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Hitler, Christianity and Atheism

What did Hitler really believe? Hitler's mother was a devout Catholic. His father considered religion a scam. Hitler called himself a Christian and venerated Jesus as an anti-Jewish fighter. German churches replaced bibles on altars with copies of Mein Kampf and services were held in Hitler's honour. He worked hard to harness the power of religion for his own ends, but the heart of his ideology was diametrically opposed to Christianity.



Das Kreuz war noch nicht schwer genug

Caption: The cross wasn't heavy enough

According to Baldur von Schirach, head of the Hitler Youth movement, *"the destruction of Christianity was explicitly recognized as a purpose of the National Socialist movement."* Rejecting Christianity outright, the Nazis changed the Bible to fit their ends. First, Jesus was rebranded as Aryan. While the New Testament is emphatic about Jesus' Jewish identity, Hitler declared, *"I can imagine Christ as nothing other than blond and with blue eyes, the Devil however only with a Jewish grimace."* Nazi-era Bibles removed the Old Testament and edited the gospels to purge references to Jesus's Jewishness, his missional prioritization of the Israelites and his fulfilment of Hebrew scripture. Nazis edited New Testament texts to align with their ideology and militaristic mindset. Most stunningly of all, the Nazis even went to replace Jesus with Hitler himself. Joseph Goebbels, minister for public enlightenment and propaganda, said of Hitler: *"We are witnessing the greatest miracle in history. A genius is building a new world!"* Hitler's youth were taught a prayer resembling the Lord's prayer, but addressed to Fuhrer:

Adolf Hitler, you are our great Fuhrer.

Thy name makes the enemy tremble.
Thy Third Reich comes, thy will alone is law upon the earth.
Let us hear daily thy voice and order us by thy leadership,
For we will obey to the end and even with our lives.
We praise thee! Heil Hitler!

So Nazi Germany was founded on a new religion, with a new messiah and an ideology that could not have been further from Christianity. The Nazis mangled Christianity beyond recognition. Thousands of Protestants protested Nazi tactics and as a result seven hundred pastors were arrested. Many were executed or sent to concentration camps. This was not Christianity.

Hitler loathed Christianity and hated Judaism. In Hitler's view, the Aryan race was simply superior, and maintaining racial purity was an evolutionary ethic: *"The stronger must dominate and not mate with the weaker, which would signify the sacrifice of its own higher nature."* We can see the horrifying logic: if evolution is the reference to how we value things, then since evolution depends on the survival of the fittest, perhaps one race can claim to be more fit and out-compete the others. If we think that evolution created and defines all ethics then virtue equals *"sacrifices that benefit one's own group in competition with other groups,"* and on these terms, Hitler's fascism was *"the ultimate virtuous ideology."*

One of Hitler's strongest intellectual influences was nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche didn't believe in the Christian understanding of God, and is well known for his famous statement: *"God is dead."* Now Nietzsche did not make this claim in a narcissistic or triumphant manner but in absolute despair. Rather, he feared that in the denial of God, all the Judeo-Christian morals and values serving as the foundation of Western civilization could no longer be held as true. Nietzsche concluded from this that everything would soon fall apart, in a catastrophic manner both psychologically and socially. Nietzsche wrote: *"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"*

Then in his book 'The Will to Power', Nietzsche prophesied that two major consequences would arise in the denial of God's existence. Firstly, as the purpose of human life became uncertain outside the purposeful structure of monotheistic thought and the meaningful world it proposed, we would experience an existential devastating rise in nihilism. Secondly, he suggested people would turn from religion to rigid, totalitarian ideology substituting God's wisdom for man's.

Now Nietzsche wasn't so keen on the two logical outcomes of God's denial, so he proposed, rather inconsistently, a single remaining escape from nihilism and totalitarianism: the emergence of an individual strong enough to create his own set of values, project them onto a valueless reality, and then abide by them. The issue is that this solution is ignorant of the fact that if there is no God, nihilism is your only consistent alternative worldview. You can't just create your own morals and values and then conclude that reality must adhere to them. There is nothing objective or true about those values, they are merely subjective. And if you create values and ethics in contradiction with mine, who is right? Neither of us. *They are just made up.* And if each of us lives by our own created and projected values, what remains to unite us? We are left with war with the winning team imposing their values on the rest of us. And that was exactly what Hitler attempted.

