

Nordic Ideology in the SS and the SS Ahnenerbe

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1. The Historiography of the Church Struggle and its Misrepresentations

The conceptual framework of the so-called historiography of the church struggle has shaped the scholarly occupation with the religious development in the Third Reich to a large extent. Two fallacious equations in particular affected the post-war debate even within secular historical scholarship. The first was the identification of National Socialism with National Socialist Paganism. In the continuation of the former quarrels between church and state over the impact of a number of measures taken against church interests, the Nazi regime appeared from a certain perspective as political fulfilment of the worst of an anti-Christian heathendom aiming to annihilate Christianity in Germany as a whole. Secondly, many if not most studies written in the context of the church struggle supported the opinion that Christianity, its doctrines and essential meaning, had been the only relevant counterforce in that battle between the forces of light and darkness. This widespread idea of a deadly combat between two antagonistic worldviews entailed a fairly distorted picture of the German history of religions after 1933. Its simplistic bipolarity disregarded important overlaps and eliminated intermediary elements from the great many bilateral relations that were in place. Any potential ideological permeability between Christianity and National Socialism was contested and common features between both them and between Christianity and Paganism were belittled or categorically denied.

While the church struggle paradigm has been largely abandoned with regard to Protestantism and Catholicism – consider just the works of Manfred Gailus and Doris Bergen for the Protestant and the ones of Olaf Blaschke and Kevin Spicer for the Catholic side¹ – it is in full force when it comes to Paganism. With very little factual evidence, much guessing and conjecturing prevail over earnest studies on Pagan groups and individuals, on their beliefs and rites. An overview of the fragmented field of organised and non-organised Paganism is still far beyond reach. With the exception of three dissertations by Ulrich Nanko, Hiroshi Kubota and Schaul Baumann, no one has undertaken comparable efforts to shed light on the

1 Cf. Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001), Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross. The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Olaf Blaschke, *Katholizismus und Antisemitismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) and Kevin Spicer, *Hitler's Priests. Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

German Faith Movement, viz the biggest and most significant Pagan association in National Socialist Germany.² Who knows much about its composition, its short life and early death? Who has worked on those Pagan groups separate from or in opposition to the German Faith Movement?³ We still have to draw on the doctoral dissertation of Heinz Bartsch, written under the supervision of Hans Freyer and Arnold Gehlen at the University of Leipzig in 1938, to achieve a large part of reliable data.⁴ Though Bartsch was an outspoken Pagan National Socialist, his study does contain important information about the inner development and organisational forms of Paganism in Germany. The early and influential post-war account of Hans Buchheim was based on a Christian assumption that the German nation was hit by a deep spiritual crisis, a crisis that he associated to the demise of the church and the defiance of Christian values.⁵ Therefore Buchheim regarded *völkisch* Paganism as the ideological spearhead of National Socialism, commissioned with the task of substituting a wicked counter-religion for Christianity, for ethics and morality as such.

Buchheim's biased view neglected not only the dynamics of political adaption processes all religions are subject to, but also the plenty of possible responses to the challenge of modernity taking shape in, at the fringe, or outside of the established churches. The false identification of religion with Christianity and of Christianity with the church, which dominates the historical narrative to a great extent, underrates vital aspects of ordinary people's religious life and conduct irrespective of and very often in contrast to ecclesiastical doctrines. Long before the rise of National Socialism many Germans had developed their own understanding of Christian morals and did not hesitate to disobey, openly or in secret, the claims of the church hierarchy. Large numbers of workers and intellectuals refused further allegiance to what they considered outdated teachings and dogmas. Although church

2 Ulrich Nanko, *Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung. Eine historische und soziologische Untersuchung* (Marburg: Diagonal, 1993), Hiroshi Kubota, *Religionswissenschaftliche Religiosität und Religionsgründung. Jakob Wilhelm Hauer im Kontext des freien Protestantismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2005), Schaul Baumann, *Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung und ihr Gründer Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962)* (Marburg: Diagonal, 2005).

3 An exception is only the Ludendorff movement, see Bettina Amm, *Die Ludendorff-Bewegung. Vom nationalistischen Kampfbund zur völkischen Weltanschauungssekte* (Hamburg: Verlag ad Fontes, 2006), eadem, "Die Ludendorff-Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus – Annäherung und Abgrenzungsversuche", Uwe Puschner and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Beziehungs- und Konfliktgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), pp. 127–48 and Frank Schnoor, *Matilde Ludendorff und das Christentum. Eine radikale völkische Position in der Weimarer Republik und des NS Staates* (Egelsbach: Hänzel-Hohenhausen, 2001).

4 Heinz Bartsch, *Die Wirklichkeitsmacht der Allgemeinen Deutschen Glaubensbewegung der Gegenwart* (Breslau: Ludwig, 1938). The book was reprinted by a right wing publisher seven decades later (Toppenstedt: Uwe Berg Verlag, 2007).

5 Hans Buchheim, *Glaubenskrise im Dritten Reich. Drei Kapitel nationalsozialistischer Religionspolitik* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1953).

membership never fell below approximately 95 per cent of the German population throughout the first half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of nominal Christians alienated themselves from the religion of their childhood. But only a tiny minority went so far as to join one of the Pagan groups in consequence. Therefore the National Socialist assumption of power did not lead to the revival of Paganism that its leaders had yearned for so heavily. Instead of a Pagan upsurge, Germany initially experienced a powerful reinvigoration of Christianity and the re-entry of many of those who had left the church previously. The tremendous upswing of Christian confessions in 1933 rested upon ideological correspondence in various regard. The strong response to atheism, materialism and “cultural Bolshevism” as well as the wiping out of “filth and trash” in all sectors of the society met the approval of the church leadership. Except for the parties of the left, no other adversary attracted more attention than the Jews. Standing in a long tradition of Christian anti-Judaism, the Protestant as well as the Catholic church subscribed wholeheartedly to the fight against the “Jewish threat”. Even when church and state interests diverged in the mid-thirties, the hostility to Communism and Judaism remained strong, and reached a mortal level with the beginning of World War II.

In our days, no serious historian would question the wide range of agreement between church and state, and hosts of excellent studies have outlined the multiple ties between the National Socialist government and the established churches. That this relationship cooled down in the second half of the 1930s is also a commonplace of historical scholarship, though controversies persist over what the status of Christianity presumably would have been after a military success of the German troops. While detailed examinations have generated a balanced and differentiated picture of Protestantism and Catholicism, Paganism has not been treated with the scholarly rigor it deserves – neither by secular nor church historians nor scholars of religion. It is probably no exaggeration to say that Nazi Germany’s non-Christian history of religions has remained one of the few riddles left unresolved in the historiography of National Socialism.

2. The Relevance of Paganism

We should not be surprised in light of this situation that both the SS and the Ahnenerbe of the SS are commonly seen as agencies of an anti-Christian heathendom that would have sought to destroy the church and to establish a neo- or Indo-Germanic form of Paganism as the Third Reich’s new state religion instead. Only the lost war would have prevented the “final solution of the church question” from being executed. Although arguments of that kind are wide spread, they are false and misleading in several respects. First they follow the specious idea that Paganism would have been a somehow authorised ideology, the religious extension of National Socialism so to speak. But Paganism never received official support at any

time whatsoever. Then they try to assert that Christianity was about to be persecuted in a way comparable to the German Jews, perhaps not factually, but at least in the imagined consequence of a military victory of the German troops. On that account the churches are able to evade accusations of complicity, changing from the side of the culprits to that of the victims. Accordingly, Paganism is held responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Even the holocaust then develops into a result of the Pagan struggle against Christianity.⁶

Without diminishing the pro-Nazi, racist and antisemitic conduct of many if not most Pagans, it is nonetheless necessary to repudiate the general propensity for their demonisation and to emphasise that Paganism never enjoyed a formal backing of government. On the contrary, the heathenish sectarianism of its various factions was not only considered a threat to the unity of the German folk, but also to the respectability of National Socialism and its claim to constitute a scientific worldview rather than a spiritual reform programme. With only a few exceptions, the Nazi leadership harboured no doubts that Paganism, given free play, would endanger the ideological consensus of the nation and therefore minimise its prospect of winning the next war, which was in course of secret preparation since 1936. Pagan organisations profited very little from the increasing frictions between National Socialist authorities and the Christian churches. While Hitler's assumption of power triggered off exuberant hopes among Pagans, the subsequent disenchantment reached its peak in September 1939 with the beginning of World War II, when any criticism of Christianity had to be abandoned for the sake of a new party truce deemed imperative for the victory over the enemies.

The German Faith Movement as Centre of Organised Paganism

The German Faith Movement started its short life on the famous Wartburg Castle near Eisenach on 29–30 July 1933. Some ten communities and around 170 individuals came together to deliberate on the possibility of a religious awakening outside of Christianity and the established churches.⁷ Not all of them were decided Pagans or adhered to a *völkisch* or Nordic worldview. A great number belonged to the camp of liberal Christians being dissatisfied with the restoration of the old association of throne and altar as it had made so visible the Concordat with the Catholic church

6 This is a core idea of Karla Poewe's *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006). To rid Germany of Jewish Christianity would have been the central goal of Pagan Nazism: "By blaming anti-Semitism on Christianity, scholars have badly misled their readers. (...) Rather it was neo-pagans both within and without the church who had an intense dislike of Christianity precisely because it is Semitic." Ibidem, p. 14. Poewe's arguments that "being against Christianity" was the "most authentic and deepest form of anti-Semitism", and that German Christians "were not Christians but pagans" due to their essentially anti-Christian antisemitism (p. 7f.), turns history upside down and holds Paganism liable for the centuries-old Christian hostility towards Jews.

