of discussions involving more than the customary range of local worthies, reflected a collective sense of what the war had been for, a consensual minimum beyond which lay more contentious expectations in the new mass democracies where sacrifice brought a sense of entitlement. The overwhelming majority of these memorials drew on traditional classical or romantic imagery, although Catholic countries employed a greater range of religious exemplars such as a grieving mother cradling a dead son. Parallel with this public art, artists of considerable distinction brought their talents to bear on the greatest event of those times. Quite possibly the finest example of this tradition was the cycle of etchings

*Miserere* produced by the intensely religious Georges Rouault between 1916 and 1928, but made public only in 1948, in which works of small compass achieve the monumentality of images on a medieval cathedral, while encapsulating something essential about the war from a Christian perspective.<sup>4</sup>

War memorials were not simply constructed to focus grief, but often carried a moral message to the future. In bronze or stone, at least, the dead became pensive paragons of service and sacrifice, no longer caked with mud, crawling with lice or numbed by serial percussive detonations, but hidden beneath sculpted helmets and the stone folds of trench coats. An acceptable narrative was imposed on an experience that defied most imaginations except those of the men who had been to hell and back.

Many writers, whether consciously creating art or not, chose to transpose hell into the made-to-measure clothing of received literary traditions in which birdsong, poppies, roses and warriors prettified the reality of industrial-scale slaughter involving barbed wire, bombardment, gas and machine gun that in some respects prefigured the Holocaust. Everyday speech was contaminated by terms only explicable from that era, although nowadays it comes more readily to those who write for tabloid newspapers than it does in normal intercourse, where it strikes a false note.<sup>5</sup> While grief remained a presence at commemorations – and does so every 11 November – so participants were encouraged to see themselves as guardians of the unfinished legacy of the dead, whether fulfilling some real yet inchoate vision of a better world, or by imagining that blood spilled had ended bloodlust, a theme reflected in a naive enthusiasm for the inter-war League of Nations.

Individuals in Britain or France may have relished the war experience, but this did not translate into a ‘political religion’ that subsumed the myth of the Great War into an apocalyptic and redemptive politics. The war temporarily shook these societies, but it did not destabilise their institutions or shatter their forms of government. For that we have to turn to Germany and Italy. The German empire was one of four major European empires not to survive the war. Its first democratic republican experiment lasted a mere fifteen years before conflicts that the war exacerbated and which peace did not resolve resulted in a totalitarian tyranny. Italy’s liberal regime barely survived the war, to be blamed for a ‘mutilated peace’ and was hijacked by Mussolini’s Fascists a mere four years after the war ended.<sup>6</sup>

Although Germany had its memorial to the Unknown Soldier –

installed in Berlin's Neue Wache – there was no single national monument to the dead equivalent to the Cenotaph or the French necropolis at Douaumont, commemorating huge losses incurred during the victory at Verdun. The Weimar Republic eventually managed to construct the Tannenberg memorial in East Prussia, an ugly series of squat towers enclosing an immense space, which was opened in 1927 in the presence of President von Hindenburg, but no agreement was reached regarding where to site a single memorial to Germany's war dead, and Tannenberg commemorated two mythically connected victories, defeat by the Poles in 1410 and victory over the Russians in 1915. Put slightly differently, one could argue that the Republic failed to capture the symbolic representations that are essential if any regime is to survive.<sup>7</sup> Since the experience of grief was universal, local memorials served German mourners in the same ways as their British or French equivalents. But in the circumstances of what to many seemed inexplicable defeat and post-war chaos, they were overshadowed by the war as part of a nationalist myth, in which the dead were restless rather than deeply sleeping, waiting to join Germany's self-appointed political saviours. Vivid myths were stronger than the quotidian complexities of operating a democratic regime in unpropitious circumstances.

British and French veterans may have hoped that this terrible conflict had been the war to end all wars, but in both Italy and Germany such resolve was often trumped by the rival view that the war was the prelude to the triumphal resurrection of the fatherland.<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1925, Ernst Jünger exclaimed that 'this war is not the end, but the chord that heralds new power. It is the anvil on which the world will be hammered into new boundaries and new communities. New forms will be filled with blood, and might will be hammered into them with a hard fist. War is a great school, and the new man will be of our cut.' In the space left vacant by a stridently pacifist left, the political right successfully represented its own fighting formations, whose first incarnation were the Freikorps bands of demobilised veterans and radicalised students, as the apostolic successors of the men who had fought and died in the trenches. These units of paramilitary freebooters evolved from the elite units that general Erich Ludendorff had created to break the tactical deadlock created by the clash of conscript armies whose training was almost designed to stifle individual initiative. Men were ordered and trained to attack in waves, since to duck, weave and zigzag was deemed beyond their limited capabilities and intelligence. By contrast, the stormtroopers



were armed for close-quarter combat and were expected to range opportunistically around the battlefield so as to identify weak points in massed positions. These units were relatively democratic, in the sense that distinctions between officers and men were based on ability rather than convention or class, and they consisted of men who went about carnage with excitement as well as grim determination: 'gathering men about us and playing soldiers with them; brawling and drinking, roaring and smashing windows – destroying and shattering what needs to be destroyed. Ruthless and inexorably hard. The abscess on the sick body of the nation must be cut open and squeezed until clear red blood flows. And the blood must be left to flow for a good long time till the body is purified.'<sup>9</sup>

After the war, the Socialist-dominated republican government unleashed these marauders upon Bolsheviks in the Baltic States, upon Poles in Upper Silesia and upon the revolutionary left throughout post-war Germany. This was rather like sowing the dragon's teeth, since Freikorps veterans subsequently flooded into anti-republican conspiratorial organisations or the paramilitary arms of the Nazis. Inevitably the literary imagination – for left-wing writers have no monopoly of glorifying political violence – was drawn to these gaunt figures, many of whom, like Ernst von Salomon, were themselves passable writers. Salomon described these armed bohemians in idealised terms: 'We were cut off from the world of bourgeois norms . . . the bonds were broken and we were freed . . . We were a band of fighters drunk with all the passion of the world; full of lust, exultant in action.' These men had overcome human sympathy, which was routinely dismissed in such circles as insipid sentimentality. This overcoming gave the stormtroopers the narcissistic delusion, common among psychopaths, that they themselves were a new predatory type of being in whom hardness trumped humanity. According to Ernst Jünger, a former stormtrooper himself, they were 'magnificent beasts of prey', for whom war was not sporting, and whose soldierly contempt for civilian existence tipped over into murderous rage towards republicans and revolutionaries. These were fierce figures. As Arnold Zweig wrote in 1925: 'We have become a wrathful people / committed to the waging of war / as a bloodied and enraged knighthood of men / we have sworn with our blood to attain victory.'<sup>10</sup>

Values engendered by total war – notably the inward-focused camaraderie of what the British called 'bands of brothers' – were perpetuated and turned outwards in what became a murderous war

against the weak Weimar Republic, political parties that camouflaged vested interests, Jews and socialists, overlooking the fact that large numbers of Jews and men of all political persuasions had made their own patriotic sacrifices. If in Britain local worthies worried about whether having statues of men armed with rifles and bayonets conjured up a killer instinct that many wanted to forget, in both Italy and Germany elite fighting units (the Italian *arditi*) who had brought fanatical courage and tenacity to the wartime battlefields, provided the prototypical ‘new man’ who, despite his self-professed dehumanisation, was supposed to be the nation’s future redeemer. The brutality that total war had engendered, and which in Armenia, Belgium, the Balkans, northern France and East Prussia had spilled over into violence towards civilians, became a permanent condition, in the sense that political *opponents* were regarded as deadly *enemies*.<sup>11</sup> In Italy people who revelled in violence for political purposes acquired a political label earlier than elsewhere: that of Fascists, the very symbol – of axes tightly bound in lictorial rods – conveying the closed community of the exultantly thuggish better than the mystic iron octopus of the Nazi swastika. But this is to anticipate; there were states of mind that we must first visit.

