

Religion and Resistance: An Analysis on the Influence of Christianity on the White Rose
Resistance Movement

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Because religion often leads people to do seemingly irrational things, understanding a person's religion is essential to understand his/her actions. This was especially true in Nazi Germany when religious conviction led some people to risk their lives to do what they believed was right, others allowed their religion to be transformed and co-opted by the Nazis to fit a political agenda while meeting spiritual needs, and still others simply tried to ignore the cognitive dissonance of obeying an authority that was acting in direct contradiction to a spiritual one. This paper will examine the role of Christianity in resistance movements against the Nazis with a focus on the White Rose in an attempt to explain how members of the same religion could have had such drastically different responses to the National Socialists.

The White Rose resistance movement officially began in June, 1942 when the group's first anti-Nazi pamphlet was published and distributed, although the activities and broodings of the members far predated this event. The movement started at the University of Munich, where a small group of students, most notably Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, Alex Schmorell, Willi Graf, Christoph Probst, and Traute Lafrenz, and their philosophy and musicology professor, Kurt Huber, discovered that they shared negative opinions of the Nazis and began meeting in secret to discuss their dissident political views.ⁱ Some of the most dedicated and passionate members felt the need to spread their ideas throughout the German populace and call upon their fellow citizens to passively resist the Nazis. For this purpose they published seven pamphlets containing philosophical and moral appeals, each ending in a request that the reader make and distribute as many copies as possible. These pamphlets never called for an active uprising of the people to fight against the Nazis, revealing the authors' view that such a revolution would be impossible given the Nazis' military strength.ⁱⁱ In addition, the authors saw the battle Germans faced as a spiritual one, not physical, in which the Nazis failed to govern correctly and robbed people of

free will. They urged the readers to stop turning a blind eye to the crimes the National Socialists were committing, realize the loss of German honor they were causing, and engage in passive resistance.ⁱⁱⁱ This focus on the spiritual aspect of living under the Nazis and the high degree of change the authors thought a spiritual and moral revolution would bring about shows their emphasis on religion and faith in its power to rid the world of the evil of the Nazis.

On February 18, 1943 Hans and Sophie Scholl were leaving copies of their leaflets in the hallway of the University of Munich for students to find and pick up as they switched classes. Having some spare copies, they decided to strew them about the atrium and as they were doing so a custodian noticed them and called the police. Three members, Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst were immediately arrested, interrogated, accused of treason, sentenced to death, and were beheaded on February 22, 1943.^{iv} The interrogation and trial of other members and those with whom they were associated took longer due to multiple postponements, but by October of 1943 all of the identified White Rose members had been beheaded or sentenced to life in labor camps.^v Some of the members believed that their fate would garner publicity and support for their cause, as can be seen in Sophie Scholl's statement from her prison cell that her death was trivial "as long as what we did served to stir up the people and make them think," and her firm belief that students would revolt.^{vi} However, it seems Sophie Scholl placed too much faith in her fellow students and their ability to risk their lives as the White Rose members did, creating even more intrigue about what caused these particular University of Munich students to resist. Aside from a few groups of students in nearby cities, the White Rose movement never spread as the founders hoped it would and their voice was mostly silenced until the end of the war when the White Rose became an inspiration for postwar Germany.^{vii}

One of the most interesting aspects of the White Rose resistance movement are the overt Christian references in the pamphlets and the religious influence on the members' decisions to risk their lives to resist the National Socialists. Although all of the members of the White Rose identified as Christian, they were from a variety of denominations with Hans and Sophie Scholl identifying as Lutheran, Christoph Probst as Catholic, and Alexander Schmorell as Orthodox.^{viii} Although this divide may seem minimal from today's perspective in which religious diversity calls to mind believers in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and many other religions, it is important not to gloss over the potential for division created by these different denominations of Christianity, particularly between Catholics and Protestants as illustrated by the historically strained relationship between these two groups. It is impressive that members of these different denominations could collaborate effectively, especially when creating written works based so heavily on religious ideology. The fact that believers of these different religious traditions were able to agree on the line of thought to be followed and published in the pamphlets shows that the White Rose members deemed their goal of inspiring the German people to resist the Nazis to be more important than certain ideological differences. It also shows the universality within Christianity of their core beliefs since followers of practically any denomination could adopt them, and the members' view that the actions of the National Socialists, and Hitler in particular, violated the main tenets of Christianity.