7 See for the meeting, Nanko, *Die deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, pp. 143ff.

and the National Socialist support of the German Christians during the Protestant church elections. That Christians, church members and professors of Protestant theology, were about to play a leading role in the formative phase of the German Faith Movement, resulted in heated debates about the relationship with Christianity. It could be little wonder that the question of double membership dominated much of the debate at the beginning. The notorious hubris of most prophets and self-styled leaders of Paganism further complicated the efforts to reach a greater religious and organisational consensus. Important fractions of the Pagan movement exercised constraint to collaborate or even refused to join the German Faith Movement. Others disassociated themselves soon after the Eisenach gathering.

Despite these difficulties, the formation of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Glaubensbewegung* (ADG) in July 1933 meant a great step forward towards the consolidation of the splintered field of German Paganism. For the first time ever, its adherents and devotees seemed to have had a realistic chance to leave the sectarian fringe and move closer to the centre. But it turned out to be much easier to criticise Christianity, its dogmas, Jewish roots and negative role in history than to develop a positive religious programme of one's own. Therefore the National Socialist race idea came to them as a heavenly gift, enabling Pagans the association of their variegated and volatile religious thoughts with 'stable' categories of biological ancestry, which appeared to be scientifically substantiated by the natural sciences. Drawing on an Aryan or Indo-Germanic lineage became an ideal opportunity to unify the wide array of Pagan ideas and religious reform agendas. Analogous to the German Christian Movement, the German Faith Movement used the racial doctrines of the Third Reich not only for their stabilisation but also for the claim to represent the religious base of National Socialism.

Competing fiercely with German Christians for state recognition, German Pagans laid emphasis on the historical and spiritual connection of Christianity with Judaism, declaring any further role of the Church in Germany impossible. Both types of a *völkisch*-religious revivalism, the Pagan as well as the Christian, argued against the alleged Jewish influence in Germany. But while German Pagans sought to identify Christianity with Judaism, German Christians underlined the deep antagonism towards the Jewish precursor religion. Defending themselves against the Pagan accusation of spiritual and even racial defilement with Judaism, they pointed to the centuries-old Christian experience of combat against the Jewish adversary. In judging the antisemitism of German Pagans and German Christians, one should be careful not to lose sight of the different role Judaism played in their respective salvation models. For Pagans, the Christian churches were the chief enemy with Judaism as a secondary, primarily political problem in its wake. German Christians in contrast accused the Jewish people of having committed a *deicide*, that is to say the

worst crime possible. On these grounds its mere existence bore witness to the falsehood of the Christian truth claim.⁸

Their political accordance with National Socialism notwithstanding, Pagans had to accept the regime's pro church policy at the beginning. The famous paragraph 24 of the party programme advocating a "positive Christianity" without commitment to a particular confession was an insurmountable obstacle for everybody in contradiction to the established churches. Whatever meaning might be attached to the idea of a positive Christianity, it could in no way constitute a part of Paganism that defined itself by its antagonism towards Christianity and the Christian churches. For that reason alone, Pagans such as Jakob Wilhelm Hauer were deterred from joining the NSDAP, viz a party advocating positive Christian values. Parts of the so-called old-*völkisch* wing of the Pagan movement consequently addressed reproaches to the Nazi leadership of maintaining close relations with the churches and their non-Nordic worldview.

At Whitsun 1934, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Glaubensbewegung went from a confederation of Pagan groups and individuals to a genuine religion. For the discussion of ideological and organisational issues a second convention was arranged ten months after the Eisenach gathering in the village Scharzfeld in the southern Harz region north of Eisenach from 18–21 May. On Whitsunday, some 500 people participated in a religious ceremony that was held in front of a cave previously used as "stone church" by the Nordungen group. Again the community was caught by a strong communal spirit and sense of togetherness. All separating problems were deferred and the urgent necessity of a religious unity caught hold of the attendants. At the end of the meeting, each individual group decided to dissolve in order to give way to a new religion called Deutsche Glaubensbewegung on Whitmonday. For a second time the Tübingen indologist and religious studies scholar Jakob Wilhelm Hauer was proclaimed the Führer of the German Faith Movement. As founder and editor of the journal *Deutscher Glaube*, he had become widely known and was recognised as one of the most prominent Pagan intellectuals in Germany.

In the months that followed the inception of the German Faith Movement, a plethora of activities were launched to press ahead and attract attention. Hauer gave a speech at the famous Berlin Sportpalast with more than 20.000 listeners on 26 April 1935. In it, he blamed the Christian churches for the worldview quarrels of the day. Not Paganism, but the Church was responsible for the fierce rowing that irritated the German public. Its time would expire in the near future and Paganism would take the place Christianity held before. Whereas the German Faith Movement experienced a considerable growth at this time, the figures forwarded to the authorities were nevertheless extremely exaggerated and nothing but wishful thinking. It is a well known fact in the study of religion that new religious movements

8 I have dealt with the dependence of Christianity on the Jewish bloodshed in Horst Junginger, *Die Verwissenschaftlichung der 'Judenfrage' im Nationalsozialismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011), especially p. 41 and p. 413.

possess an intrinsic propensity to overrate their seize and influence as far as possible. While the German Faith Movement enlarged its dimensions to several hundreds of thousands, it had, even in the height of its existence in 1935, not more than five or ten thousand members. Its Nordic core did barely exceed a heterogeneous group of some 2,000 people.⁹ Regardless of that, Count Ernst zu Reventlow (1869–1943), the second Führer of the German Faith Movement after Hauer, did not hesitate to speak of 2.5 million followers.¹⁰ One way to achieve such extraordinary numbers was to equate sympathisers with members and the attendance of public lectures with real or at least with imminent membership. Taking the same line with the opposite intention, the churches overplayed Pagan heathenism too. They declared its existence a danger to the public safety and order and used the opportunity to argue for the preservation of the well-established old system and against government endeavours to decrease their influence and vested rights. Also state agencies had their share in hyping Paganism. Its vociferous activities aroused irritation if not anger and forced them to take appropriate measures to calm down the public turmoil of the “Kirchenkampf”. On the other hand, they could and did use the Pagan anticlericalism as efficient means to discipline the churches and keep them off from criticising National Socialist politics too overtly.

The antagonism between the moderate old and the radical young generation of Pagans provoked a fatal crisis of the German Faith Movement in early 1936. Beyond mere personal arguments, the ideological incoherence regarding the scriptures, rites and doctrines that ought to be considered authoritative soon led to bitter altercations and the collapse of the German Faith Movement. After the decision of the old headmen to vacate their position, a number of minor figures took over responsibility with the aim of bringing Paganism in closer connection with National Socialism and the politics of the day. The result was disastrous. Neither achieved the German Faith Movement a sort of official acknowledgment, nor did it succeed to maintain the religious awakening and the degree of organisation achieved thus far. In fact, the reshuffling of the management structure initiated the final demise in spring 1936. After a life span of less than three years, organised Paganism expired without great sensation. Only some splinter groups succeeded in staying, and the secrete police put these remainders under strict surveillance to prevent them from stirring up troubles.

The German Faith Movement and its Relation with the SS

Jakob Wilhelm Hauer is a good example for the distorted relationship between Paganism and National Socialism and with Paganism and the SS, respectively. While Hauer became a member of the SS and established contacts with its leadership, he would not join the NSDAP before 1937 because of the “positive Christianity” that

9 See for the numbers, Nanko, *Die deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, p. 179.

10 Bartsch, *Die Wirklichkeitsmacht der Allgemeinen Deutschen Glaubensbewegung*, p. 71.

had a prominent place in the party programme opposing his Pagan understanding of life fundamentally.¹¹ As Führer of the German Faith Movement he got in touch with the SS and the secret police already in 1934. Various currents of the free-thought movement had approached him with the wish to affiliate themselves with the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Glaubensbewegung, which promised to afford a safe haven for people with deviant views. Many religious free thinkers were former adherents of the Social Democrats and attached to one of their sub-organisations. Their possible integration into the German Faith Movement understandably raised issues, and they urged Hauer to enter into negotiations with the authorities concerned.