## II THE LAST DAYS OF MANKIND

The Great War cast a very long shadow over the creative literature dedicated to warfare, inspiring novelists to this day – the obvious contemporary analogy being the imaginative writing, good, bad and indifferent, generated by the Holocaust. The pre-war apocalyptic imaginings of the artist Ludwig Meidner became wartime apocalyptic facts as even cathedrals were blown to oblivion on the grounds they were used as artillery observation points. The conflict destroyed a world that combined ordered social relations with a degree of cultural experimentation in what the US novelist Scott Fitzgerald called ‘a gust of high explosive love’.<sup>12</sup>

As the historian of memory Jay Winter has argued, regardless of whether they were personally religious, imaginative writers often drew on religious traditions – broadly conceived – as they tried to capture the essence of the war experience, leaving the matter of causes for historians to discover in the pre-war diplomatic traffic. The apocalyptic mode

dominated fiction, as if the war signified divine judgement upon the civilisation of the pre-war era or mankind as a whole. Literary prophets abounded. The French Socialist Henri Barbusse spent seventeen months on active duty in the trenches of the Western Front. He was cited for bravery on two occasions and then invalided out, exhausted and suffering from dysentery and damage to his lungs. In early 1917 he published *Le Feu*, which within a year had sold two hundred thousand copies and had won the author the prestigious Prix Goncourt, although some critics thought the novel lacked verisimilitude to their own war experiences. In terms of character, the novel does not amount to much – a socially and regionally heterogeneous French band of brothers, gone astray from any novel by Zola, is rapidly thinned out through the random impact of battle – all interspersed with vague socialist yearnings for a better tomorrow that seems questionable to anyone unfortunate enough to have experienced even a simulacrum of it.

But, despite its romantic political predictability, Barbusse's book succeeds in depicting war as an additional natural element, alongside fire and earth, air and, above all, water. The action alternates between miles of trenches and villages and towns that have been smashed to smithereens but there is another, much more pervasive presence even than the smells of death. Water is the novel's dominant element, as rain found its way through even the most carefully buttoned tunic and spread upwards along trouser legs from boots swollen with damp mud, or trickled down the waders that were essential in water-logged trenches. Everywhere there was an ocean of deep mud, regularly churned up by shelling to reveal new layers of corpses in varying states of decomposition, or, bizarrely, springing open the coffins in bombarded cemeteries. The battlefields were submerged by a flood of biblical proportions, leading Barbusse to announce 'hell is water' – rather than other people.

Where are the trenches?

We see lakes, and between the lakes there are lines of milky and motionless water. There is more water even than we had thought. It has taken everything and spread everywhere, and the prophecy of the men in the night [that the trenches were disappearing] has come true. There are no more trenches; these canals are the trenches enshrouded. It is a universal flood. The battlefield is not sleeping; it is dead.

The flood provokes Barbusse's surviving soldiers into angry denunciations of a war:

that is about appalling, superhuman exhaustion, about water up to your belly and about mud, dung and repulsive filth. It is about moulding faces and shredded flesh and corpses that do not even look like corpses anymore, floating on the greedy earth. It is this infinite monotony of miseries, interrupted by sharp, sudden dramas. This is what it is – not the bayonet glittering like silver or the bugle's call in the sunlight!

The men cry 'no more war' and argue such banalities as 'When all men have become equal we'll be forced to unite,' while denouncing such comic-strip villains as bankers, priests, lawyers, economists and historians. The novel concludes with the remark, 'if this present war had advanced progress by a single step, its miseries and its massacres will count for little', at which, as if on cue, 'a tranquil ray shines out and this line of light, so tightly enclosed, so edged with black, so meagre that it seems to be merely a thought, brings proof none the less that the sun exists'.<sup>13</sup>

At roughly the time Barbusse was converting the war into socialist prophecy, the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus was training his larger talents upon the enthusiasts who welcomed war in 1914. Kraus was an intriguing figure. Paper factories owned by his family meant that he was rich enough not to have to earn a living. He edited *Die Fackel*, one of the most successful journals in central Europe, and was easy in the company of the beautiful young aristocrat Sidonie Nadherny, with whom he fell in love. Bespectacled, bookish and slight with a curvature of the spine, he took up horse riding so as to fit in with the aristocratic country set he admired. Although Jewish by birth, he frequently gave vent to wounding antisemitism, particularly against the liberal Jewish bourgeoisie of his home city who furnished a number of his hate figures. He detested the superficial Positivism of the times, with its belief in Enlightenment, Progress and Science, and its credulity towards journalism, sociology, psychiatry and eugenics. The liberal *Neue Freie Presse* became the *Neue feile Presse* (best rendered as 'New Presstitute') in his hands. Kraus converted to Roman Catholicism, while drifting politically, during the First World War, from a conservative anarchism to republicanism and socialism.<sup>14</sup> As a leading journalist, he was inclined to exaggerate the power of the press and words in general.<sup>15</sup> His published talk 'In these

great times' delivered in November 1914 was an attack upon the vicarious heroics of the editorial bench and war profiteers, as well as other writers who in August so eagerly prostituted their pens. He was scathing about the role of the press in bringing about its own sanguinary fantasies by engendering the vicious mass enthusiasms that had propelled Europe into war. His technique relied upon absurd details, of 'patriotic' Viennese restaurants that renamed macaroni 'Treubruchnudeln' ('perfidy noodles') to condemn what seemed treachery by the Italians, to identify some symptom of the age, his other obsession being an advertisement for Berson's shoe rubbers which 'progress' sought to inflict even on babies – the advertisement had appeared opposite the Austrian proclamation of war:

May the times grow great enough not to fall prey to a victor who places his heel on the intellect and the economy, great enough to overcome the nightmare of the opportunity to have a victory redound to the credit of those uninvolved in it, the opportunity for wrongheaded chasers after decorations in peacetime to divest themselves of what honour they have left, for utter stupidity to discard foreign words and names of dishes and for slaves whose ultimate goal all their lives has been the 'mastery' of languages henceforth to desire to get around in the world with the ability not to master them! What do you who are in the war know about the war?! You are fighting! You have not remained behind! Even those who have sacrificed their ideals to life will some day have the privilege of sacrificing life itself. May the times grow so great that they measure up to these sacrifices and never so great that they transcend their memory as they grow into life!<sup>16</sup>

In 1915 Kraus commenced work on a documentary drama called *The Last Days of Mankind*, which took seven years to complete and ten hours to perform on the stage with a cast of hundreds. According to his greatest biographer, the documentary form was partly inspired by Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* which Kraus saw in Berlin in 1902, but the influence of Shakespeare is also apparent, including vengeful ghosts and juxtapositions of high and low conversation, although Kraus regards the gravediggers as more important than Hamlet. Kraus claimed that even the most outré utterances in the play were grounded in documentary fact; that he had to defend two libel actions related to people caricatured

in the play suggests that his satire hit home. One of his key dramatic devices is the 'gruesome contrast'. The belligerent crudity of the Viennese mob is transformed into purple prose by the no less belligerent mob of journalists who reported it. Pope Benedict XV prays in the Vatican imploring God to stop the mindless bloodshed; his namesake, the Jewish newspaper editor Benedikt, dictates a gruesome piece involving the Adriatic's fish and lobsters dining better than before on the bodies of Italian seamen whose ships have been sunk by the Austrians.<sup>17</sup> In a Protestant church 'Pastor Buzzard' assures his congregation:

Let us acknowledge clearly and unequivocally that Jesus' commandment 'Love thy enemies' applies only to individuals and not between nations. In the struggle of the nations there is no room for loving one's enemies. Here the individual soldier need have no scruples! In the heat of battle, Jesus' command of love is suspended! In combat, killing is no sin but a service to the Fatherland, a Christian duty – indeed, even a service to God!<sup>18</sup>

Kraus also repeatedly uses the device of reducing and ridiculing such 'world historical' figures as Berchtold, Conrad, Hindenburg and the German and Austrian emperors, while inflating nonentities, such as the typical reader of the *Neue Freie Presse*, into embodiments of the age. Although the drama does not develop in any conventional sense, Kraus employs a running commentary shared between an Optimist and a Grumbler to register his sense of moral outrage, aroused not only by the home front but also by a war that had degenerated into summary killings of prisoners and the wounded, or the execution of deserters and shirkers by brutal NCOs and officers. The play's epilogue uses Shakespearean spectres to accuse those Kraus held responsible for the war – including the soldiers who allowed themselves to be abused – before order is restored as God defeats the Antichrist. The play ends with a series of nightmare apparitions, of children drowned in the *Lusitania*; of an elderly Serb digging his own grave; of a bomb landing on a school-room; of civilians and prisoners of war being shot and so forth until Kraus plunges the stage world into darkness, as a wall of fire rises on the horizon and God says: 'I never wanted this.'