As seen in their leaflets, the main grievances the students held against the National Socialists were that they attempted to rob the German people of their free will, were engaged in the murder of Jews, and constantly lied. Each of these criticisms has religious roots and is backed up textually through some reference to Christianity or through direct quotation of religious texts. The members of the White Rose placed a high degree of emphasis on the idea of free will and

free expression of ideas in any form, be it verbal, written, or visual, and saw Germany's situation of having a government for the government's own sake as "interfering with the progress of the spirit."^{xix} This reveals that the White Rose members saw their resistance as a battle for morals and the human spirit rather than political gain. In fact, the White Rose leaflets do not include much political commentary at all, merely a call for freedom. The underlying cause for this passion for freedom comes from the idea that it is "God's will" that every individual pursue his/her happiness.^x Although the idea of freedom is something contested in philosophy with regards to the issue of predestination and fate, the interpretation of the White Rose members was that God gives humans the ability to choose everything about their lives, and even to choose whether or not to accept the salvation offered by Jesus' death. The idea of freedom was so important to the authors that in letters to one another Hans wrote "I know how limited human freedom is, but... it is his freedom that renders him human."^{xi} By this, Hans explains his view that although humans are subject to God, the meager freedom they have is so important that it determines humanity. This discussion of freedom determining humanity is central to the argument presented in the "Leaflet of Resistance" that the National Socialists were subhuman due to their blind following of Hitler and would continue to be so unless they "cast off the cloak of indifference" and began exercising their free will and listening to their conscious as it called them to resist the Nazis.^{xii} The White Rose members knew that such resistance would require bravery, but they did not see fear as an excuse for passivity and exhibited courage themselves.

One of the aspects of the White Rose pamphlets demonstrating the bravery of the authors is the blunt and straightforward way in which they present their arguments against National Socialism. In contrast to the elaborate, fanfare-ridden speeches given by Nazis about the wonders of National Socialism bestowed upon the German people by Hitler, the authors of the White

Rose leaflets declared themselves the “guilty conscious” of the German people who were behaving passively in the face of crimes against humanity and ignoring their “responsibility as members of Christian and Western civilization,” furthering the idea that their primary aim was to appeal to people's senses of morality.^{xiii} In their second leaflet the White Rose authors refused to discuss the “Jewish question,” writing that it was unimportant in light of the fact that Jews were human beings and were being slaughtered in Poland while Germans were aware of this abomination and doing nothing to stop it.^{xiv} From this leaflet it is clear that the White Rose members took a more universal approach to the value of human life than some of their contemporaries and that this value stemmed from the religious belief that God too values all human life. This follows the logic of Michael Von Faulhaber, a Catholic Cardinal and the Archbishop of Munich, who argued that racial tension clouded the fact that Christianity was meant for all people.^{xv} Just as the White Rose members overlooked ideological differences between themselves to deal with the greater issue of Nazism, they overlooked religious and racial differences in victims of Nazi violence because of the greater issue of human dignity. Further illustrating the members’ belief in the equality of humans, the White Rose members bemoaned the fate of German soldiers being “sacrificed” to Hitler in Stalingrad, despite the fact that most of these soldiers were likely supporters of Hitler and National Socialism themselves.^{xvi} This shows the universal value the White Rose members placed on human life and a compassion for those they opposed, both of which stemmed from their religion.

The view of human life being innately valuable contradicts the beliefs of other Christians who held that they had no responsibility to help the Jews, who they blamed for the death of Jesus. These Christians believed that the Jews were fundamentally different and separate from Christ and therefore were less than human and “the real enemy of Christianity,” which justified

their murder.^{xvii} In today's society many Christians attempt to distance themselves from these individuals, who were not merely passive but rather active agents in promoting Nazism, saying that they were not truly Christians. However, because these people identified as Christians, Bergen argues that they must be classified as such and brings into question whether Christians were actors or acted upon in the Third Reich.^{xviii} This complicates the discussion of the Christian influence on the White Rose resistance movement since the same religion that led the White Rose members to resist also spurred Nazis to action, but also adds another level of depth to their resistance in their interaction with the church. The White Rose members were willing to criticize the church and members of their own religion, holding all people to the same moral standards in an attempt to have Christianity as they saw it put into practice by everyone. This criticism may have been rendered easier by the lack of affiliation with the church or a particular denomination which was entangled with the state, leaving the members free to focus their attention on their deep concern and love for humanity.^{xix}

One of the main issues the White Rose members had with the Nazi co-opting of Christianity was their attempt to use the religion to garner support for Hitler, whom the authors saw as a vile human being. Because the National Socialists wanted to control all aspects of private life and ensure that their worldview was of the utmost importance to Germans, it makes sense that they sought to fill the spiritual needs of the German people through the idolization of Hitler. Hitler was portrayed as a Christ figure for Germany, a man sent from God or who was God himself who would redeem the Germans from their undeserved suffering. This religious attachment to Hitler can be clearly seen in the "Declaration of German Christians," in which Hitler is praised as the manifestation of God's law and affirms the belief that it is God's will for the German race to be purified.^{xx} Through this religious devotion to Hitler, the National