It has to be added here that the development of the “Freireligiöse Bewegung” in the Nazi era is quite intricate. Irrespective of their general inclination towards the political left, a number of religious humanists hoped to survive by way of adaptation to the new system after 1933, while others made ideological concessions up to the degree of alignment. A few of them detected an ideological consensus with the ‘socialist’ elements of National Socialism.¹² Generally, the German Faith Movement appeared to be a place of refuge that could preserve them from persecution. Thus the adjustment strategy of religious freethinkers turned into a total disaster and became the prelude of a broad range of suppressive measures. In the intermediary phase of attraction and repulsion Hauer had to bargain with the responsible persons in the secret service on how to determine the valuable elements among the religious humanists and how to oust the others. He repeatedly met with Heinrich Himmler (1900–45) and Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42) to discuss the problem. Werner Best (1903–89), the ambitious SS and police leader in the wake of these two, had been chosen to enter the German Faith Movement where he acted as a kind of liaison officer. Hauer’s first personal encounter with Himmler and Heydrich took place on 17 April 1934 in Munich and soon later he joined the SS and the SD by handshake with both.¹³ The former Christian missionary to India and Protestant vicar subsequently became a useful informant and collaborator in various respects. Hauer not only placed information and material to the disposal of the secret police, he participated in the brutal oppression of religious dissenters as well. Eventually, he got wrapped in criminal conduct and took an active part in the suppression of the anthroposophical movement.¹⁴

11 For Hauer’s affiliation with National Socialist organisations, see Horst Junginger, *Von der philologischen zur völkischen Religionswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), pp. 124–44.

12 See Horst Junginger, “Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung als ideologisches Zentrum der völkisch-religiösen Bewegung”, in Uwe Puschner and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), pp. 88–96 (65–102). It goes without saying that the non-religious parts of the German free thinkers were persecuted from the very beginning.

13 Junginger, *Von der philologischen zur völkischen Religionswissenschaft*, p. 135.

14 Ibidem, pp. 197–215.

Not surprisingly, these personal relations between Hauer and the top of the SS raised his hopes for the possibility to promote the fortune of the German Faith Movement and to enhance the role of Paganism in Germany by and large. Much to his consternation, the SS was anything but interested in religious or ideological support from his own or any other of the Pagan groups and associations. The two years between his first meeting with Himmler in April 1934 and his resignation from the position of Führer of the German Faith Movement in April 1936 turned out to become a period of progressive disillusion. Neither Himmler nor any other SS leader were interested in responding to the Pagan offer. Even worse, Hauer could not refrain from recognising that rejection described the attitude of the SS much better than mere indifference. Being a diligent informant and collaborator of the SD when Werner Best headed the southwest district of the secret service, Best's successor Gustav Adolf Scheel (1907–79) renounced his further participation straightforwardly. Scheel, who replaced Best in August 1935, justified the termination of Hauer's employment with his Pagan engagement, which he condemned openly. Scheel had a steadfast Protestant and German Christian background and stood in close contact with the Protestant New Testament scholar Gerhard Kittel (1888–48) of the University of Tübingen, where Kittel was one of Hauer's main rivals. Advocating a natural alliance between Christianity and National Socialism, Kittel and Scheel fiercely rejected Hauer's Pagan claim for religious hegemony.¹⁵

Against popular belief neither Himmler nor any other SS leader supported any of the Pagan organisations. The Reichsführer SS rather ordered his command personnel not to coerce their subordinates into quitting the church. He vigorously opposed blasphemous speaking and behaviour in the SS and enforced a strict policy of religious neutrality.¹⁶ Any SS-member impinging upon this imperative would be expelled. Himmler deemed this instruction from 15 September 1934 so important that it had to be read out in front of every SS unit quarterly.¹⁷ That church officials and ministers were disallowed to engage themselves in the SS is general knowledge

15 The world-famous editor of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 'discovered' Christian anti-Judaism now as a chance to excel Paganism. In so doing he tried to establish a new form of scientific antisemitism. See Horst Junginger, "Antisemitismus in Theorie und Praxis" in Urban Wiesing et. al eds, *Die Universität Tübingen im Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2010), pp. 488–90.

16 See his orders from 15 September 1934 and 25 November 1934 displayed in *Dokumente zur Kirchenpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, vol. 2, 1934/35 (München: Kaiser, 1975), p. 170 as well as the interpretation of Wolfram Dierker, *Himmlers Glaubenskrieg: Der Sicherheitsdienst der SS und seine Religionspolitik 1933–1941* (2nd revised edition, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003), p. 87.

17 "Ebensowenig wie der Deutsche jemals für Gewissenszwang gewesen ist, ebenso sehr ist ihm die religiöse Überzeugung und Anschauung seines Nächsten heilig und unantastbar. SS-Angehörige, die sich gegen diese Grundsätze verfehlen, werde ich, sobald ich davon erfahre, aus der SS ausschließen. Dieser Befehl ist allen Stürmen beim Appell zu verlesen. Die Verlesung ist vierteljährlich zu wiederholen" Order from 15 September 1934, *Dokumente zur Kirchenpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, vol. 2, p. 170.

about the Third Reich and its religious policy. But it passed entirely unnoticed that the interdiction applied to Pagan groups as well. Repeating an older statement from 15 October 1934 that required the “honourable retirement” of clerics from the SS, Himmler forbade SS members to adopt a leading function in any Christian or Pagan religious organisation on 20 September 1935, explicitly citing the German Faith Movement as example.¹⁸ Mere membership remained, however, unaffected by the ban for both Christians and non-Christians.

The official proclamation of the Deputy of the Führer Rudolf Hess (1884–1987) from 13 October 1933 played an important role for the determination of National Socialist religious policy. It firmly prohibited discrimination in religious regards. Of course this ‘religious freedom act’, as some contemporaries called it, did not extend to Jews, atheists and other enemies of the folk community. It is therefore deceptive when adherents of the German Faith Movement recorded it as their particular success that eked out with the Hess declaration an edict of religious tolerance.¹⁹ Himmler adopted the Hess rule, which originally was designed for NSDAP members, in the SS. In like manner he stressed the right of every SS member to adhere to a religious belief of his own choice. On 20 September 1935, Himmler declared the Hess communiqué moreover to be the National Socialist version of an old Germanic right of religious liberty. Thus he would not accept any impairment of one’s personal decision of faith. Mocking or deriding the religious commitment of other fellow Germans would not be tolerated and result in the exclusion from the SS.²⁰ The private memoirs of a Christian member of the Waffen-SS in my possession take the same line of arguing.²¹ This pious Methodist and con-

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- 18 “In gleicher Weise verbiete ich mit sofortiger Wirksamkeit jede führende Tätigkeit in irgendeiner sonstigen religiösen oder Glaubensgemeinschaft (z.B. Deutsche Glaubensbewegung usw.)” Order of the Reichsführer SS from 20 September 1935, printed in *Dokumente zur Kirchenpolitik*, vol. 3, 1935–1937 (München: Kaiser, 1994), p. 87.
- 19 Margarete Dierks later iterated this argument in her biography of *Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, 1881–1962. Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1986), p. 236 and p. 270. See my critique in Horst Junginger, “Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung und der Mythos einer ‘dritten Konfession’,” in Manfred Gailus and Armin Nolzen, eds., *Zerstrittene Volksgemeinschaft: Glaube, Konfession und Religion im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), p. 190.
- 20 Himmler’s wording was: “In dieser Verordnung ist die nationalsozialistische Fassung des uralten deutschen Rechts der Glaubensfreiheit verankert. Genau so wie es in der SS nicht geduldet wird, daß irgendein Mann zu irgendeinem konfessionellen Bekenntnis gezwungen oder auch nur gemahnt wird, genauso dulde ich es nicht, daß von irgendeinem SS-Angehörigen die Ansichten und Überzeugungen anderer deutscher Volksgenossen, die ihnen heilig sind, verspottet und verlästert werden. (...) SS-Angehörige, die hier zuwiderhandeln, werde ich, weil sie ungeeignet für die Gemeinschaft und den Orden der SS sind, aus der SS ausschließen.” *Dokumente zur Kirchenpolitik*, vol. 3, p. 87.
- 21 Hermann Duppel, *Mein Leben im Dritten Reich. Zwischen Kirchengemeinde und Waffen-SS* (unpublished typescript), p. 19. The active member of a South German Methodist congregation wrote his memories at the end of the 1990s. My contact with him originated from material

vinced SS soldier had no problems doing his daily Bible reading during his training in the SS barracks München-Freimann. Franz Schönhuber (1923–2005), the founder and chairman of the German right-wing party “Die Republikaner”, made a similar case when he described the punishment of an SS instructor for his animosities against him as a devoted Catholic Waffen-SS member.²²

Far from being an expression of religious tolerance, Himmler’s SS directives were signs of an increasing margin for Pagan and Nordic ideas in Germany. They indicated a better chance for Pagan groups of all shades to come to the fore. Pagans used the opportunity to engage themselves in the SS and related organisations. On the other hand, although they reinforced their position there, Pagans generally remained on the fringe of the society. While they were accepted as normal members in National Socialist organisations, they were still unable to assume responsibility and occupy eminent positions if they persisted to act out their faith resolutely.

