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Liberal Studies

Our Lord Hitler: The Historical Basis for the Theocracy in *Swastika Night*

*If I can accept a divine Commandment, it's this one: Thou shalt preserve the species.* (Adolf Hitler, qtd. in Scarlett 394)

Serious critical analysis of Katharine Burdiken's dystopic novel *Swastika Night* began nearly fifty years after it was first published in 1937. The First Feminine Press's publication of its edition in 1985 placed the book and its author squarely into two burgeoning streams of analysis. One stream focuses on the rediscovery of feminist literature written and published during and between the two world wars. The other stream has to do with a new look at dystopic fiction in light of the advent and passing of the year 1984, which served as the setting for George Orwell's famous novel. Though the critical thinking about *Swastika Night* has crossed both of these streams, it has been weighted in the direction of Burdiken's feminist message. Daphne Patai for example, in her Introduction to the 1985 edition, focuses on Burdiken's critique of "gender ideology and sexual politics" (iii). *Swastika Night* provides ample material for this important line of analysis. For example, a woman's lowly place in the dystopic social hierarchy, as well as the fact that she does not have a soul and is not human, is established in the first chapter of the book. But this perspective suggests a limited view of Burdiken's contribution to dystopic literature. Burdiken envisions her state as a theocracy, which provides the very foundation for her dystopia. My aim in this essay is to suggest a reading of the novel based on the primacy of this proposition and that, grounded as it and its fundamental tenets are in the reality of Hitler's place in Germany at the time, the dismal future of *Swastika Night* is all the more realistic and frightening.

Unlike Orwell or Aldous Huxley, Burdiken does not stake the Night in her future on an imaginary cataclysm. Rather, as I shall argue, her dystopia is a plausibly projected consequence of the actual state of things as they were when she wrote. As we shall see, Burdiken's Hitlerism as religion was already nascent in the early 1930s. The preeminence of violence for the Nazis had been established. The fate of women, Jews, and of Christians for that matter, was prefigured. Homosexuality, though publicly condemned, was tacitly tolerated at the highest levels of Nazi leadership, and homoeroticism was portrayed in propagandist art. Even the formal movement to change history, or the public's perception of it, was imminent. All of these elements of the Nazi order are embedded in the theocratic structure of *Swastika Night*.

#### BURDEKIN ESTABLISHES A THEOCRACY

During the worship service at the beginning of *Swastika Night*, Burdiken reveals the theology, based on the deification of Hitler, which rules her Germany. The congregation sings the Creed, "*I believe in God the Thunderer..., and in His Son our Holy Adolf Hitler. Who was not begotten, not born of a woman, but Exploded! From the Head of His Father, He is perfect, the untainted Man-Child, whom we, mortals and defiled in our birth and in our conception, must ever worship and praise*" (Burdiken 6). After thus mimicking the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus, the Creed continues with a Christ-like story of Hitler's holy journey, concluding with the belief that he will come again after all heathens have been converted to Hitlerism. The character of the old Knight, von Hess, who is officiating the ceremony, proceeds to recite the fundamental immutable law of Hitler Society:

*As a Woman Is above a worm,*

*So is a man above woman.*

*As a woman is above a worm,  
So is a worm above a Christian. (7)*

And then, after a ritual warning against race defilement, he delivers the other laws:

*As a man is above a woman,  
So is a Nazi above any foreign Hitlerian.  
As a Nazi is above a foreign Hitlerian,  
So is a Knight above a Nazi.  
As a Knight is above a Nazi,  
So is Der Fuehrer (whom may Hitler bless)  
Above all Knights,  
Even above the Inner Ring of Ten.  
And as Der Fuehrer is above all Knights,  
So Is God, our Lord Hitler, above Der Fuehrer.  
But of God the Thunderer and our Lord Hitler  
Neither is pre-eminent,  
Neither commands,  
Neither obeys,  
They are equal in this holy mystery,  
They are God. (7-8)*

Here Burdiken establishes the theocratic nature and structure of the novel's world. The laws describe a social and religious hierarchy. Moreover, the social or civil law derives from Lord Hitler, or God, and is mediated by the Knights, who serve the law through ecclesiastical and civic functions. Thus, we see von Hess take responsibility for the young Nazi character

Hermann's deposition in the courtroom in addition to overseeing the worship service (40). The central place of religiosity is a distinctive feature of *Swastika Night*.