### III THE WORLD AS FRAGMENTS IN A FRAGMENT

What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal

If many writers and artists turned to compelling Christian idioms to interpret the Great War, others subsumed traditional elements within a deliberately ‘fragmented’ vision that seemed to reflect the condition of the post-war years. Actually, the ensuing fragmentation was evident well before the war. In a series of lectures on ‘Civilisation at the Cross-roads’, delivered at Harvard in 1911, the Anglican monk John Neville Figgis said:

amid the Babel of the world’s religions and moralities, it is not possible to state what are the governing ideals of the triumphant classes at the moment, and it is ten to one that if you met two dozen at dinner, you would hear a dozen different faiths asserted, with all that voluble enthusiasm that befits ‘the light half-believers of our casual creeds’ . . . if we judge by their conduct, we may ask with Archbishop Benson, when he arrived in London, ‘What do these people believe?’<sup>19</sup>

The decades before the war were almost as rich in devotees of occult practices as the ‘New Age’ is now. The war makes many oblique appearances in a work which, despite its saturation with traditional images, is regarded as a waypost of artistic modernism because of its fashionable anthropological references, jazz-like rhythms and random snatches of the pulsing city’s polyphonic argot. But the war is there all right, in the references to the archduke, to rats crawling along alleys, to dead men’s bones, to fear and dust, in the demobbing of Albert, maternal

lamentations, Madame Sosostris, hooded hordes and the marching dead of commuters through the dingy London air.

T. S. Eliot began working on *The Waste Land* – although the original title was ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’ – in 1921, completing the poem the following year, after a supervening convalescence in Margate. It was to be a large modernist statement, reminiscent of Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, although Eliot would later claim that he had just reassembled a few fragments – fashionable references to primitive and Eastern religions, Jacobean drama, jazz syncopations and pseudo footnotes – while denying that the poem had any major point to make. He sounds an ironist embarrassed by the credulity of admirers and disciples, such as the undergraduate aesthete Anthony Blanche who declaims the poem to shock Oxford hearties in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* or those who, without irony, dubbed themselves ‘The Waste Landers’. The desire to make a cult of a poem in which cryptic and eclectic allusions to a variety of religions abound was *in itself* symptomatic of the spiritual appetency of the post-war wasteland it evoked, and which Eliot would mock in his later *Four Quartets* after he had turned to Anglo-Catholicism.<sup>20</sup> According to Eliot the poem was variously ‘just a piece of rhythmical grumbling’, or as he later admitted, ‘I wasn’t even bothering whether I understood what I was saying.’<sup>21</sup>

#### IV AGE OF ANXIETY, TIME OF THE PROPHETS

Modern sociologists of religion tend to relate the strength of religion in the contemporary world to existential anxiety. While this argument involves leaving aside the US as an ‘inexplicable’ anomaly, it does seem to account for the increasing purchase of religion in what used to be called the Third World.<sup>22</sup> It holds good not only for the transcendental monotheisms, but also for the cults, fads and sacralised mundanities that accompanied, if not secularisation, then de-Christianisation and the remorseless atomisation of life in the modern world. In ‘The Dry Salvages’, the third of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot captured this vapid spiritual experimentation:

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,  
To report the behaviour of the sea monster,



Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,  
Observe disease in signatures, evoke  
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm  
And tragedy from fingers; release omens  
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable  
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams  
Or barbituric acids, or dissect  
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors –  
To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual  
Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:  
And always will be, some of them especially  
When there is distress of nations and perplexity  
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.<sup>23</sup>

More disturbing than these more or less harmless pastimes were the political manifestations of what could be called mass spiritual need in deranged times. As Langmead Casserley argued long ago: 'Totalitarianism is founded not only on the will to power of autocratic statesmen, but also on the will to security, and the impulse to adore and propitiate, of the mass of citizens . . . The pseudo-divinity of the modern state is perhaps not so much a divinity which it has arrogantly usurped as a divinity thrust upon it by masses of insecure and frustrated people, insistently demanding some powerful and venerable object of faith and trust.'<sup>24</sup>

A bare recital of what Germans underwent from 1918 onwards reveals the magnitude of their existential crisis at a time when intellectual doubts had already undermined belief in science and progress as well as revealed religion.<sup>25</sup> We begin with the series of external events before moving on to the parallel world of the mind and spirit, which are poorly handled in most accounts of the Third Reich.<sup>26</sup> It was one of those times of what Emile Durkheim called 'effervescence' in which, like the night of 4 August 1789 when feudal privilege was renounced, men and women experienced life with an intensity that is hard to evoke except in terms of religion.<sup>27</sup> The German armed forces, whose triumphs were so integral to national identity, and which wartime propaganda had presented as invincible, had been defeated, despite Russia having been knocked out of the war by revolution, and following a vast final push that promised to break years of stalemate on the Western Front. Defeat seemed inexplicable. The German-Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith had served

under Ritter von Epp on the Austro-Italian front, until he was shot in the chest and captured by the Italians. After being repatriated after two years through a prisoner exchange, he recalled his father, a respected painter, at home in Munich during the later stages of the war: 'The pinning of miniature flags on the wall-map of theatres of war I left to my patriotic father, who was saddened by his son's indifference. He never took any notice of the retreat of German troops when he was engaged in this. The miniature flags always stayed in the most advanced positions, and when the Western front collapsed, the war on the map seemed almost won.'<sup>28</sup>

Since there were no enemy soldiers on German soil – although the effects of Allied blockade were palpable to starving civilians – defeat seemed to many the result of domestic treason or of a more malign conspiracy involving interconnected 'racial' actors. A wartime hunt for Jews who had allegedly shirked their patriotic duty became a post-war hunt to identify Jewish preponderance in such areas as banking, the arts and journalism. The Versailles peace settlement blithely blamed Germany for a war whose causes are still debated and criminalised commanders recently deified as heroes. Being neither generous nor punitive, its ambiguities increased the sense of having lost control of one's destinies, especially since the economy seemed to have been put in hock to foreigners in a perpetuity whose horizon was an improbable 1988. Venerable institutions collapsed, with many people already having lost faith in them, the Hohenzollern dynasty being a major case in point. Once capable of inspiring awe in every carbuncular young clerk, as well as in the obsequious monster conjured forth in a controversial novel by Heinrich Mann, Wilhelm II became a forgotten figure in Dutch exile.

Revolutionaries, who were readily conflated with the 'Asiatic hordes' on the loose with their firebrands in Russia, brought chaos to the streets of German and other central European cities. These Bolsheviks acquired a racial aspect since many of the leaders of evanescent socialist republics in Budapest, Berlin and Munich were radicalised Jews tantalised by Marxism's messianic vision. In 1923 the Reichsmark went into freefall, upsetting a moral order based on constant values. Karl Löwith experienced the havoc this played on the finances of his own family. In four decades, his father had worked his way up from being a penniless immigrant Moravian Jew to being a pillar of Munich society. Now, the sale of a villa on nearby Lake Starnberg brought nothing. His wife's dowry was rendered valueless. He could not pay the life-insurance premiums on his wife's life. His patriotic investments in war loans were

worthless. He kept a packet of thirty thousand Mark notes; when his son tried to sell them, they fetched ten Pfennigs as collectors' items. Karl had inherited shares worth 30,000 Marks from his grandfather; they were worth three Marks at the height of the inflation. His monthly salary as a tutor in Mecklenburg was the equivalent of a hundredweight of rye or five small cigars. Löwith was no more nor less outraged than the rest of the bourgeoisie as the scum rose:

Old and well-situated families were impoverished overnight, while young have-nots acquired great wealth through bank speculation. The buyers of my father's paintings were no longer the rich distinguished businessmen of the Wilhelmine era but major industrialists, speculators and shoe manufacturers who wanted to invest their money in material assets. Even the four year war did less to loosen morality and the whole fabric of social life than this raging turmoil, which eroded people's foundations anew every day, and instilled a desperate daring and unscrupulousness in the younger generation. It was only this grotesque occurrence that laid bare the true significance of the war: the total overspending and destruction resulting in the zeros of the inflationary period and the Thousand Year Reich. The virtues of the German bourgeoisie were swept away then, and this dirty brown torrent bore the movement which formed around Hitler.