3. The Ahnenerbe of the SS

The Formative Phase

In July 1935, Heinrich Himmler, Herman Wirth and a number of other *völkisch* minded National Socialists founded the “Studiengesellschaft für Geistesurgeschichte”, a society for the study of something that could be called the history of primordial ideas. This private association turned into the notorious Ahnenerbe of the SS later on. The additive “ur” was the invention of Herman Wirth, who used the prefix to indicate that the Nordic race was spiritually rooted in prehistoric times, which would be, however, only comprehensible by the “Ursymbolforschung” he had developed. Studying the pictorial, figurative and linguistic symbols as well as other remnants of the assumed primeval religion of the Nordic peoples, Wirth ‘detected’ genetic correlations between all of their members from time immemorial to the present. The Netherlands-born Wirth was a hopeless romantic, whom the twist of fortune afforded the opportunity to become a prominent *völkisch* intellectual for some time. From the National Socialist government Wirth expected backing and patronage of his ideas. He had enough self-confidence to feel that destiny had delegated to him the task of pointing the German people towards a bright future. While Wirth unhesitatingly grasped at National Socialist race studies to corroborate his thoughts, he first and foremost remained a *völkisch* visionary with predominantly spiritual goals, consecrating his entire life to the spreading of his ur-symbolic findings without considering the consequences for his or the life of his family. His symbol or emblem studies were religious motivated and never quite at home in a

on the SS-Obergruppenführer Gottlob Berger (1896–1975) I rendered to Mr. Duppel. Berger was the founder of the Waffen-SS and one of the closest associates of Himmler.

22 Franz Schönhuber, *Ich war dabei* (München: Albert Langen, 1981), pp. 49–50.

scholarly setting. Wirth aimed at the spiritual renewal of a languishing German society, which he believed was trapped in a state of decay and despair after the lost war. As one of the numerous seers and prophets brought forth by the Weimar republic, Wirth predicted Germany's total downfall, though simultaneously commending the application of his insights as aiding remedy. To return to the ancestral heritage, the "Ahnenerbe" of the Nordic race, was in his opinion the one and only possibility for its maltreated members to recover and regain the previous strength and glory of the German Reich.

Against this backdrop, it was little wonder that Wirth corresponded with the *völkisch* religious awakening in 1933 and aligned himself with the emerging German Faith Movement. As member of its inner circle ("Führerrat") he took an active part in the early discussions about how to proceed further with the Pagan departure. Hauer's journal *Deutscher Glaube*, which likewise tried to answer that purpose, appeared since 1934 in association with a group of *völkisch* characters, among them Herman Wirth.²³ As it proved beyond his reach to play the first fiddle, Wirth refused any further engagement in the German Faith Movement. Typical of almost all *völkisch* prophets, his sense of mission and energetic self-consciousness did not allow any submission to the ideas of others. Hence it proved a fluke of history when he received the opportunity of meeting Heinrich Himmler in person at a party of the Nazi publicist Johann von Leers (1902–65), who was married to his former secretary, in October 1934. The alliance with Himmler helped Wirth to escape from at least some of the quarrels evoked by Pagan evangelism and held him aloof from the problems usually connected with the founding of a new religion. The Ahnenerbe provided much better prospects for Wirth for bringing his spiritual life reform ideas to fruition.

Himmler wholeheartedly consented to Wirth's various manifestations of cultural criticism, to his predilection of all things Nordic as well as to his tremendous veneration of the old Germans. However, the dispute about the *Ura Linda Chronicle*, a book Wirth published in 1933, raised the issue of how to assess his scientific and other reputation. Another criticism originated from the fact that Wirth had received money from Jews who previously facilitated some of his projects. His engagement for the German Faith Movement awakened further suspicion and even National Socialists took umbrage at his bearing as herald of old-Germanic heathendom. Activities initiated in the orbit of Alfred Rosenberg to gain ideological hegemony in National Socialist Germany pushed the Ahnenerbe to reconsider Wirth's role. Especially when it came to the question of raising public support, his position became questionable. Wirth's Pagan commitment fuelled the impression of an odd religious sectarianism and compromised Himmler's standing in the Nazi hierarchy. Regardless of his general sympathies for Wirth's fertile imaginations, Himmler had to dis-

23 Wirth contributed a small article to the second issue: "Die Zeit Gottes", *Deutscher Glaube* 2 (1934), pp. 71–4.

tance himself from the *völkisch* reformer. Hence he had no other choice but to disband the connection with him.

The Transformation of the Ahnenerbe into a Think Tank

The change of the Ahnenerbe from an association of people with crude ideas towards a scientific brain trust became visible when Himmler replaced Wirth by a young and ambitious professor of Indian and Iranian studies at the University of Munich, Walther Wüst (1901–93), in February 1937. Ensuing from a confidential encounter between Himmler, Wüst, Bruno Galke, the financial officer of Himmler's personal staff ("Persönlicher Stab") and Wolfram Sievers, the managing director of the Ahnenerbe, in Himmler's private residence in Tegernsee in August 1938, Wüst was nominated the new president of the Ahnenerbe. Only a month after Wüst's appointment, Wirth consequently was relegated to the position of an honorary president. Mainly for better fundraising opportunities, Wüst and Himmler later changed their positions, making Wüst curator of the Ahnenerbe as of 1 January 1939. According to the protocol of that notable Tegernsee meeting, Himmler assigned Wüst a number of orders, for instance the monitoring of Wirth's activities and literary output. A lengthy Odal manuscript of Wirth appeared even in Himmler's perception a poor piece of work that needed comprehensive revision to prevent the Ahnenerbe from criticism or amusement. Vice versa Wirth had to restrict himself to his symbol studies and to approach Wüst before publishing any of his writings.²⁴

In marked contrast to Wirth, Wüst had no penchant for a Pagan re-modelling of the world. Being raised in a traditional Protestant family, Wüst never turned away from the religion of his youth like so many leaders of the *völkisch* movement did, who, in fact, frequently were Christian converts or disappointed would-be renovators of their former religious peer groups. Wüst remained in a Protestant milieu, giving, for example, a lecture at the annual convention of the East Asia Mission, one of the leading Protestant missionary societies, in Basle in 1931. Several attempts by Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, a previous member of the competing Pietist Basle Mission, to draw Wüst over to the German Faith Movement met his growing disgust. Wüst's scholarly occupation with the culture and religion of India had brought him at the end of the twenties closer to the thinking of Herman Wirth, whom he admired during a couple of years for his elaborate cultural criticism. Realising in Tegernsee the opportunity to advance to the top of an undeniably influential organisation, Wüst did not hesitate a second to separate from the founder and spiritual rector of the Ahnenerbe, who had been a source of his intellectual inspiration in the past. In bitter disappointment, Wirth quit in December 1938.

24 See for Himmler's orders and the context of the Tegernsee discussion, Horst Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler. Walther Wüst and the Aryan Tradition", in *ibidem*, ed., *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 121–2.

Six months earlier, Wüst had given a detailed report about the actual state of affairs declaring that the Ahnenerbe, which had started with five divisions in 1935, now consisted of twenty departments and seventy-two collaborators, a number that doubled by the end of the war.²⁵ A great part of the Ahnenerbe research had a traditional academic or philological-historical orientation. There was no single institute mandated with religious tasks, although a particular branch on the spiritual roots of the Indo-Germanic or Aryan race existed. It was headed by Otto Huth (1906–98), an early follower of Herman Wirth, who did his habilitation under Jakob Wilhelm Hauer at the University of Tübingen in 1938.²⁶ As member of a circle occupied with the work of the German philosopher and psychologist Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), Huth belonged to the working community of the German Faith Movement for a short period of time. When I visited him in the mid-1990s, he strongly emphasised the scientific context of his Ahnenerbe affiliation. Understandable as such an opinion was, it inverted the truth, seeking to obscure the political and ideological dimensions of his commitment. However, Huth's work for the Ahnenerbe apparently lacked a concrete religious agenda.

Ahnenerbe Activities: From Ideology towards Crime

The Ahnenerbe constitution of 1937 proclaimed three main objectives: First, to explore the space, spirit and deed of the Indo-Germans, second, to spread relevant research findings among the German people and, third, to activate all fellow Germans to participate in these endeavours.²⁷ Any concentration on or even mention of specific religious goals is absent. Central to the Ahnenerbe programme was, by contrast, the development of a scientific worldview that had two primary functions: to obtain general acceptance as ideological centre of National Socialism and to be used for the worldview training of SS members in an analogous form to the efforts of the Amt Rosenberg for the NSDAP. Such being the case, Himmler tried to infiltrate the university system and to affect the Third Reich's cultural policy with a race-based *völkisch* conception of history to be worked out by the Ahnenerbe. Instead of rather absurd research plans such as the World Ice Theory of the Austrian engineer Hanns Hörbiger (1860–1931), the search for gold in German rivers, the breeding of frost-resistant horses or a Germanic system of birth control, other endeavours came to the fore. The execution of explorations, in particular, gained

25 A diagram of the various Ahnenerbe departments as of 1943/44 is to be found in *ibidem*, p. 142.

26 For Huth, see Horst Junginger, *Von der philologischen zur völkischen Religionswissenschaft*, pp. 248–268 and *idem*, “Huth, Otto” in Ingo Haar and Michael Fahlbusch, eds., *Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften* (München: Saur, 2008), pp. 246–49.

27 See Michael H. Kater, *Das ‘Ahnenerbe’ der SS 1935–1945. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (München: Oldenbourg, 1997, 1st German edition 1974), p. 85 and the introduction to the NS 21 inventory of the German Federal Archives: www.bundesarchiv.de.

momentum and drew from Ahnenerbe resources. Petroglyphs in Sweden (Bohuslän), prehistoric rock inscriptions in Italy (Val Camonica) or the Nordic heritage of the Roman Empire in the Middle East caught the attention of Ahnenerbe scholars. The 1938–39 Tibet expedition led by the zoologist and SS officer Ernst Schäfer (1910–92) was considered a huge success and achieved enormous public interest.²⁸ A documentary of the expedition created a sensation when it was shown publicly for the first time in Munich on 16 January 1943.