More popular dystopias, such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*, neither refer to a theology nor describe a deity as guiding the world order. Homage is paid to Orwell's Big Brother as a referent to embody the Party's ideology, not to an actual deity. Likewise, the citizens of Huxley's World State refer to Our Ford and engage in pseudo-religious rituals worshipping the T (as in Model-T), not because Ford is a god, but because World State had inherited its values of mass production and consumerism from the historical Henry Ford. One might argue here that, Burdiken's portrayal of Hitler as a god notwithstanding, my characterization of *Night's* theology is not qualitatively different from what Huxley and Orwell espouse as ideology. Specifically, for example, one might say the content of Hitlerian Creed is just the same as ideology, thus blurring the distinction I make between Burdiken's source of authority and that of Orwell and Huxley. That seems to be Patai's view. For her, Burdiken's cult of masculinity is the most fundamental principle (Patai, "Orwell's Despair" 88). According to this train of thought, the immutable laws of Hitlerism reflect an ideology justifying such a cult, and the religion just serves as another institution that subjugates women in support of masculine supremacy. However, this view disregards the distinctions between religion and ideology, as well as the historical context on which Burdiken draws to articulate her novel's religiosity.

A religion may embody an ideology, or content that could be an ideology outside the religion. One might, for instance, strive to help the poor because one believes in an ideology of social justice based on the equitable distribution of goods. On the other hand, a Christian who is true to her faith may seek to help the poor because she believes there are spiritual consequences for herself and the person she helps. The historical literature on totalitarianism reveals more

refined arguments about the differences between religion and ideology. In her survey of the recent literature, Ulrike Ehret points to the work of George Mosse as “an essential inspiration to the current scholarship of totalitarian culture” (1237). Mosse, a Jew whose family fled Germany in 1933, maintained that fascism was not an “ideology in the traditional meaning of that term, but a faith which could not be explained in rational terms,” and which was created by the participation of people in mass ceremonies, and the repetitious use of symbols and slogans (Mosse 46, qtd. in Ehret 1241). Emilio Gentile extends the notion of fascism as faith to the concept of political religion, which he defines as follows:

a type of religion which sacralises an ideology, a movement or a political regime through the deification of a secular entity transfigured into myth, considering it the primary and indisputable source of the meaning of the ultimate aim of human existence on earth. (328)

A political religion, being secular, occupies a middle space, so to speak, between ideology and spiritual religion. But how are we to make sense of a secular religion? Gentile interprets “religion as a phenomenon that expresses the dimension of the *sacred* as a human experience and, consequently, does not necessarily coincide with the dimension of the *divine*” (364). As Ehret says, secular religion “elevates its principles to the heights of faith” (1242). Thus, secular religion is not to be equated with mere ideology, but neither, in the absence of the divine, does it include a spiritual dimension that we would normally ascribe to religion.

Burdiken however assigns a *spiritual authority* for the laws of Hitlerism. In *Swastika Night*, men are not seeking to subjugate women merely for their own ends; nor do they attend worship services to listen to a recitation of the fundamental law just to experience the sacred. There is an other-world, *divine* consequence for belief in the Creed and adherence to the laws:

once every individual has been converted to Hitlerism, Hitler will reincarnate to complete his salvation of the race (Burdiken 6). Burdiken has not only moved beyond the ideology prevalent in other dystopias, but also beyond the political religion often used to analyze fascism. To substantiate my claim that the power of Burdiken's dystopic theocracy derives from its grounding in reality, we turn to an exploration of the circumstances on the ground in Germany of the 1930s.

#### THE RELIGIOUS NATURE OF NAZI GERMANY

Unlike Burdekin's world, Nazi Germany was not formally governed as a theocracy. The government was a civil authority based on a constitution, however corrupted the intent of that constitution may have become. To find the seeds of the religion in *Swastika Night*, we must look to the historical person of Adolf Hitler. The first thing to note about Hitler in relation to the incipient religiosity of Nazi Germany is his ability to stir the masses, inciting a rapturous state among those in his audience, through his speaking ability. In the Preface to his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, he thus acknowledges the importance of speech, "I know that fewer people are won over by the written word than by the spoken word and that every great movement on this earth owes its growth to great speakers . . ." (n.p.). Conscious as Hitler was of the importance of speaking, he developed a rhetoric that would encourage reverence and devotion among his followers (Robinson and Topping 195).