As Löwith sensed, 'Germany was undergoing universal devaluation – not only of money, but of all values – and the National Socialist "revaluation" was a result of that.'<sup>29</sup>

A sense of moral order was further outraged by the pockets of artistic nihilism and pseudo-radicalism and sexual self-advertisement in the major cities, cities surrounded by rural seas of conservative traditionalism. The myth of the modern artist would prove to have tragic consequences when he became a model for a new generation of 'artist-politicians' whose egoism dwarfed that of the denizens of Bloomsbury, Montmartre or Schwabing.<sup>30</sup> Creative artists, the majority belonging to the left by way of gesture, contributed to undermining the Republic. While some glorified conmen and criminals – such moral relativism being a sure sign of cultural decadence – others, like Kurt Tucholsky, failed to discriminate between such worthy statesmen as Gustav Stresemann and the paramilitary Stahlhelm. The left's desire to

see every opponent to the right of them as a 'Fascist' duly led them massively to underestimate the genuine phenomenon. Foreign armies, including the nightmare of 'Black' French colonial troops pushing around white Europeans, were ensconced in the occupied western regions of Germany, which indigenous separatists threatened to detach permanently.

No wonder the apocalyptic mode of thought that the war had encouraged intensified during a 'peacetime' that had many of the characteristics of a civil war as well as a material and moral catastrophe. Prophets of the end of days abounded, whether on the political left or right. Oskar Jaszi, a Hungarian government minister who witnessed Béla Kun's orgy of violence in post-war Soviet Budapest, described the latterday possessed:

Now for the first time, in circumstances most agreeable, the demonic spark lurking behind Marxism has caught fire. Indeed, like every true mass movement, it ignited firstly with powers of religious character . . . Constantly we would witness excited discussions in the streets and coffee houses, in theatres and lectures, in which people with feverish eyes and fierce gesticulations prophesied and discussed the nearing of a new world order . . . The days of Capitalism were numbered, the world revolution is loudly nearing, Lenin will soon unify the labour force of all Europe in one single revolutionary union . . . In the brains of these people the new deity was alive: the belief in the unavoidable dialectic of said economic development which will bring to fall the evil Capitalism and with the irresistibility of the laws of nature – divine laws – will bring to life the new society, dreamed of by all prophets, the land of peace, equality, brotherhood – the Communist society.<sup>31</sup>

A messianic mood was abroad in Germany, which invariably took the form of expectations of a leader to redeem the German chosen people from the Egypt of Allied captivity. Such hopes had a long tradition in Germany, with figures such as Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, Bismarck or, on the left, Ferdinand Lassalle, indicative of the exceptionally gifted individuals who would come to the nation's rescue. If such longings partly represented the recasting of messianism in secular form, so it also reflected a democratisation of the traditional relationship between monarch and subject who became, respectively, the 'leader' and his 'following', although the German word *Gefolgschaft* continued to reflect

feudal origins.<sup>32</sup> Historians, like many academics deeply inimical to the Weimar Republic, contributed their anti-democratic pennyworth by encouraging their credulous students to inhabit a mental universe consisting of supposedly ordered past societies dominated by genial leader-figures, whom they contrasted with the dull pragmatic politicians who were making a hash of the present. The theologians were not much better. Although the Lutheran Paul Althaus deplored the fact that even pastors were not immune to ‘political messianism’ as a substitute for belief in redemption through Jesus Christ, in the same breath he argued that the Old Testament’s conflation of the history of a people with salvation was ample precedent for ‘political preaching’ about events in Germany in the present. Did Lutherans owe the Weimar Republic the loyalty prescribed in Romans 13? Only in a heavily qualified way, since the ‘temporary structure’ of Weimar was ‘the expression and means of German degradation and apathy’.<sup>33</sup> This betrayal of professional objectivity was so pervasive that the sociologist Max Weber devoted a talk in a Munich bookstore to these ‘tenured prophets’ of a future Führer. Bearded and tired, Weber spoke without notes, although his words were taken down. After his second lecture, which became ‘Politics as a Vocation’, he concluded with these delphic verses from Isaiah 21: 11–12:

The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman,  
what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?

The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night:  
if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.

Night was a metaphor for the lordship of the Babylonians over Dumah, an oasis in Arabia; Seir was a mountain in Edom sometimes used as a metonym for it. From there comes the question to the Watchman, another name for prophet: ‘Watchman, what of the night?’ The answer suggested only temporary relief, since the signs were unsure – it was neither night nor day – for the prophet refused to raise false hopes. Indeed, according to Weber, it was his duty to lower expectations until matters became more transparent. Weber used this passage about an unusually equivocating prophet to urge his students to reject those who claimed to divine the course of events, while retaining their focus on the pragmatic issues of the day.<sup>34</sup> One of the students who heard Weber speak was Karl Löwith:

At the end of his two lectures Max Weber had prophesied what was soon to happen: that those who could not endure the tough fate of the times would be returning into the arms of the old churches, and that the 'conviction politicians', who intoxicated themselves with the Revolution of 1919, would become the victims of the reaction whose onset he anticipated within ten years. Because before us lay not a blossoming spring but a night of impenetrable darkness, and it was therefore pointless to wait for prophets to tell us what we should be doing in our disenchanting world. From this Weber drew his lesson: we should set to work and meet 'the demands of the day'; this is plain and simple.<sup>35</sup>

Such counsels of caution had virtually no effect as young people, including large numbers of students, rebelled against conventional political parties and threw themselves into bizarre cults, orders and sects, or into political parties that stressed absolute obedience and practised military drill. The rebellion took entirely predictable forms: naive prostration before any convincing charlatan or the retreat from the chaos of modern life into communes and rural settlements, on a scale that would not be repeated until the 1970s. During both the period of hyperinflation from 1919 to 1923 and then the Depression between 1929 and 1933, Germany also witnessed the phenomenon of wandering 'prophets', who went about barefoot, bearded and long-haired, charging people considerable sums to attend meetings at which they prophesied the end of the world and called for moral renewal and a new type of man to create a new type of society before it was too late. According to a journalist on a Cologne newspaper who attended such a meeting in Berlin:

Today the public flocks to the meeting halls of these fantasists because in its monumental mental confusion it seeks any kind of prop to console itself. Already, shortly after the end of the war, as the fruitlessness of so many efforts became apparent, a mood of limitless disappointment set in. On top of that, in recent months, people's minds have been totally deranged by the ever increasing material distress, the hopeless struggle against inflation . . . Everyone, and especially weaker natures, flocks to these contemporary redeemers with their long hair and mad fantasies, because they cannot do without such support. Prophecy is a dangerous symptom of the spiritual condition of Germany at

the moment. One should not underestimate it; it will become more pervasive in the crises to come. The time is out of joint! As Hamlet said.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, one of the most astute observers of those times had difficulty distinguishing between the barefooted beardie-weirdies and the future German Führer, whose ideas sounded as insane as theirs. Writing in British exile on the eve of the Second World War, Sebastian Haffner recalled these prophets of the early 1920s, with one significant addition:

Gradually the mood had even become apocalyptic. Hundreds of saviours were running around Berlin, people with long hair, wearing hairshirts, claiming that they had been sent by God to save the world . . . The most successful of them was a certain Haeusser, who advertised on advertising pillars and staged mass gatherings and had many followers. According to the newspapers, his Munich counterpart was a certain Hitler . . . Whereas Hitler wanted to bring about the thousand-year Reich by the mass murder of all Jews, in Thuringia a certain Lamberty wanted to bring it about by having everyone do folk dancing, singing, and leaping about.<sup>37</sup>