Prior to the afternoon premiere of this film titled “Gehemimis Tibet”, the already existing Ahnenerbe department for Inner Asian Research was transformed into a “Sven Hedin Reichsinstitut für Innerasien und Expeditionen”. The ostentatious opening ceremony of the new institute named after the world-celebrated Swedish explorer was organised by Wüst in his capacity as scientific director of the Ahnenerbe and principal of the University of Munich. It was accompanied by the bestowal of an honorary doctorate to Hedin. Wüst said in his ceremonial address that the conferment revered Hedin as one of the greatest friends and admirers of Germany abroad. Hedin answered in the affirmative, proving himself a steadfast supporter of the German cause. Ignorant of the looming Stalingrad disaster, Hedin expressed his strong conviction that the victory of the German troops would be imminent. Favourable utterances of the Swedish explorer and widely read author about the political achievements and military capacity of the Third Reich were eagerly received and widely publicised by National Socialist propaganda agencies. Though one might concede a certain degree of political naïveté on Hedin’s part, he had no scruples about praising a terror regime that had attacked almost all European nations and to campaign for its alliance with Sweden. Apart from any Pagan bias, Hedin was focused on the Russian archenemy, whose overthrow would require the unwavering solidarity of all Nordic counterforces. The research into Inner Asia and the institute named after Hedin grew into the largest branch of the Ahnenerbe, though it had to move to an Austrian castle in August 1943 due to the worsening military situation.

Another attempt at spreading and enforcing the Nordic idea was the “Germanischer Wissenschaftseinsatz”, a war project of the SS to implement a new order for the whole of Europe. A special division with the same name was incorporated into the Ahnenerbe scheme in 1942 with its chief Hans Ernst Schneider (1909–99) travelling all over the occupied parts in Europe to establish contacts with Germanophile institutions and people. The activities of the “Germanischer Wissenschaftseinsatz” were geared to strengthen the ideological unity with Nordic nations, main-

28 See the article of Isrun Engelhardt in this volume as well as Christopher Hale, *Himmler's Crusade. The True Story of the 1938 Nazi Expedition into Tibet* (London: Bantam Books, 2003), Wolfgang Kaufmann, *Das Dritte Reich und Tibet. Die Heimat des 'östlichen Hakenkreuzes' im Blickfeld der Nationalsozialisten* (2nd ed. Ludwigsfelde: Ludwigsfelder Verlagshaus, 2010) and Peter Mierau, *Nationalsozialistische Expeditionspolitik. Deutsche Asienexpeditionen 1933–1945* (München: Utz, 2006).

ly Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway. Schneider succeeded in establishing branch offices in Flanders, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Vallonia.²⁹ Beyond the collaboration with like-minded organisations and intellectuals, Schneider's staff intended to recruit volunteers for the German Waffen-SS to fight side by side with their German blood brethren against the Soviet army. Although the Germans concealed their supremacy claims as effectively as possible, there could be no doubt that the influence of collaborationist individuals, institutions and nations would be restricted to a minimum in the Europe to come. After the war, Schneider carved out a successful career as professor of literature at the University of Aachen by assuming the surrogate name Schwerte. It was not until 1995 that his real identity as SS officer and department head of the Ahnenerbe became public.

A noticeable shift away from the humanities and ideological matters towards the natural sciences came to pass after the German invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II. Now, the phrasing of ideology faded from the spotlight making way for the concentration on practical and application-oriented concerns. Under the circumstances of war, worldview themes had to be subordinated to the military imperative. The necessities of a successful warfare, for instance the search for an alternative oil production or the general quest for economic autarky, became much more important than issuing ideological statements. It was not the mythological idealisation of Tibet but a directive of Hitler from 5 April 1942, which resulted in the intensification of the Ahnenerbe work on that region. Only a few days after Hitler's announcement of the strategic summer offensive ("Fall Blau") to proceed further eastwards subsequent to the capture of the Caucasian oil fields, Himmler visited the Ahnenerbe department for research into Inner Asia in Munich and commanded the expansion of that Ahnenerbe focus. All Ahnenerbe enterprises fell within the provision of improving Germany's military strength during the war. With the establishment of the infamous Institute for Military Scientific Research ("Institut für wehrwissenschaftliche Zweckforschung") that conducted medical and other experiments with human subjects, the door to a blending of ideology and crime was pushed wide open.

On behalf of the Ahnenerbe, Sigmund Rascher (1909–45) undertook high-altitude and freezing experiments with inmates of the Dachau concentration camp to detect the maximum height pilots could be subject to as well as the time limit exposure to cold water after downing. Other horrible testing in Dachau included Polygal and blood coagulation experiments. Preparing for chemical warfare, August Hirt (1898–1945) conducted poison and wound experiments in the concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof to develop a treatment of poisoning caused by Lost gas (sulphur mustard). Hirt, a professor of anatomy at the Reich University Strasbourg, provided the first letter of his surname for a special department "Amt H" or "Amt Hirt" set up by Himmler on 7 July 1942 for that kind of Ahnenerbe research. With

29 See Horst Junginger, "Introduction", in *ibidem* ed., *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, p. 75 and for the general context, Kater, *Das 'Ahnenerbe' der SS*, pp. 170–90.

the establishment of a skull and skeleton collection of Jews murdered in advance for their racial examination, Hirt committed one of the most heinous crimes history has ever seen. Shortly after the formation of the “Amt H”, Wüst accompanied Himmler on a visit to Auschwitz in mid-July with the purpose of getting an overview of the situation there and, in all likelihood, also to inspect further research possibilities.³⁰

A Religious Impact of the Ahnenerbe?

Taking a closer look at the Ahnenerbe activities shows very plainly that its intention went into the direction of a scientific worldview and not in that of a religious revivalism. The founding of a new religion with Pagan clerics, old-Germanic rites or the invention of a pantheon of heathen gods and deities was never on the agenda of the Ahnenerbe. Neither would such an endeavour have met the consent of Hitler, who sharply rejected and ridiculed every attempt to reinvigorate the religion of the old Germans, nor would the Ahnenerbe have gotten funding for their projects from state agencies such as the German Research Foundation. Most Ahnenerbe members stood on the payroll of the Reich Ministry of Science and Education, if not directly as university teachers, then indirectly as project employees.

The only person next to Wirth with clear religious or, more precisely, esoteric interests was the Austrian Ariosophist Karl Maria Wiligut (1866–1946), nicknamed “Weisthor” during the time of National Socialism and “Himmler’s Rasputin” after.³¹ As a member of the Edda-Society, Wiligut participated in the foundational meeting of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Glaubensbewegung in Eisenach in July 1933.³² A few weeks later he got in touch with Himmler at a conference of the Nordische Gesellschaft in September. The Reichsführer SS not only took pleasure in him as person, but had also a fancy for his spiritual ideas, which revolved around an age-old Irminic religion destroyed violently during the Christianisation of the Germanic tribes. It was not a coincidence that Wiligut’s Irminism reflected the world tree “Irminsul”, the Ahnenerbe symbol. In Wiligut’s religious conception, a Germanic Krist played the decisive role, having proclaimed his tenets already 12,500 years before the advent of the Christian Christ. Thus, the Church would have adopted Krist’s doctrines and distorted their noble meaning later on. Wiligut claimed to have a particular faculty that allowed him to directly communicate with Krist’s descendants back to the earliest times.

30 Junginger, “From Buddha to Adolf Hitler”, p. 145.

31 See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism. The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935* (London: Tauris, 2012, 1st ed. 1985), pp. 177–91. The subtitle of the paperback edition characteristically changed from indicting a case study to an overview: *Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology*.

32 Nanko, *Die deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, p. 342.

In April 1934, the Austrian mystic was appointed SS Standartenführer and achieved the rank of a SS Brigadeführer in September 1936 two years later. During that time, Wiligut was adopted as a kind of a spiritual advisor to Himmler who let him live out his ideas to a certain degree. Best-known is probably the famous “Totenkopfring”, the death’s head ring of the SS, designed by Wiligut with runic elements as insignia of the old Germanic legacy. Every recipient received an accompanying letter from Himmler, demanding loyalty to the Führer and the duty of its bearer to sacrifice his life for the community if necessary.³³ Originating from his private studies, Wiligut discovered ample evidence of the truth and meaning of the Irminic belief. He also influenced the rebuilding of the Wewelsburg castle that, according to his wishes, were to be transformed into an order-castle and ceremonial focus of the SS.³⁴ But Wiligut’s ideas never materialised. The assumption of the Wewelsburg as a spiritual centre of the SS is a modern myth without substance, although it is prevalent in esoteric and neo-Nazi circles. In a similar way, the famous Externsteine, an impressive rock formation in the Teutoburg Forest near Detmold, attracts the fantasies of like-minded people. Despite great efforts, no proof has been ever found to give evidence for its alleged function as pre-Christian centre of a Nordic or Pagan religion. In November 1938, Himmler learned that Wiligut had spent several years in a psychiatric hospital in Salzburg, diagnosed with megalomania and schizophrenia. This knowledge determined Wiligut’s influence in the Ahnenerbe. While his drawback in August 1939 was justified with age and poor health to the outside, the dismissal actually resulted from mental disorder and alcohol abuse.