Noted journalist H. R. Knickerbocker, who met Hitler many times and had observed him closely since 1923, attested to his successful speaking ability, calling Hitler, "probably the greatest spellbinder of all time. He talked himself into power in Germany and thereafter he talked the great German nation into becoming his blindly obedient and fanatically loyal Herculean

slave” (38). On moving the masses, Knickerbocker said he was “the most effective mob master ever to step on a platform. He [swept] his audience with him” (39). Young Alfons Heck, in attendance at the Day of Hitler Youth during the Nuremberg Party Congress in 1938, gives a more personal account of an emotionally compelling speech Hitler gave there to 80,000 boys and girls. After the speech, “[w]e erupted into a frenzy of nationalistic pride that bordered on hysteria. For minutes on end, we shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: *Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!* From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul” (Heck 23). The personal experiences of Knickerbocker and Heck captured what was for Gentile an essential manifestation of the political religion emblematic of fascism:

In the totalitarian State, civil life was a continuous spectacle, where the fascist new man was swept away in the flow of orderly collective existence, in the re-enactment of rites, in displaying and worshiping symbols, in the constant appeal to collective solidarity to the point of mystic fusion, at least in peak moments, of psychological and emotional ecstasy, of one’s own individuality with the unity of the nation and the race through the magical meditation of the Leader. (Gentile 339)

At a minimum then, we have established the presence of secular religious conditions in Hitler’s Germany. The validity of my claim that the germ of Burdiken’s dystopian theocracy was present in Germany will depend upon whether a spiritual religion was also present in some form. To put the question another way: was Hitler indeed a spiritual leader, which could justify his future deification by Burdiken?

*Hitler as Messiah.*

In 1938, Knickerbocker visited the psychiatrist Carl Jung for his insight into what made the dictators tick. Much of Dr. Jung's "diagnosis" of Hitler was couched in spiritual or religious terms. Jung noted, for example, that many Nazis were then referring to Hitler as the Holy Ghost and a prophet (Knickerbocker 54). As George Scarlett points out in his analysis of Hitler's faith, Hitler himself had a strong sense of his divine role as "an instrument of Providence. His self-image as an instrument of Providence became, then, [a] core image defining his faith" (398). Jung also understood that Hitler's ability to tap the feelings of every German was at the heart of his spiritual power. According to Knickerbocker, Jung said:

"Hitler is the mirror of every German's unconscious . . . . He is the loud-speaker which magnifies the inaudible whispers of the German soul until they can be heard by the German's conscious ear. He is the first man to tell every German what he has been thinking and feeling all along in his unconscious about German fate, especially since the defeat in the World War, and the one characteristic which colors every German soul is the typically German inferiority complex, the complex of the younger brother, the one who is always a bit late to the feast. Hitler's power is not political; it is magic." (Knickerbocker 46)

Here we see Hitler's connection with another core image of his faith, the Volk — the German community for which the individual must subordinate his own interests. This is the key to understanding Hitler's drive for the purity of the race. For as he says in *Mein Kampf*, the "self-sacrificing will to give one's personal labor and if necessary one's life for others is most strongly developed in the Aryan. The Aryan is not greatest in his mental abilities as such, but in the extent



of his willingness to put on his abilities in the service of the community" (142). And so, in the words of historian Joachim Fest:

[Hitler's] sincerest and most solemn thought, . . ., his one positive concept, was this: to gather again the Aryan blood that had wasted itself . . . and to guard the precious grail for all time in the future, thus becoming invulnerable and master of the world. All the calculations of power tactics and all cynicism stopped short of this vision. (Fest *Hitler* 533)

Hitler was on a messianic mission to conquer the world and to literally sow the seeds of a pure Aryan race, which alone had the capacity to realize the best sort of society for mankind.