Socialists created a way to meet the spiritual needs of the people that simultaneously deepened their devotion to the Nazi worldview. The members of the White Rose found this association of Hitler with Jesus abominable and wrote when Hitler invoked the name of the almighty in his speeches he referred not to God, but to Satan.^{xxi}

To more completely understand the role Christianity played in the White Rose resistance movement it is necessary to examine the development of the members' non-religious demographics, religious beliefs, influence from other Christians, and the members' spiritual activity in the face of death. For this purpose this paper will now focus on two of the most prominent White Rose members, Hans and Sophie Scholl. As Baranowski points out in her discussion on the resistance of the Confessing Church to the Nazis, it is important to look at factors other than religious background, such as age, education, and financial stability when examining participants in resistance movements. Hans and Sophie Scholl, as well as most of the other White Rose members fit the mold of being relatively young, educated, and well-off financially and therefore the most likely to engage in resistance.^{xxii} However, these factors alone do not necessarily lead to resistance, and the ample religious influences in the published leaflets as well as in personal letters and diary entries gives evidence to support the argument that Christianity was a driving force behind the White Rose movement.

Hans and Sophie Scholl were raised in a Lutheran household where Christianity was emphasized as a way of determining meaning and value in life, which helped the two students develop strong morals and a desire to live uprightly and help others do the same. This focus on religion can be seen in the letters and conversations between Hans and Sophie and their parents, many of which contain a reference to a Bible verse or a work by a religious author, and which Gilman writes prepared Hans and Sophie Scholl "for their valiant, doomed enterprise."^{xxiii} In one

discussion about the presence of concentration camps and the deportation of a non-Nazi teacher, Hans and Sophie's father urged his children to realize the value of God-given free will and to "live in uprightness of freedom of spirit, no matter how difficult that proves to be."^{xxiv} The Scholl children, however, were not raised to blindly follow religious teachings and spent long periods of time reading philosophical texts and questioning their beliefs to better understand them.^{xxv} Not only did this exercise strengthen the members' religious beliefs, it gave them experience in independent thought and moral judgment that would later inspire them to resist the Nazis.

Both of the Scholl children experienced Nazism from an early age and seemed to have an immediate dislike for the contradictions and moral violations they noticed. Hans Scholl became a member of the Hitler Youth in 1933 and even became a squad commander before he resigned because of his inability to place his trust completely in Hitler and follow orders without thinking.^{xxvi} The model for a perfect Hitler Youth can be seen in the film *Hitlerjunge Quex* where the main character gives his life to the Nazis figuratively and literally, becoming a martyr for the Nazi cause.^{xxvii} To Hans Scholl this religious devotion to National Socialism seemed unfounded, especially after being drafted into the military in 1937, witnessing the horrors of war, and being forced to assist a government he did not support. His antipathy towards the war is illustrated by his statement that he did not know "how long I can bear to watch this butchery of ours."^{xxviii} Hans Scholl avoided actually killing others by becoming a medic, but was still deeply troubled by the war. He often studied and drew from philosophical texts, particularly those with a Christian angle, which brought him peace during his service and later during his trial.^{xxix} This can be seen in one of his letters, when he says that his heart is deeply troubled, but that he does not despair, and quotes the Catholic writer Paul Claudel, writing, "Life is a great adventure

toward the light,” revealing his view that life, while important, is simply a journey that one goes through to reach God.^{xxx} This belief and experience of having it tested in difficult situations deepened his religious convictions and gave him the perspective that his fate was secure enough to risk losing his life.

Similarly, Sophie Scholl served her mandatory labor as part of the League of German Girls at about the same time that Hans was serving in the military. In her letters she complained about the constant, senseless stream of praise for the National Socialists from the other girls in her unit. Sophie made every effort to turn away from her peers, and spent her time reading the Bible and writings of religious scholars such as St. Augustine, which comforted her and clarified her view of life as a gateway to heaven, writing that when her heart was troubled by “petty anxieties” she reminds herself of “the great way home that lies before it.”^{xxxix} This view of worldly life as nothing more than a precursor to the afterlife aided Sophie in her resistance when she was willing to risk her life for what she saw as the greater good and gave her peace during her trial.