Wiligut’s views were even more bizarre than those of Wirth, though they showed similarities in form and content. The rivalry between them led to mutual criticism and the disparagement of their respective teachings. Wiligut alias Weisthor can in no way be regarded as characteristic of or relevant to the Ahnenerbe scheme. His religious thoughts proved to be still less generalisable than Wirth’s. Certainly Himmler had a particular taste for the belief system and religious rites of the old Germans, the Indo-Germans or the Aryans. Yet he exercised constraint in that regard and was never so imprudent to crusade for this predilection too offensively. He would have exposed himself to ridicule if someone like Wiligut would have been identified with him or if the Ahnenerbe would have applied for a funding for his Irministic nonsense. On that account, Wüst turned out to be the right person to

33 Himmler’s order dated 10 April 1934. See for its wording, Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler. Eine Biographie* (München: Siedler Verlag, 2008), p. 298 and p. 850.

34 Cf. Jan Erik Schulte, ed., *Die SS, Himmler und die Wewelsburg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), in particular Daniela Siepe, “Die Rolle der Wewelsburg in der phantastischen Literatur, in Esoterik und Rechtsextremismus nach 1945” (pp. 488–512) as well as Karl Hüser, *Wewelsburg 1933-1945. Kult- und Terrorstätte der SS. Eine Dokumentation* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifatius Druckerei, 2nd ed. 1987) and the excellent catalogue of the permanent exhibition of the Wewelsburg District Museum: Wulff E. Brebeck et al., eds., *Endzeitkämpfer. Ideologie und Terror der SS. Begleitbuch zur Dauerausstellung in Wewelsburg* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2012).

prevent Himmler and the Ahnenerbe from sliding into the vortex of *völkisch* sectarianism with its manifold figments of a Nordic imagination running to leaf.

Generally, one can say that the religious character of the Ahnenerbe is a fiction of later times. The major part of the Ahnenerbe work was directed towards the ideological substantiation of the political purposes of National Socialism. Its religious undercurrents, though existing, failed to surface and determine the Ahnenerbe agenda. Even the belief in the strength and heritage of the Nordic race was not particularly religious, but served the old German wish to dominate Europe. Another question is of how to evaluate the success of the Ahnenerbe quest for ideological hegemony within the Third Reich. The wishful thinking of figures like Wirth and Wiligut can hardly be taken as proof of the Pagan background of the Ahnenerbe, the SS or of National Socialism as such. It is quite evident that the Ahnenerbe efforts to attain a prerogative of interpreting the proper meaning and consequences of the ideology of National Socialism were unsuccessful. Instead of surmounting the polycratic system of power and ideology characterising Nazi Germany, the Ahnenerbe contributed to its augmentation. Other institutions within the scope of the universities or the NSDAP succeeded pretty well in denying the Ahnenerbe demand for interpretational sovereignty. At the end of the war, most of its projects had come to a halt except for the military scientific research. While the general impact of the Ahnenerbe had been downplayed before the appearance of Kater's dissertation in 1974, its influence is considerably exaggerated in our days. This particularly holds true for a non-scholarly occupation with the occult background and esoteric meaning of the Ahnenerbe.

Building on earlier publications, which address the 'secret history' of the Third Reich, a whole genre of Nazi occultism with books, films, games etc., has emerged in the recent past, a significant portion of which deal with the Ahnenerbe and its assumed clandestine setting. Noteworthy examples are the video games *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, a first-person shooter released in 2001 that refers to the occult forces of the Ahnenerbe and includes an actor with the name Karl Villigut, and *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* from 2009, an action-adventure video game featuring Ernst Schäfer's Tibet expedition. The anime *First Squad: The Moment of Truth* is a Russian-Japanese coproduction, also from 2009, directing the supernatural powers of the Ahnenerbe and its efforts to raise an army of crusaders from the Order of the Sacred Cross.³⁵ The popular role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu*, which had its 30th anniversary in 2011, deals with magical capacities fostered by the Ahnenerbe. Neofolk bands such as *Blood Axis* (Michael Moynihan, Annabel Lee) draw on elements of the Ahnenerbe ideology to frame their production. The Austrian martial or post-industrial band *Allerseelen* (Gerhard Petak) uses the black sun of the Wewelsburg as cover emblem and poems of Karl Maria Wiligut as textual basis for its songs. Another CD of *Allerseelen* with the title "Neuschwaben" has its focus on the German

35 An anime is a Japanese animated film or style of motion-picture animation.

Antarctic expedition to New Swabia in 1938/39. Many other patterns of an omnipresent Nazi mysticism could be added. Particularly the new media provide a fertile environment for these kinds of fantasies. Being new in form, they share, however, constitutive elements of older conspiracy theories that succeeded to outlive the defeat of National Socialism.

Attempts to illuminate the supposed esoteric or occult background of National Socialism have become very popular but usually lack historical and scientific grounding. Instead of explaining the spiritual underground of Nazism, they just recount earlier guesswork without omitting the chance to enrich old with new fantasies contingent upon one's personal taste. In addition to mere religious and historical speculations, many of these self-appointed experts act from a certain sympathy for the political system involved. This holds particularly true for the "Ahnenerbe in fiction" genre. While such a bearing fits quite well to Wiligut's, Wirth's and other *völkisch* luminaries' religious ideas, it is worse than useless, in fact wholly detrimental, to a scientific study of their real meaning and impact. Serious scholars probably shy away from delving into the fantastic worlds created by the theoreticians of the heathen fringe, knowing that an equally strenuous and boring work is awaiting them. And on the level of later rehash, things are deteriorating even more. Thus National Socialist Paganism and its muddy subsoil tend to attract the fascination of like-minded people rather than scholarly interests.

4. The General Irrelevance of Paganism

Vain Hope

With the National Socialist takeover of power, Pagan hopes for more influence and a greater share mushroomed. For the first time ever Pagans thought to have good reason to expect an end of their marginalisation and becoming a valuable, hopefully even a vital, element of the National Socialist revolution that had been set in motion. To their painful experience none of the anticipations erupting in 1933 came true. There was no single institution or governmental department, which allowed a Pagan influence to spread. The Ministry of Science and Education rejected all Pagan ambitions of getting involved in matters of school and higher education.³⁶ In spite of minor successes at the federal state level, Pagan teaching and teachers continued to be barred from the educational system. Other ministries, but also the NSDAP and the SS, proved to be immune against the wish of Pagan groups to in-

36 Acting in line with his superior Bernhard Rust (1883–1945), Eugen Mattiat (1901–76), a Protestant theologian in charge with the humanities from 1934–37, repelled all Pagan attempts to gain a foothold in educational matters. See Horst Junginger, "Religionswissenschaft", in Jürgen Elvert and Jürgen Nielsen-Sikora, eds., *Kulturwissenschaften und Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2008), pp. 61–63.

filtrate them as well. The overwhelming majority of Germans displayed not only a firm reservation but were more often than not uncompromisingly dismissive of Paganism and its proselytization endeavours. Membership figures of Pagan organisations remained extremely low. It was only because of their assertive propaganda that some of the Nordic, Germanic or other heathen associations were apprehended in public.

The early breakdown of the German Faith Movement provides convincing evidence that, even under favourite circumstances, Pagans failed to expand their influence on a larger scale. They were even unable to attain ideological coherence in their own ranks and unite more than a part of its spectrum. On these grounds it proved hopeless to draw level with the churches and become a force to be reckoned with. In fact, Paganism remained the outsider phenomenon it had been all along, without the least prospect of parity with its Christian opponents. To acknowledge this simple truth should, however, not delude us into underrating the religious altercations that affected National Socialist Germany. The founding of the German Faith Movement can be seen as a significant expression of religious change, showing that it was indeed possible to fuse parts of the Pagan awakening. It depends on perspective, how the meaning of the word "significant" is assessed at this point.

As Pagans saw it, the Christian primacy in Germany had not only suffered a heavy setback but was on the edge of being overthrown. It could be only a matter of time before they would supersede and take the place of their adversaries. The representatives of the church conversely overstated the impact of Paganism. With the aggressive evangelism and vile demeanour of its representatives in mind, they accused Pagans not only of their anti-Christian propaganda, but of corrupting moral standards and of undermining the ethical foundations of state and society on the whole. On that basis it is hardly possible to achieve a sound estimation of the real influence of *völkisch* Paganism. Both accounts show great deficits and consequently entail biased judgments. The real situation had little to do with the soaring dreams of Pagans and the agitation of the churches against them. Putting ideology aside, it is beyond question that Paganism continued to be a negligible seize from the very beginning until the very end of the Nazi reign. The notoriety of its existence did not result from factual evidence, but from the ideological uproar its propagators and adversaries brought about. Historical scholarship has the task to objectify these turbulences and put them into perspective.