Hitler's personal faith was the foundation for a religion, which Knickerbocker and Jung discussed as Hitlerism during their conversation. Jung is reported to have said the following:

"Hitler's 'religion' is the nearest to Mohammedanism, realistic, earthy, promising the maximum rewards in this life, but with a Moslem-like Valhalla into which were the Germans may enter and continue to enjoy themselves... [I]t occurs to me that the religious character of Hitlerism is also emphasized by the fact that the German communities throughout the world far from the political power of Berlin, adopted Hitlerism. Look at South America." (Knickerbocker 49)

The Nazi state essentially demanded both temporal and spiritual power. Therefore, it is not so far-fetched to consider that had Germany prevailed in World War II, the evolution of something like Burdiken's theocracy could have ensued. Having established the credibility of Burdiken's theological foundation for *Swastika Night*, we turn now briefly to the extant conditions underlying her treatment of violence, Christians, homosexuality and the corruption of history.

*Historical Seeds of Burdiken's Elements of Hitlerism.*

The foundational principles and fundamental tensions in Burdiken's dystopia are likewise to be found already, at least in germinal form, in Hitler's Nazism. Burdiken's Hitlerian creed closes with the belief "in pride, in courage, in violence, in brutality, in bloodshed, in ruthlessness, and all other soldierly virtues" (6). The virtues cited could have been drawn almost verbatim from Hitler's own words in speaking about his educational philosophy.

My pedagogy is hard. The weak must be hammered away. In my castle of the Teutonic Order a youth will grow up before which the world will tremble. I want a violent, domineering, undismayed, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once more flash from its eyes. (qtd. in *Fest Face of the Third Reich* 233)

This description so accurately sums up the basest qualities of Burdiken's young Nazi, Hermann, particularly the kind of violence with which he attacks the young boy in the woods (Burdiken 33-4). Like Burdiken's good Nazi, Hitler's use of violence served to model his pedagogical injunction. Early in his ascendancy, he used the force of his Brownshirts to round up communists and force them into his first concentration camps. Within a year, he further demonstrated his ruthlessness by turning on his friend, Ernst Röhm, and other Storm Troopers leaders in the Night of the Long Knives (Ingrao 5). The subsequent litany of Nazi violence, from the cruelties of the Polish ghettos to the inhumane brutality of the concentration camps, is well documented and need not be recited here.

Though the persecution of Jews is well known, the case of Hitler's persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is instructive for what it portends for all other religions under Hitlerism.

First we note the behavior of the Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches in Germany. The Protestant church had been influential in the Imperial government. The Weimar Republic, however, was more agnostic about its recognition of the authority of different denominations. Many clergymen in the Protestant church, “hoping for restoration of its own privileges through a new political and national power . . ., saw in Hitler a ‘great man sent by God’ — a man who would introduce the birth of a new Protestant Germany” (Yonan 311). The Catholic Church, on the other hand, supported the Weimar Republic and initially rejected the National Socialists. Within months after Hitler took power, the Church completely switched its position and entered a special agreement with Hitler in an attempt to secure its future. As Yonan points out, “[t]his was a mistake since Hitler had no intention of keeping any agreements” (312). Furthermore, both the Protestant and Catholic Churches tacitly condoned the persecution of Jews and other groups, partially justifying, and perhaps motivating Burdiken’s position that Christians were responsible for the extermination of Jews. The resistance of Jehovah’s Witnesses represents a special case of Christian denominations. Witnesses were virtually unanimous in their immediate resistance to Hitler’s rise and the Nazi regime. Retribution was swift. One scholar noted, “[o]f the more than 20,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses [in Germany] in the year 1933 . . ., almost one out of two was arrested . . . [and a] total of 6,019 were put in prisons concentration camp” (Yonan 310). With the advent of Hitlerism, there could be no space for any other religion. Jews are nonexistent in *Swastika Night*, and after 720 years of evolution, Burdiken’s immutable law that a Christian is below a worm is quite imaginable.

Of the homoeroticism and homosexual inferences in *Swastika Night*, one could rightly say that they are logical consequences of the extreme devolution of the cult of masculinity to the point where women are no more than animals. Even so, we need not abandon our project of

seeking the seeds of this theme the circumstances surrounding Hitler's ascendancy. Indeed, one of the early founders of the Nazi party, and for some time one of Hitler's closest friends, Ernst Röhm, was blatantly homosexual. According to Knickerbocker:

[Röhm] as the head of 2,500,000 Storm Troops had surrounded himself with a staff of perverts. His chiefs . . . , commanding units of several hundred thousand Storm Troopers, were almost without exception homosexuals. Indeed, unless a Storm Troop officer were homosexual, he had no chance of advancement. All this was known to every intelligent observer in Germany and of course was known in every detail to Hitler. (34)