Who were these people? As it happens, we know quite a lot about them, even if this involves studying the files of psychiatric institutions and courts where many of the prophets and their followers washed up. Stuttgart in Württemberg was the epicentre of the movement, the hometown of Bosch and Daimler-Benz being an unlikely location to choose for the renewal of the world. In reality, the area had a strong tradition of peasant pietism, which seeped back into the countryside as the workers forsook the factories for the wooded hills that ringed the productive twentieth-century cauldron below. The town and surrounding heights attracted a wide range of mystics from the pedagogue Rudolf Steiner to the 'Vagrant King' Gregor Gog, the name being indicative of the madness. The war and the ensuing hyperinflation greatly contributed to the phenomenon of life on the open road, setting hundreds of thousands of indigents in motion, as vagrancy became as epidemic as it would be in the US Depression. The prophets catered to a very Teutonic sense of 'longing' (*Sehnsucht*) for a big idea expressed by a charismatic leader, who would give meaning to the lives of humble workers as well as Viktor Emil von Gebattel, who would subsequently discover his life's purpose

as Germany's first professor of psychotherapy. Many of them espoused nudity and relaxed sexual relations. This must have been convenient, since several of these bearded satyrs went through a remarkable number of sexually voracious young women, with the startlingly successful claim that they had been chosen to give birth to the new redeemer, a variant of which promise leaders of the 1968 student movement (not to speak of an entire generation of slightly sordid academics) would also routinely exploit to confuse sex and Sartre.

The movement completely rejected most of the fundamental principles the Enlightenment has given to the modern world, notably the separation of politics and religion. Several of these prophets made sallies into politics, offering a novel ideological synthesis, or the transcendence of politics as such. Although a few of the prophets gravitated to the *völkisch* right, the majority were attracted to the anarchist or radical Communist left, in either its socialist or its nationalist variants. Many other boundaries were also fluid, since the prophets were sometimes welcomed by Protestant clergy, who admired their followers' enthusiasm, and by the artistic avant-garde, of Bauhaus and Dada, who themselves were attuned to provocative 'happenings'. In most cases, the failure of hopes of revolution in 1918–19 led the prophets and their followers to refocus their enthusiasm away from the prospect of radical socio-economic change to the world of consciousness and personal development. This was truly the 'Ich' generation. The private and the personal were then politicised and generalised in the form of a moral-political revolution, of which Hitler was merely a mutant and successful manifestation, for in some respects these prophets were like a parody of the much more politically astute future Führer, sometimes saying what he was clearly thinking and employing similar means of mobilisation on a more modest scale.

Ludwig Christian Haeusser, who styled himself 'President of the United States of Europe', was born in 1881, the son of a brutal and ill-tempered farmer who beat him every time he showed any interest in learning. Eventually, Haeusser managed to escape this grim environment, learning commerce in London and Paris. After various scams, involving close calls with the law, he established an apparently successful champagne-exporting business, the elegant clothes, top hats, rich wife and house on the Champs-Élysées being some of the external fruits of his enterprise. In 1912 on a business trip to Frankfurt, he seems to have rediscovered religion, although not the conventional pieties that he had



imbibed as a boy. The outbreak of war in 1914 – the French confiscated his local assets – intensified his belief that mankind was on the verge of a rebirth, and that he had the duty to help bring this about. He began to write endless, unpublished articles as well as a book called ‘The Coming Superman’, which posterity was similarly spared. His business went to pieces as customers who came to buy champagne were treated to hours of prophetic ramblings.

In the summer of 1918 he turned up, dressed in a top hat and starched shirt, at the Italian mecca for drop-outs and redeemers at Ascona. Returning to neutral Switzerland, after his forty days in the Italian wilderness, he exchanged his starched shirts for the bearded, long-haired look, and forsook swanky restaurants for the local soup kitchen. Sometimes he ate leaves and slept in ditches. He took up nudism so as to personify the ‘naked truth’: in his case it was never a pretty sight. His newfound role of prophet took him back to his native Württemberg, where he honed such rhetorical devices as referring to his audiences as ‘apes, donkeys and swine’ to get their attention. He attracted a following. A number of his acolytes were young women, many drawn by his wish to sire the mother of God through them. Although Haeusser took every opportunity to speak of sexual purity, he was addicted to cunnilingus and sado-masochism, as seem to have been some of the ladies in suits and ties with short-cropped hair in his permanent entourage. When admirers gave him gifts, their choice invariably fell upon silver-encrusted whips. The entourage was blindly devoted to the prophet. On one occasion a very drunk Haeusser leaned over the lectern in the middle of a public lecture and vomited over the audience, whereupon several young women rushed to get mops and buckets to preserve the stomach contents of ‘the saviour’. Beginning in 1922, Haeusser turned to a political vocation, hoping that a morally purified German ‘master race’ would lead Europe. His programme included the closure of all asylums and prisons and the pardoning of their inmates; the universal abolition of property; a ten-day general strike; and a reformed officialdom, whose watchword would be to be nice to the disadvantaged. The guillotine awaited anyone who resisted the ‘spirit of truth’ revealed by the ‘peoples’ Kaiser’. In a sense, Haeusser spoke as Hitler’s holy fool:

Blood! Blood! Blood! Blood!

Blue blood! Black blood! Red blood! Blood in every colour!  
Even white blood! Only blood! Nothing but blood! Blood again!

Once more blood! Cold blood! Flowing blood! Hot blood! Blood! A very special taste! Blood is the universal panacea. Blood is healthy! Blood is a sign! With this sign you will conquer! With German blood and broom the world will soon recover. I am the true blood-wind! Bloodhound! Blood storm! Blood-Blood-Blood-Blood shall flow. Blood must flow!

Although others, equally obsessed with 'blood' would put into effect Haeusser's psychopathic fantasies with greater thoroughness, the prophet himself attempted to found a political movement. By now calling himself 'Louis the Christ, King of Germany and Emperor of the World', he founded a Christian Radical People's Party in 1922, together with a journal immodestly called *Haeusser*. In an odd prefiguring of what Hitler would subsequently announce in 1927, he called this a 'partyless party', consisting of 'men of the deed' who would resist all compromise. He wanted it to attract all the extremes. Hence he referred to it as the 'Swastika-Communists'. While the extreme-right German Racial Defence and Offence League was cool, Haeusser did attract support from the self-styled National Communists, who were drawn by his promise of an 'enabling law' in which 'millions of superfluous, parasitic, unproductive officials' would be forced Pol Pot style to work. This platform attracted about 25,000 votes in March 1924, although his party's share of the poll plummeted in successive elections. By this time, Haeusser was embarked on a personal Golgotha. His intemperate letters to various authorities – 'I shit on your lazy, mindless laws – yes, I shit a great big heap of shit!' – and his publishing of lists of the names of judges with whom he had had contretemps, whom he said he would execute within three days of establishing his dictatorship, inevitably attracted the concerted malice of the law. From 1919 onwards, the authorities in each federal state shunted him hither and thither and he was held under protective arrest during the right-wing Kapp putsch in 1920 as a menace to public order.

Haeusser eventually washed up in north-western Oldenburg, where in 1922 he became engaged to Hetty von Pohl, the niece of a wealthy aristocratic landowner and daughter of the former chief of the imperial navy. He relinquished his waist-length beard and acquired decent suits and shoes so as to fit in with this smart company. Although his future uncle had initially been won over to his teachings, things turned sour when Haeusser moved his entourage into the baron's home and the family silver found its way to a pawnbrokers in Hamburg. Appalled by