Statistical Evidence

Basic statistical data evince that Pagans miserably failed to reach more than a tiny part of the population with their ideas of a Nordic or Indo-Germanic religion. The population censuses of 16 June 1933 and 17 May 1939 display practically no difference regarding their size. The general distribution of 95 per cent Christians and 5

per cent non-Christians did not change either. In 1933, 95.2 per cent of an overall population of 65.2 millions belonged to a Christian church. The remaining 4.8 per cent consisted of Jews (0.8), unbelievers without any religious affiliation (3.7), people making no statement (0.1) and 0.2 per cent or 153,152 persons believing in another than the Christian or Jewish religion.³⁷ The greatest change from 1933 to 1939 concerned the Jews who suffered bisection from 0.8 to 0.4 per cent, owing to an increasing policy of expulsion. Six years after the Nazis had seized power, the heathen fringe was still confined to a small subgroup within the small group of about 5 per cent of people not affiliated with either the Protestant or Catholic churches. The chart on the following page clearly illustrates that Christians continued to form the absolute majority of the now roughly 80 million residents of the German Reich.³⁸

During the war, the ratio shifted even further to the benefit of the churches. Because the territories occupied by the German Wehrmacht had an overwhelming Christian preponderance, the percentage of Pagans decreased correspondingly. A Catholic compendium published in 1943 noticed with great satisfaction that among the now 96 million inhabitants of "Groß-Deutschland" 48 millions were Catholics and only 45 million Protestants. Adding Alsace-Lorraine, Luxembourg and the "Generalgouvernement" with alone 9 million Catholics to the balance, the altercation would have been even more perceivable.³⁹ The Catholic statisticians expected the total size of all Christians to reach 105 million people in the near future, among them 59 million Catholics and 46 million Protestants, which meant that Catholics then would have succeeded to outnumber Protestants. Speaking of the Christian share in Germany or Greater Germany respectively, involves numbers at the level of 75 million prior and 100 million during World War II. Pagans, on the other hand, barely exceeded a few thousands with an unambiguous tendency towards declining. With them, evidently, waging war would have been impossible.

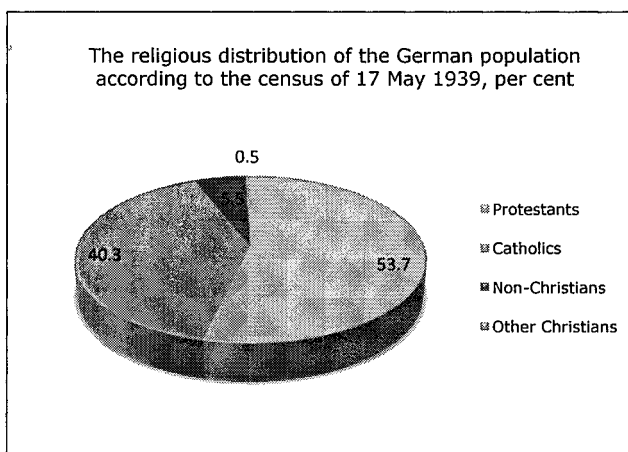
37 See for the 1933 figures the official *Statistik des Deutschen Reiches*, vol. 451-3 (Berlin: Verlag für Sozialpolitik, Wirtschaft und Statistik, 1936), p. 3/7. For the whole German Reich only 34 groups with an Aryan or Germanic orientation are listed in the appendix (ibidem, p. 3/73); most of them did, if at all, not exceed a few hundred members.

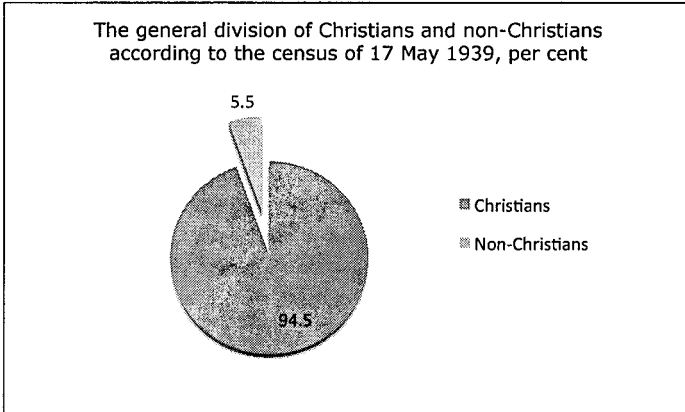
38 The numbers originate from the official census report published in Statistisches Reichsamts, ed., *Wirtschaft und Statistik* 9-1 (1939), p. 173.

39 *Kirchliches Handbuch für das katholische Deutschland*, vol. 22 (Köln: J. P. Bachem, 1943), p. 158f.

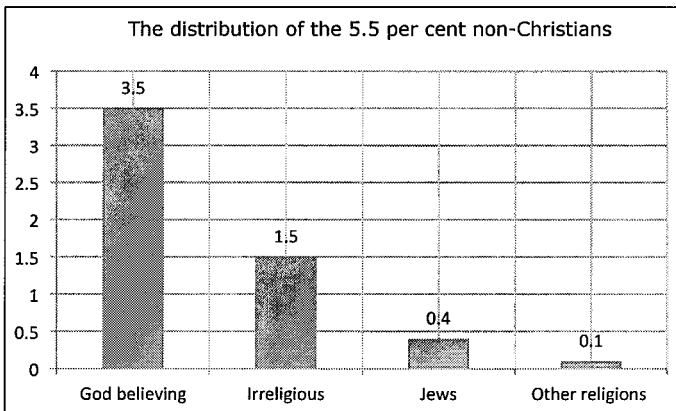
The religious distribution of the German population
according to the census of 17 May 1939

| Persons altogether | Figures | Percentages |
|--|------------|-------------|
| Members of a church, religious association or a worldview community on religious grounds | 75,393,799 | 95.0 |
| Namely: | | |
| Members of the Protestant churches and denominations | 42,636,218 | 53.7 |
| Members of the Roman Catholic Church | 31,943,932 | 40.3 |
| Other Christians | 419,612 | 0.5 |
| Jews | 307,614 | 0.4 |
| Members of other non-Christian religious associations and worldview communities on religious grounds | 86,423 | 0.1 |
| God believing | 2,745,893 | 3.5 |
| Irreligious | 1,208,005 | 1.5 |
| Without statement | 27,584 | 0.0 |
| Total population | 79,375,281 | 100.0 |





If we have a closer look at the 5.5 per cent or 4,347,935 people outside the churches as of May 1939, this segment mainly consisted of nonbelievers, Jews, other non-Christians and a new group of god believers, namely Germans who regarded themselves as “gottgläubig” (god believing) in a general sense. While the proportional distribution of Christians and non-Christians at a ratio of 95:5 per cent remained basically constant, within the group of non-Christians a noticeable fluctuation occurred. In June 1933, the census had revealed 2.7 million or 3.7 per cent Germans without any religious affiliation who were called “Gemeinschaftslose”, people without a religious community. According to the statistical records, most of them



turned into the “god believing” group six years later. Only 1.5 per cent negated the May 1939 census question about their religious affiliation categorically, saying that they would be irreligious or atheistic. This comes as no surprise, given the general denigration of atheism and a life without religion, god and morals. Irrespective of its particular shape, a general faith in god and divine providence was still considered mandatory for a good German. National Socialism even consolidated this commonplace in motivating a significant part of the group of unbelievers in 1933 to become god believers in 1939. The only other substantial alteration concerned the German Jews. Some fifteen weeks before the outbreak of World War II, a little more than 300,000 Jews (0,4 per cent) lived in Germany. All other religions – including Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Pagans etc. – numbered 86,423 persons or 0.1 per cent of the German population in total. Quite obviously, Paganism did not profit from the Nazi reign.

Talking about Nordic or *völkisch* religions or about Paganism as such, we have to bear in mind that our reference group is made up of less than one one-thousandth of the German population. And from these, generously, 100.000 people, only a small minority belonged to a Pagan organisation. This means that Paganism had no statistical relevance whatsoever. Absolutely nothing had changed from the June 1933 to the May 1939 census in that regard. While heathen associations such as the German Faith Movement and *völkisch* Pagans such as Jakob Wilhelm Hauer or Herman Wirth performed well to create considerable religious uproar, exaltations on one side and fierce rejection on the other, they never had any noticeable impact on the overall development of religion in Germany.

What really indicates a meaningful religious change, though within the narrow bounds of 5.5 per cent of the German population, is the group of 2.7 million or 3.5 per cent god believers. “God believing” was a term introduced by the Reich Ministry of Internal Affairs on 26 November 1936 to substitute the former expression “Dissident” in official documents.⁴⁰ People unaffiliated with a particular denomination now had the chance to eschew their identification with atheism and disbelief. Previously “dissident” was the label for persons who had dissociated themselves from the church, that is from the generally accepted code of behaviour and, in a society with a thoroughgoing confusion of church and state, from the social order as such. From the ministry’s point of view, National Socialists without church affiliation could not possibly be treated as citizens with a subaltern status as it had been the case with the former dissidents. Particularly meant for NSDAP members, the notion “gottgläubig” ought to free all honest people from the smell of a godless atheism. The decree was additionally issued by the Reich Ministry of Church Affairs and the Deputy Führer and Reich Minister without Portfolio Rudolf Hess (1894–1987). Released in the wake of the church struggle, it evidently had anticlerical undertones, since it facilitated the decision of Germans to leave the church.