Nietzsche saw that *"when one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident."* In 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra', he imagined an 'Übermensch', or "Superhuman," who would rise above the concept of good and evil founded from Christianity, and throw off this "slave morality", and instead create their own values and moral code. This human would have qualities even quite disturbing to many today. Hitler (most likely against Nietzsche's intentions) mapped this idea onto Aryan Germans and rejected the *"morality of weakness"* offered by Christianity. Like Nietzsche, Hitler abhorred Christian morality such as the belief in human rights and that all human life has equal objective value. In effect, Hitler saw himself as Nietzsche's superhuman who had evolved beyond Christian ethics. As the British historian Alan Bullock wrote: *"In Hitler's eyes, Christianity was a religion fit only for slaves; he detested its ethics in particular. It's teaching, he declared, was a rebellion against the natural law of selection by struggle and the survival of the fittest."*

The Nazis were trying to create a post-Christian, post-religious perfect man, the ideal Aryan.

Many secular scholars have attempted to re-establish a basis for human rights that is untethered to religious moorings. Philosopher Ronald E. Osborn surveys some recent forays into this territory, but concludes that the core humanistic values of inviolable human dignity, inalienable human rights, and intrinsic human equality cannot be upheld by naturalism (and so atheism) that will always crumble into nihilism. Most of my friends who identify as nonreligious are passionately committed to human rights, and many secular philosophers argue for human rights and equality as a must, but when it comes to an objective philosophical foundation for human rights from a secular perspective, building materials are hard to come by. Many atheists today anchor themselves on humanism, believing in the human spirit and capacity for progress, creativity and love without any need for a "God hypothesis." But Richard Dawkins's relentless claim that there is *"no design, no purpose, no evil, no good"*- illuminates a problem. This bleak, secular view of the universe erodes the foundations on which we balance life and humanness itself. If there is no good or evil, why do we lament? If our sympathy for others is just a byproduct of evolutionary kinship, why empathize with the suffering of those outside our tribe? And if our sense of self, our soul, is just a delusion, moral agency evaporates and so do human rights. As late Christopher Hitchens, former champion of atheism, declared: *"How do I know there are such things as human rights? I don't. I don't know if there are such things... Our grounding (for human rights) is about as tenuous as our position as a primate species on a rather dodgy planet."*

Human equality has no firm secular foundation and there is no escaping it.

Hitler understood this, and by it, he justified his atrocities against other humans who were not part of his 'pack'. Think about it: competition, violence, and the eradication of the weak fuel the engine that drives evolution, it is the key to natural selection; so if you reduce humans down to just their scientific components and exclude deeper levels of meaning, then you are left with a worldview incompatible with a belief system that values humans equally.

We can see this echoed in society today. Consider the words of the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, who makes the calculation that even *"a week-old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many nonhuman animals whose rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity, and so on, exceed that of a human baby of a week or a month old."* Therefore, Singer concludes that *"the life of a newborn baby is of less value... than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee."* Medical ethicists Alberto Guibilini and Francesca Minerva also argue that *"after-birth abortion (killing a newborn) should be permissible in all cases where abortion is, including cases where the newborn is not disabled."* You may find this uncompassionate, after all these so-called *"ethicists"* are talking about being able to kill a newborn baby, but they are only being consistent with their secular worldview. If we are not in a special category of personhood by virtue of our

creation in the image of God, perhaps we can judge our value according to our capacities. Hitler also thought this, denying the life of those who were disabled or weak because they were less useful.

If you maintain a belief in human equality and the objective value of life while assenting to a secular worldview, *then make no mistake about it, you are inconsistent!*

The fact is, today's secular humanism offers a worldview in which its conceptions of morality and reality are at odds: human beings are a collection of atoms labouring under a false belief that they are moral agents. And yet humans are of immense, equal, and inalienable worth. What will be the outcome? Hitler applied the reality of secularism for his own ambitions. If there is no God, if we are purposeless biological robots controlled by the outcomes of physical laws alone, then our sense of self is just an illusion. We have no moral agency; morality is no more than preference. As MIT professor Alan Lightman put it, *"We are a bunch of atoms, like trees, and like doughnuts,"* so, eat a doughnut, or eat a child. Anything goes.

Hitler had his own twisted view of human progress, and secularism provided the justification he needed to carry it out. Without the Christian concept of God Hitler was free from the concepts of good and evil which would restrain his own interest. *In that case, it can be said with confidence that Hitler did nothing objectively wrong.* Reject God, and you lose a philosophical foundation by which you can objectively justify the concepts of justice, purpose, meaning and true value. I have come to believe that there are only two consistent worldviews - Christianity and nihilism. Your pick.