the prospect of this *mésalliance* with a maniac, Hetty's mother had her daughter confined in a secure psychiatric hospital, to break the spell of a fiancé who more properly belonged in such a setting. Haeusser lashed out at the authorities in Oldenburg, 'small, fly-blown, rancid, lousy' being the printable outbursts, which resulted in a storm of prosecutions against the prophet. He was sentenced to twenty-one months' imprisonment and a one million Mark fine. During what proved to be three years inside, he wrote a 2,413-page diary on wrapping and lavatory paper, which a team of female devotees duly transcribed for future publication. His chances of early release diminished when the authorities came across articles in *Haeusser* which appeared to threaten the life of the prosecutor at his trial. His mental and physical health worsened, until in 1923 he almost died. It seemed that every other political jailbird was being pardoned, including the anarchist Erich Mühsam and Adolf Hitler, while the prophet stayed behind bars. In July 1925 he was released and settled in Hamburg. After one final spurt of political prophecy, in June 1927 the forty-five-year-old Haeusser died.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, in deepest Thuringia, Friedrich Muck-Lamberty was leading his followers on a merry dance. Muck was born in 1891 into a family with fourteen children. He was christened Muck because, like the character in the fairy tale, he had a large head. However Muck grew up to be a man with the clean-cut good looks of a Robin Hood in a 1950s film, an image he actively promoted with his medieval jerkins and hunting horn. The young Muck was raised as a Catholic, but his faith took a knock when he surprised the priest with his housekeeper and the priest bribed him with chocolate to ensure his silence. At thirteen he left home. By sixteen, he had become a 'lifestyle reformer' and vegetarian, managing to turn the former passion into a successful business by helping to design orthopaedic footwear. By eighteen he had gravitated to the wandering youth movement and sought to found his own utopian rural settlements consisting of skilled craftsmen who would sell their goods through co-operatives. During the Great War, Muck was stationed by the navy on the island of Heligoland in the North Sea, where he was appalled by the arrogance of officers and the vulgarity of the sailors. The revolutionary events at the end of the war convinced him that all those involved were locked into outmoded forms of thought. In a programmatic statement that he published in January 1919, he called for a supra-political 'German national community' based on abstinence, lifestyle reform and a reversion to craftsmanship. Above all he thought

that 'without religion there would be no nation' and called for popular solstice festivals to bring this about. Muck's Catholic background was also evident in the enormous importance he attached to woman as mother, being especially exercised by the appalling way in which working-class men treated their wives.

During the warm summer of 1920, Muck led a throng of youthful middle-class followers through Franconia and Thuringia. They set out from Kronach and marched via Coburg, Jena and Weimar to Eisenach. They were dressed in blue and white coloured fabrics and went either barefoot or in self-made 'Jesus sandals'. Each evening Muck blew a horn to summon his followers to a 'Thing' where he heard and resolved their complaints and concerns. One would confess to having eaten meat, and agree to a three-day fast. Another would ask to sleep alone, since the sound of snoring kept him awake when he slept in the close-packed row. In Eisenach the group refused to stand for the national anthem at a nationalist youth festival since the ambient fug of tobacco and beer detracted from the dignity of the occasion. Eventually some thousands of people joined Muck's merry moralising band. They were quickly encouraged by some enterprising Protestant pastors into their churches, notwithstanding Muck's pronounced Mariolatry, impressed as they were by the group's charismatic enthusiasms. There was more. In each village and town they journeyed through, the group took over the square and used it to form concentric circles of dancers, which the incredulous inhabitants were invited to join. The dances were more reminiscent of a Kirmesse by Breughel than of the era of the Foxtrot, Rouli Rouli and Topsy Step in which these people were living. There was much 'swinging' to induce a quasi-religious ecstasy, although many young men and women took the opportunity to 'swing' in a less innocent sense. In the autumn of 1920 the 'throng' retraced their route, wintering on the Leuchtenberg near Kahla where Muck established a crafts settlement whose products they exchanged for apples and potatoes from local farmers.

Initially the local authorities were sympathetic to the settlement, but there was a snake in paradise. A disgruntled female member of Muck's entourage wrote to the authorities accusing the prophet of running a 'household harem'. Investigations proved that, although he already had a child with a married woman, a girl in the throng was also pregnant, with one of the many children he would name after trees, even as he was carrying on with another of his young disciples. All the mothers of his

children were themselves members of the extreme racist Mittgart League. A year earlier he had also tried to seduce various blonde girls with the prospect that they might give birth to a German Christ. A court subsequently established the, invariably compelling, nature of his pitch: 'A personality like Christ, a redeemer, is necessary in the present time. Every female being, whether married or unmarried, but physically and spiritually sound, is entitled to help bring about the birth of this redeemer.'

This accusation resulted in an embarrassing examination by the authorities in Altenburg. Muck and his throng were ordered out of town and he became the object of sly commentaries. The throng did not desert the disgraced prophet. He set up a new settlement in a villa at Naumburg, where they concentrated on wood-turning and produced such knickknacks as nutcrackers and sewing boxes. The scandal was over. During the Depression, Muck made a brief reappearance as a public prophet, when he organised a 'religious week' in Hildburghausen. Among the young Bolsheviks, young Catholics, young Nordicists and a sprinkling of Russians, he established contact with representatives of the more socialist wing of the Nazis. Although he was no more a friend of the Republic than they were, he found some aspects of Nazism unsympathetic – they put power before the spirit, and deceived themselves with their prodigious feats of organisation. While the Nazis subsequently forbade Muck to use the term 'throng' – their own German Labour Front appropriated it – autarchy and an emphasis on craftsmanship meant that his workshops boomed in the 1930s. He spent the Second World War training naval cadets, and then returned to Naumburg where the scrap from a huge weapons plant enabled him to re-establish his communal business. Relocated to Königswinter in 1949, this settled into a conventional family firm, which exists to this day.

Although sophisticates mocked the sudden appearance of deranged figures on village squares and the streets of modern cities, other commentators detected a stirring of ancient spirits, as if deep currents had erupted through the surface of modern life. In 1924 a Franciscan called Erhard Schlund wrote:

The war of Christianity against Teutonic paganism was not over when Bonifatius felled the sacred oak. Even after the general victory of Christianity and the Christianisation of the German tribes, the battle continued as a guerrilla war in the souls and in the beliefs and religious customs, even in certain individuals and

there were always men who preferred Wotan to Christ. Today it seems as though this century-old skirmish will again become an open battle.<sup>39</sup>

Early in the same year, D. H. Lawrence wrote his perspicacious ‘Letter from Germany’, although it was not published for another decade. Lawrence felt that ‘the great leaning of the Germanic spirit is once more eastwards, towards Russia, towards Tartary. The strange vortex of Tartary has become the positive centre again, the positivity of western Europe is broken. The positivity of our civilisation has broken. The influences that come, come invisibly out of Tartary. So that all Germany reads *Beasts, Men and Gods* with a kind of fascination. Returning again to the fascination of the destructive East, that produced Attila.’ In Heidelberg Lawrence encountered hordes of students, including ‘queer gangs of Young Socialists, youths and girls, with their non-materialistic professions, their half-mystic assertions’. The country was ‘whirling to the ghost of the old Middle Ages of Germany, then to the Roman days, then to the days of the silent forest and the dangerous, lurking barbarians’.<sup>40</sup> In an essay entitled ‘The Longing for a World View’ written two years later, the novelist Hermann Hesse described the almost frenetic quest for the stable beliefs and morality that had once accompanied rural and small-town society:

Making itself felt with particular urgency, however, is the need for a replacement for the values of the vanishing culture, for new forms of religiosity and community. That there is no shortage of tasteless, silly, even dangerous and bad substitute candidates is obvious. We are teeming with seers and founders; charlatans and quacks are mistaken for saints; vanity and greed leap at this new, promising area . . . In itself this awakening of the soul, this burning resurgence of longings for the divine, this fever heightened by war and distress, is a phenomenon of marvellous power and intensity that cannot be taken seriously enough.<sup>41</sup>

In July of that year, Joseph Goebbels attended a series of meetings in and around Berchtesgaden. One of his diary entries recorded his gushing impression of Hitler, whose star Goebbels had begun to follow. He added: ‘In the afternoon he [Hitler] spoke about the conquest of the state and the meaning of political revolution. Thoughts, that I had certainly had myself, but which I had never articulated. After supper we sat for a

long time in the garden of the Naval Home, and he preached on the subject of the new state and how we would fight for it. It sounded like prophecy. In the heavens above a white cloud took on the form of a swastika. There was a flickering light in the sky, which could not be a star. – A sign of destiny?<sup>42</sup>