After Hitler turned on Röhm and the other leaders of the Storm Troopers in 1934, homosexual men in particular were mercilessly persecuted and abused. Yet, until the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler had protected Röhm from arrest and prosecution under long-standing laws and Nazi party policy. Subsequently official party policy took a 180 degree turn. Hence, Burdiken's Hitlerian creed names Röhm as one of the four arch-fiends defeated by Hitler (6). The new anti-homosexuality policies influenced the official state view of art, particularly depictions of the male body. As Pursell articulates in his essay "Queer Eyes and Wagnerian Guys", efforts to model images of the masculine form to idealize virtues of strength and virility were intended at the same time to denigrate, or even demonize, any effeminate traits, which were associated with homosexuals and Jews. Consequently, though "the Third Reich attacked homosexuality, . . . the art it endorsed was filled with images of male bonding and muscled bodies" (Pursell 134). "In the case of the hypermasculine art of the Third Reich, a gay reception . . . can ascribe meaning to these physiques that is diametrically opposed to the homophobic and anti-Semitic signifier ascribed to them by . . . the art critics of the Third Reich who worked very hard to attach those

meanings to the bodies” (134). Party intentions notwithstanding, the meaning and effect were in the eye of the beholder. This dynamic is evident in lesbian and gay activist Sarah Schulman’s observations of homoeroticism in the work of Leni Riefenstahl. In reference to *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl’s documentary of the Nazi party, Schulman claims that its “fascist aesthetic ... may be the single greatest influence, since the Greeks, on gay male representation” (n.p.). The complex issues and ambiguous perceptions surrounding the Nazi propagandist portrayal of male bodies and relationships coupled with the puzzling fact of Hitler’s long-standing tolerance of illicit homosexuality until the purge of 1934 provide the historical basis for Burdiken’s treatment of these issues in her novel.

The future of Burdiken’s dystopia hangs on the fate of von Hess’s secret book and photograph of the real Hitler, which together discredit the whole of known history according to Burdiken’s Hitler Bible. Of course, using a device typical of many dystopic novels, the Hitler Bible contains a false history. Again, my project calls on us to look beyond the literary effects of the device to consider its potential source in the history of 1930s Germany. There is at least one point to note in this regard. That is that by 1937 the National Socialist Teachers Association had already played an important role in providing political guidance to teachers. Then in 1938, official guidelines were issued for teaching history, an excerpt of which follows:

A new understanding of the German past has emerged from the faith of the National Socialist movement in the future of the German people. The teaching of history must come from this vital faith, it must fill young people with the awareness that they belong to a nation which of all the European nations had the longest and most difficult path to its unification but now, at the beginning of a new epoch, can look forward to what is coming full of confidence.

...

. . . [O]nly the important events, those which have a major impact on life, should be portrayed in history lessons. (“Guidelines for Teaching History”)

Though the falsification of history was endemic under Nazi rule, we see that it had become official policy even as Burdiken was writing *Swastika Night*. By the time her story unfolds, seven hundred years have elapsed, over which span we can easily imagine these early efforts to manipulate history would have evolved into the full-fledged denial of history in favor of the self-serving false Hitler Bible.

#### CONCLUSION

We can now return to our original notion that Burdiken bases her novel on a theocracy grounded in the contemporary reality of 1930s Germany, lending a credibility to the story that supports and strengthens its dystopic vision. I have demonstrated that Nazi Germany was spellbound by something beyond ideology, even by something beyond political, or secular, religion. Hitler was a spiritual leader, both seeing himself as such and being seen in that light by the German people. Burdiken took the next logical historic step and made him God. Furthermore, the tenets of Burdiken’s Hitlerian creed and immutable social laws are precisely those that held sway in the Hitlerism of the historical Nazis. Of these fundamental tenets, the only one I have not addressed here is the place of women. The subject has been treated thoroughly by Daphne Patai and others, and to add to their analysis is unnecessary. My view of *Swastika Night* only addresses Patai in so far as she holds the novel’s religion to be merely another institution demonstrative of the cult of masculinity. It is a tribute to Katharine Burdiken’s prescient understanding of the forces at work

during Hitler's ascendance that the strength of her feminist message rather lies in the historical foundation of *Swastika Night's* theocratic setting.

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