40 See the entry “gottgläubig” in Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 281–83.

There can be little doubt that a great number of people with Pagan affinities ranked among the god believers after their religious organisations had dissolved. It is also safe to assume that the percentage of Germans stating “gottgläubig” in the 1939 census was significantly higher in the SS, the SD and other Nazi organisations compared to the average population. But also Christians impatient of the Church could feel entitled to draw on the term god believing for their own religious feelings. Church warnings against the use of the designation “gottgläubig” indicate that a number of Christians actually did so. Whereas a general trend towards the unchurched parts of the German society seems to be supported from the 1939 survey, nothing concrete can be said about the religious commitment of those 2.7 million Germans who now chose the term god believing to indicate their religious views. Future research has to gather more material about their motives, social structure, political inclination and possibly new religious ideas and behaviour.

5. Nordic Religion or Nordic Ideology?

A closer examination of the Ahnenerbe from the perspective of the general history of religions leads to contrasting conventional assumptions of the historiography of the church struggle as well as the imaginations of amateur historians engaged with the esoteric underground of National Socialism. It is necessary instead to highlight that the Ahnenerbe of the SS did not pertain to the Pagan movement, which started to evolve in 1933. While there existed links between Ahnenerbe members such as Herman Wirth, Karl Maria Wiligut and Otto Huth with Pagan associations at the beginning, these connections were loose and restricted to individual interests. With the replacement of Herman Wirth with Walther Wüst, of a *völkisch* writer with an aspiring university professor, all attempts to relate the Ahnenerbe work with a Pagan agenda came to naught. Neither had the new Ahnenerbe leadership the founding of a *völkisch* or Nordic religion in mind, nor acted it as spearhead of National Socialist Paganism. Claims that the Ahnenerbe would have been the vanguard of a new anti-Christian counter-religion are false and deceptive in many respects.

Post-war assertions of this type normally take the arguing and behavioural strategies of the former parties involved as *prima facie* evidence and overlook the biased nature of religiously motivated statements directed at their anti-Christian or anti-Pagan opponents, respectively. Another widespread mistake is to measure Paganism with the Christian church model in mind. Its character as a free-floating movement, consisting of various currents and a wide array of religious seekers and seers of all sorts, not only disappears from view then, but raises false associations and appreciations. Religiously deviant behaviour usually sparks backlashes, which go far beyond the realm of religion as such. To use the interpretational framework of Christianity for the assessment of a religion that in almost all regard negated the teaching and organisation of the church fails to take up an objective position and

consequently tends to misjudge the Pagan departure to pastures new. The absence of appropriate theoretical concepts must inevitably result in a simplified if not directly wrong estimation of the syncretistic disposition of Paganism with its great many of modified Christian and para-Christian elements. Pagans had, as all new religions have, to seek for building material wherever they could. It was not only a rhetorical figure to blame church leaders for betraying and distorting the real meaning of Christianity. Such criticism provided them the opportunity to refer to its essential nature and to take from the quarry of the Christian tradition and doctrine whatever stone appeared to be fitting. Denying the church hierarchy's right to determine the proper and discard an improper understanding of what the teachings of Jesus and the bible really meant for the present, was part of the church history from the very beginning and not the invention of Paganism. The equation of National Socialism with an anti-Christian heathendom is probably the most prevalent and most inaccurate conclusion drawn by researchers who, for various reasons, overstate the significance of Paganism on the whole. Their confusion of the seeming and the real is only surpassed by the idea that the muddy subsoil of Paganism, symbolised by weird figures like Guido von List (1848–1919) and Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954) and their even more bizarre religious fantasies, would have been the ground from where the Nazi reign emerged.⁴¹

Historical facts and statistical records point in the opposite direction. To disregard them and to ignore the marginality of Paganism presupposes overemphasising ideology and mistaking religious claims for reality. The right estimation that Pagans lived in National Socialist Germany under relatively favourable circumstances should not lead to the false conclusion as if they would have had the slightest chance to escape their outsider position. In fact, their success was confined to making life more convenient on the margins of the society. Pagans continued to remain a modest troop without any prospect of drawing level with the Christian churches. The census figures of May 1939 speak for themselves in this regard. Passing over the hypothetical question of how the religious state of affairs would have looked like after a German victory, the tendency towards a further decrease of Paganism during World War II cannot be disputed.⁴²

41 The bold statement of the late Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke (1953–2012) that occult ideas of an Ariosophic kind would have characterised National Socialism in general and the Ahnenerbe of the SS in particular is definitely wrong. Ariosophy by no means provides “a model case-study in Nazi religiosity” as he claims. See his preface to the 2004 paperback edition of *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, pp. vi–viii. The book's new subheading *Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (formerly: *The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935*) signifies the author's interest to transform his dissertation, an excellent case study, into an overall explanation.

42 What-if-questions of this type address wishful thinking rather than historical interest. In all probability a new agreement between state and church would have come to pass. It is hardly conceivable that the 95 per cent majority of Christians and more than 100 million Germans could have been marginalised or ironed out by the anti-clerical parts of the Nazi leadership.

The transformation of the Ahnenerbe from a private society under the influence of Herman Wirth and his "Geistesurgeschichte" into a modern brain trust has to be understood in the context of the National Socialist *Gleichschaltung*. Bringing the German society into line meant, in the second half of the 1930s, the elimination of political, economic and ideological obstacles impairing Germany's future attack potential. Religious quarrels threatened that aim and enlarged the fragmentation of the nation in the preliminary phase of the forthcoming war. The Four Year Plan (1936–40) intended securing Germany's military defence capacity, among which the ideological factor had high priority given the fact that the defeat in World War I was ascribed to the lacking unity of the nation. That Herman Wirth and Karl Maria Wiligut were forced to quit the Ahnenerbe in 1939 attests to that overriding principle, moreover showing that a *völkisch* religious agenda was not only unacceptable to the majority of the German population but also to the SS.

Keeping out of the religious war theatre, the Ahnenerbe intentions clearly went into the direction of a conventional think tank. It gathered a group of specialists and scholarly advisors for the ideological support of the political leadership and decision makers. In most cases holding academic positions, Ahnenerbe researchers examined the fundamental principles of the *völkisch* state, referring them to the Nordic race. A combination of basic research and application-oriented projects formed the centre of the Ahnenerbe work. If this confined to the academic standards of the time is another question. Kater, in his dissertation, stated the opinion that at least parts of it took place on a sound basis. But his judgment depended too much on the narrative of the Ahnenerbe members he interviewed. Today's assessments are by contrast consistently adverse, denying the Ahnenerbe any scholarly character.

No matter how flawed we consider the scientific level of particular Ahnenerbe departments or of the Ahnenerbe as a whole, it is safe to say that the ideological justification and practical backing of National Socialist politics stood in the foreground of its interest. Similar to the general development at the universities, the Ahnenerbe attached greater weight on matters of practical concern in the second half of the 1930s, first anticipating and then accompanying Germany's warfare, which went to the expense of ideology proper. The phrase monger had to make way for the specialised expert. To control a steadily growing number of occupied countries entailed a multitude of administrative tasks demanding swift and practical solutions. Long-winded theories about the old-Germans or their Indo-Germanic antecedents were not only futile but even counterproductive in this respect. The need of problem-solving competences recognisably went to the detriment of lofty fantasies and religious conceptualisation of a Nordic *völkisch* kind. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the SS Ahnenerbe did not follow a religious agenda in connection with or only close to the Pagan movement. All suggestions concerning a Pagan, esoteric or occult background have proven unfounded and remained mere speculations without any scientific verification.

Addressing, nonetheless, a possible religious surplus of the Ahnenerbe quest for rooting the German people in a race-based ancestral heritage, it is far better justified to relate it to the context of a new “Gottgläubigkeit”. While the labours of Paganism look like the vain endeavour of filling new wine in old wineskins, the belief in a superior being devoid of particular religious specifications possessed a new and innovative quality. With his non-organised general trustfulness in god, the divine providence or other vague ideas of something beyond the here and now, the National Socialist god believer anticipated a later understanding of religion paraphrased by the sociology of religion as “believing without belonging”. Having faith in an indistinct god supersedes the tutelage of clerics and dogmas and corresponds far better to the spiritual needs of modern man as an individual and religiously autonomous person.

In summary, it can be said that the Ahnenerbe was far away from being a religious organisation or an institution with an esoteric mission. One is well advised to regard it as ideological think tank with a scientific or pseudo-scientific target setting on behalf of National Socialist power politics. Its efforts to substantiate or, better, to invent an Indo-Germanic or Nordic tradition should be understood in terms of a reinforced knowledge for the sake of power and control. If this attempt ought to be rated as relatively successful or relatively inefficient is a question that has to be answered in relation to particular Ahnenerbe projects. Only then can the specific role and significance of the ideological superstructure of the Ahnenerbe be determined more closely. Instead of lumping religion and ideology together, the analytical differentiation between a Nordic, *völkisch* or Indo-Germanic worldview, as expressed by the Ahnenerbe, and a Nordic, *völkisch* or Indo-Germanic religion, as expressed by Paganism, is necessary, promising more insight and bearing greater explanatory power. In between, however, we find an interesting contact zone worth of further studies.

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