Nineteen-twenty-four saw the publication of one of the most remarkable and least-known books of the twentieth century, Christoph Bry's *Verkappte Religionen* or 'Hidden Religions'. It was reprinted in Germany in 1964, but has never been translated, although it certainly deserves to be since it speaks to the twenty-first century as much as to Bry's own time. Bry was fascinated by books, and acutely conscious that so much of what was being published was inconsequential rubbish that skilfully concealed its absence of thought behind various adopted manners. The facts of his life are sparse. He was born in Pomeranian Stralsund on the Baltic coast. His father ran a sausage shop. He had two brothers. One went missing in the First World War, the other died of a heart attack as the Gestapo arrested him. Bry, born so lame on his left side that his foot dragged behind him, died in 1926 at the age of thirty-three. The best pupil in his local grammar school, between 1911 and 1916 he studied history, political economy, jurisprudence, German, philosophy and theatre at Munich and Heidelberg. From 1916 onwards he worked for the publisher Ullstein, before establishing his own small house in Munich. Despite his difficulty in walking, he was well known on the Munich artistic scene. In order to boost his income, he wrote (he actually dictated them to his wife) newspaper articles and reviews on books, film, theatre, mass meetings and trials, including that of Ludendorff and Hitler after the failed putsch. Hitler struck him as a cross between a holy-roller and a provincial prima donna, whose audiences loved the predictability of the hectic hysteria, the sweeping arm gestures, and above all those southern German 'rolling-RRRs'. As Bry argued, Hitler belonged in the company of Rudolf Steiner, Haeusser and the other 'miracle workers'.<sup>43</sup> He was spared the worst ravages of the inflation. A student friend owned a major Argentine German newspaper, which meant that Bry was paid in US dollars, enabling him to write his extraordinary book. Unfortunately, his health deteriorated to the point where he had to visit Davos in Switzerland to recuperate. He died there in 1926, although not before telling a poet friend how he had written his book, how the public responded, and how he envisaged its themes developing. He died an optimist.

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*Verkappte Religionen* is both brilliantly written and bold in tackling several modern spiritualised monomanias, regarding which, even today, in the case of gender politics which he also included, many people might pull their punches with if they wanted to get on in life. Bry savoured the fact that in Argentina a newspaper advertisement for his book appeared next to one selling pesticides for household vermin. His acerbic, mocking tone would doubtless upset many US academics, as he believed that to adopt a 'solemn pomposity' was inadvertently to compound the earnestness he detected in the ecstasies he wrote about, thereby perpetuating discussion of them to infinitude. Bry was what Americans call mean – in other words, without spurious civility or collegiality. Writing of a monomaniacal American book of meaningless statistics about the 'success' of Prohibition, he defended the right not just 'to get pissed' – as he put it – but to resist the wider vision of the stone-cold sober 'new man' that lurked behind the walls of numbers and percentages. A 'homunculus' would result, who consumed nothing but the air he breathed, since unlike religions that seek to enhance and refine human drives, 'all forms of lifestyle reform – whether sophisticated or crude – constitute a form of spiritual suicide' as deadly as smoking or drinking oneself to death.<sup>44</sup>

Bry was concerned with many total explanations of the world, whether these were numerological or political – notably Communism and Fascism – or pseudo-religious – Freudian psychoanalysis and the 'department store' anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, as well as with those lifestyle choices that become all-consuming vocations, such as abstinence from alcohol, yoga, vegetarianism, feminism and homosexuality. Bry was especially concerned to show how the adoption of specific identities did not 'liberate' an individual, but imprisoned them within such a narrow carapace that a caricature (or stereotype) automatically resulted. His other major concern was with the more familiar theme of the 'hidden' logic – the world *behind* rather than *beyond* – that animated many of the resulting crazes, fads, sects and movements. In the case of antisemitism, which many of his cults and sects shared, this involved a salt-cellar never being just a thing used to deposit seasoning on the side of a plate, but being also physical 'evidence' of Jewish control of the ancient salt trade or 'their' majority stock holdings in modern salination works. If racism was the hidden logic of the extreme right, then it was Marx's 'achievement' to transform the inchoate utopian enthusiasms of early socialism into a hidden religion supported by what passed for science but



which was a form of prophecy involving his own chosen people – the industrial proletariat.

Interestingly, in passages which he omitted from his book, Bry claimed that the moral cowardice of the Churches (rather than of Christianity) was responsible for the elephantine growth of hidden religions, a surrender that had already been evident in their defensive response to the growth of science. Instead of seeking the widest possible position within society, they had fallen back on their own narrowing ramparts, where they duly fell into fighting among themselves. The bien-pensants had successfully caricatured Christianity as deceptive, stupid and reactionary. It was something so retrograde that there was not even any point in fighting it, an argument not lost on Friedrich Engels. Bry felt that instead of routinely blaming religious indifference upon ‘anti-religious powers’, Christians should spend more time laughing at the risible beliefs of the ‘modern’ indifferent that he analysed so sharply in his book. At about the same time, James Joyce came to a remarkably similar conclusion, when in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* his Catholic hero remarked: ‘What kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity which is logical and coherent and to embrace one which is illogical and incoherent?’<sup>45</sup>

## V POLITICS AND RELIGION IN THE 1920S

It would be wrong to imagine the post-war period in overly dramatic terms, or to view it exclusively through the apocalyptic or dyspeptic optic of many of its fashionable writers and artists. During the 1920s, Britain witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of Anglo-Catholic social endeavour, the emphasis on collective responsibility tending to accompany the more corporately conscious, medievalising wing of the Anglican Church rather than its Evangelical individualists.<sup>46</sup> Its most prominent advocate was William Temple, successively bishop of Manchester and York and, for two years before his death in 1944, archbishop of Canterbury. Hugely fat and smug in appearance, Temple was the son of a former archbishop of Canterbury, who at the age of seven had wept on learning that the servants in the family’s Lake District hotel were prohibited from eating chicken. The guilty moralism of the privileged members of an established church would hang over much of the Church of England’s social endeavours.

In 1924 – the year the first Labour government briefly came to power – Temple organised the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (or COPEC) which met in Birmingham in that year. Temple was not calling for the Church of England to put itself behind Labour, although he belonged to the Party for a couple of years, nor for a new, continental-style Christian-democratic party; his vision of establishment combined the belief that Christianity should be at the heart of the nation with the view that it should also encourage a radical, reformist social agenda through the enunciation of general principles. The COPEC conference was massively prepared with detailed expert reports on such subjects as industry and property; the treatment of crime; and politics and citizenship. The conference called:

on all Christian people to do all in their power to find and apply the remedy for recurrent unemployment, to press vigorously for the launching of efficient housing schemes, whether centrally or locally, and to secure an immediate extension of educational facilities, especially for the unemployed adolescents, whose case is perhaps the most deplorable of all the deplorable features of our social life today . . . we urge the immediate raising of the school leaving age to sixteen, and the diminution as rapidly as possible of the maximum size of classes.<sup>47</sup>

While many of these ideas, already familiar in spirit from the Christian Social Union of the pre-war era, would bear fruit in the form of the post-1945 welfare state, at the time they were unwelcome, not least to the elderly archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, who thought that the Church would be better advised to eschew partisan politics. The archbishop discovered this himself when in May 1926 he made what seems a reasonable proposal to the nation as to how to resolve the General Strike that had polarised the country: the strikers should return to work; the government should restore limited subsidies to the coal industry; and the mine-owners should withdraw their reduced wage scales. The BBC refused to broadcast the archbishop's appeal, although it did transmit the Catholic cardinal Bourne's denunciation of the strike as 'a sin against the obedience which we owe to God', sentiments which won the approval of the minority of right-wing Anglicans. As for Temple, he was ill and abroad when the strike occurred, although he lent his support to the Standing Committee of the Christian Churches on the Coal Dispute, which vainly tried to mediate between the miners and the

coal-owners. These unqualified interventions prompted prime minister Stanley Baldwin to remark that perhaps the Federation of British Industry should seek to revise the Athanasian Creed.<sup>48</sup>

The years after the war saw a remarkable burgeoning of Catholic politics in Europe, which seemed to promise a 'third way' between Marxist socialism, whether in its democratic or totalitarian guises, and the atomised individualism of liberal capitalism. Since Catholic politics encompassed left-wing trades unionists as well as clericalist authoritarians, urban as well as rural voters, it straddled the more familiar ideological divides of the modern continent. It was hostile to the power of the modern state, while its cure for the social injustices of liberalism involved reviving autonomous associations rather than multiplying faceless bureaucracies. Political Catholicism stood in a sometimes uneasy relationship with the social and political vision of the papacy, which was dominated by the goal of 'the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Christ by peace in Christ', a goal that could be realised by a variety of means other than through dedicated confessional parties. Thus, while some Catholics continued to work through political parties, others – and in particular many of the young – regarded such vehicles as Catholic Action as the better way of achieving spiritual goals that were imperfectly addressed by the parties.<sup>49</sup>

The war had a profound impact upon European Catholicism. In most countries there was a brief upsurge in church attendance and an increase in diffuse religiosity, albeit much of it bent on self-preservation or protecting the lives of combatant relatives. Most countries proclaimed a civic truce, or what in France was called a 'sacred union', designed not only to suspend class conflict, but clashes between rival confessions or, notably in France, recent clashes between Church and state. While in some Mediterranean countries the power of the Catholic Church continued as a source of resentment to militant anticlericals, elsewhere there was a marked diminution of the passions this issue had incited during the pre-war period. This partly reflected the sacrifices that Catholics, including the clergy, had made on the battlefields. Although some Catholic political parties originated in the decades before the war, such as the Belgian Catholic Party or the German Centre Party, many were created to represent Catholic interests in a new age of mass politics and parliamentary regimes. In Italy, pope Benedict XV reluctantly gave his consent to the formation of the Partito Popolare Italiano which was founded in January 1919. To appease the Church, its leader, a remarkable

priest called Luigi Sturzo, insisted that the Party was ‘aconfessional’ but broadly based on Christian principles. These were reflected in a concern for the well-being of the family and small farmers, the transference of power to subsidiary associations and the regions, and, since Sturzo was a Sicilian, for the development of the backward South. In the general elections in late 1919, the Party won 20 per cent of the vote and a fifth of the seats in parliament, becoming the second largest party after the Socialists. It did especially well in the traditionally White areas in north-eastern Italy – especially Lombardy and the Veneto – and conspicuously badly in the South, where in some regions it scraped a mere 5 per cent. Since the Socialists refused to participate in ‘bourgeois politics’, the Popolari joined each of the six cabinets that attempted to rule Italy between 1919 and Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’ in October 1922.

Essentially a broad coalition of potentially opposed interests, the Popolari disintegrated amid the tensions that were endemic in Italy in the first years of the 1920s. Sturzo’s clerical status proved to be the Party’s Achilles heel, particularly after Pius XI succeeded Benedict in February 1922. The new pope was not convinced that political parties were the best means of Catholic self-assertion, while taking the view that perhaps Mussolini could finally resolve the status of Rome. The Vatican forced Sturzo to resign the leadership in July 1923. In elections held in 1924, the Party’s share of the poll slumped to 9 per cent, as Catholic voters turned to the Fascists. Shortly afterwards the Party dissolved itself.

The advent of the Weimar Republic affected the German Churches in different ways. The soft, and only partial, separation of Church and state dismayed Protestants, who were used to the external legitimisation that had come with ecclesiastical establishment in the Empire. Since Catholics had never enjoyed such privileges, they were less affected by their disappearance. In addition to lacking a single political vehicle to defend their interests – until, that is, the Nazis appeared to address that deficit – Protestants watched with trepidation the ascendancy of the Catholic Centre Party, which, in addition to dominating most Weimar and Prussian coalition governments, supplied chancellors Fehrenbach, Wirth, Marx and Brüning. Other prominent Catholics included Matthias Erzberger, who signed the armistice at Compiègne, and was subsequently assassinated in 1921 by two right-wing extremists while out hiking during a holiday, and Munich’s archbishop Michael von Faulhaber, who became an influential voice in the land. Although Catholics had been as patriotic as the next man in the recent war, some, ignoring the

dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the role of Protestant Britain and the US, regarded the victory of, inter alia, France, Belgium and Italy as a delayed triumph for Catholicism over the Lutheran Reformation.<sup>50</sup>

The Weimar Constitution adopted confessional and ideological neutrality, rejecting an established state Church, but nonetheless included generous support for the Churches within a framework of religious toleration. The Churches enjoyed special legal protection and continued to be subsidised through taxes, while God was defended with blasphemy laws. Sunday and Church holidays continued as days of rest, while chaplains were still attached to asylums and the army. Religion remained a compulsory subject in schools, its content to be determined by the clergy, although no solution was reached to satisfy both Catholics and liberals on the wider balance between parental choice vis-à-vis a system designed to transcend confessional divisions.

Both Churches were affected by the general climate of the times, whether in terms of Allied impositions, domestic political conflict, economic dislocation or a no less tangible sense of moral disintegration, a perennial subject of clerical rumination. Protestant clergy responded indignantly to the war-guilt clause in the Treaty of Versailles by holding a day of national mourning, and tolling their church bells on the day the treaty was signed. Many Catholic priests would have done so too, had they not had to respect Benedict XV's diplomatic efforts to soften the terms of the treaty in response to entreaties from the Catholic bishops. Both Churches were affected by the subtraction of German territory stipulated by the treaty, as well as by the drastic curtailment of missionary activity in Germany's former colonies. While some liberal Protestants realistically adhered to the new Constitution and tried to win over their ecumenical friends for treaty revision, rather than supporting those actively seeking to subvert it, others continued to trumpet the 'war theology' that had resulted in one catastrophe and would contribute to another once it had mutated into the so-called German Christians.

The Catholic Centre Party was involved in all thirteen coalition governments between 1919 and 1930. Its strategy was to preserve denominational interests, while mediating between the various ideological camps that otherwise dominated the Republic. It was symptomatic of a time when being in government did parties no favours that the Centre Party regarded being in power as a form of sacrifice for the troubled fatherland. The role of mediator meant that the Centre Party was a classic party of compromise, rather than one capable of setting forth a

bold vision for the future. In the early 1920s there were attempts, associated with the trades unionist Adam Stegerwald, and then with Wilhelm Marx and Konrad Adenauer, to broaden the Party's appeal to encompass Christians in general.<sup>51</sup> Not even every Catholic, however, voted for the Party, its share of the vote being much higher among regular churchgoers than among nominal Catholics. Conservative nationalist Catholics supported the German National People's Party (DNVP), while those on the left backed the evanescent Christian-Social Reich Party. In Bavaria, the Catholic vote went to the particularist Bavarian People's Party. The combined vote for the two major Catholic parties fell from 19.7 per cent in 1919 to 13.9 per cent in March 1933, a decline that would have been much worse had newly enfranchised women voters not supported these parties in impressive numbers. Whereas almost 63 per cent of Catholics voted for the Centre in 1919, by 1930 this had fallen to 47 per cent.

The politics of Germany's Protestants were more dispiriting. A prominent few, such as Adolf Harnack or Ernst Troeltsch, were *Ver-nunftrepublikaner*, that is, people who thought that there was no going back to a non-existent imperial utopia, and that they had to work within the framework of present political realities. Initially many of those Protestants who were involved with their Churches gave their backing to the DNVP as the only party that promised to defend Protestant interests. In 1925 the Evangelical League for the Defence of German-Protestant Interests played a part in the rejection of Wilhelm Marx and the election of field marshal von Hindenburg as the president of the Republic. Thereafter, the votes of churchgoing Protestants migrated to a plethora of evanescent splinter parties, which were the religious analogue of the narrow moralising interest-based parties – for sound money, creditors' interests and so forth – that massively fragmented the middle-class electorate without being capable of sustaining it, in the middle years of the decade. Like many of their secular analogues, such oddities as the German Reformation Party, formed in 1928 to defend Protestantism against political Catholicism, Marxism and liberalism, failed to secure a single seat in the Reichstag. The same fate met the prophet-politicians such as Louis Haeusser. The political homelessness of Protestant Germany would be resolved after 1930 when its citizens gave their votes in increasing numbers to a party that promised authority, order and respect for religion: the Nazis successfully presented themselves as the sword of an awakening semi-religious German spirit. That in turn was

part of a much broader challenge from totalitarian movements with a more or less conscious mimetic relationship to the Churches, not least the Bolsheviks in Russia, the first illegitimate brother of religion to assume political power and to demonstrate the horrors of applied rationality.