In addition to reading others’ views on religion and Nazism and publishing their own opinions, the members of the White Rose fully entered the ongoing dialogue on morality and resistance to the Nazis, influencing the writings of other Christian resisters and sharing ideas. In his chapter “Political and Moral Motives behind the Resistance,” Ernst Wolf identifies two motives for Christian resistance to the Nazis: concern for humanity and concern for the church itself. This complicated Christian resistance because of the centuries of church subservience to the state, necessitating this subservience to “be overcome step by step out of religious conviction and not without profound altercation” and a “conversation” on the responsibility of humans to care for each other.^{xxxii} One of the most well-known resisters within the church was Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, who argued that Christians, who live their lives for God instead of for themselves, are the only individuals who could sacrifice everything to “answer God’s question and his call” and stand up against the evil of Hitler and the National Socialists.^{xxxiii} The White Rose pamphlets also include this idea of the Christian responsibility to resist, showing how the authors were connected to each other in the struggle to inspire people to look critically at their religion and values, realize that the Nazis contradicted these values, and resist the political regime that attempted to control every aspect of life, physical and spiritual. Another example of the back and forth rhetoric between the White Rose and other Christian resisters can be seen in these individuals’ assistance in spreading the pamphlets, particularly over the radio. In one broadcast in the United States the Nobel prize winning writer Thomas Mann, after hearing about the execution of the students, urged his listeners not to assume that to be German was to be a National Socialist. He pointed to the actions of the White Rose members and stated that their leaflets “contain words that go far to make up for many of the sins against the spirit of German freedom.”^{xxxiv} These connections indicate that the White Rose members succeeded in entering the discussion on resistance at the international level and were respected by Christian scholars and church leaders who agreed that protecting humanity was more important than protecting the church.

The influence Christianity had on the members of the White Rose and their willingness to risk their lives to resist the Nazis is vividly revealed in their writings and statements leading up to their executions. The students knew there was little hope for their lives, especially since the interrogators and judges followed Nazi ideology even when it was irrational to do so. The Nazi officials showed a lack of understanding of White Rose leaflets, focusing not on the moral appeals to the German people, but on their supposed political motives and attempts to sabotage

the German war effort.^{xxxv} This limited analysis and misinterpretation of the actions of the White Rose by the Nazis is itself an example of what the students were fighting against: a state in which human beings were unable to freely live and express themselves. In addition to Nazi ideology, inconsistency in the courts hindered the White Rose members' chance at receiving a just trial. A secret report of the SS shows that lower level courts, such as the one the White Rose members were hastily tried in, were more likely to respond to criticisms of Hitler with the death penalty than higher level courts, meaning that the White Rose members' sentences were harsh even by Nazi standards.^{xxxvi} Hanser asserts that "the most convincing testimony to the moral impact of the White Rose" is the Nazi view of the pamphlets as "bold and uncompromising expressions of the free human spirit" and "an intolerable threat."^{xxxvii} The authors of these "bold and uncompromising expressions," however, were calm in the face of danger, another aspect of their movement that was religiously influenced.

Despite the certainty that she would be condemned to death, during her time in prison before her trial and execution Sophie Scholl remained firm in her beliefs and was a vocal advocate for her cause to the very end, as portrayed in the film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*.^{xxxviii} This emphasis on Sophie Scholl's confident and calm demeanor displays director Marc Rothmund's desire to portray her as a heroine, an incredible and innocent woman who stood up for her beliefs, in an attempt to influence the contemporary dialogue on the White Rose and give the students the credit and admiration he believes they deserve. In her account of Sophie Scholl's last days, Else Gebel, one of the few people who visited Sophie Scholl in prison, reveals the source of Sophie Scholl's resolve when she repeatedly marvels at the peace Sophie Scholl felt despite hours of interrogation and writes that her "deep faith gives [her] the strength to sacrifice [herself] for others."^{xxxix} Other members were equally as calm, and as they shared a

cigarette before being beheaded, Christoph Probst commented on how being a Christian and having the promise of an afterlife made dying easy. After finishing his cigarette he said to his friends, “In a few minute we will meet in eternity.”^{xl} Through these actions it is clear that religion was central to the lives of the White Rose members and that they believed so thoroughly in their cause that even death seemed a small price to pay.

Although the White Rose resistance movement did not succeed in overthrowing the National Socialists, or even in spurring a great number of others to resist, the actions of the students involved shed light onto the complicated and fascinating world of Nazi Germany in which members of the same religion could be diametrically opposed to one another. The members of the White Rose firmly believed that the National Socialists’ actions were opposed to Christianity and held the religious convictions that humans have a responsibility to God to use their free will to follow Him, that the value of human life is universal, and that worldly life is a precursor to the afterlife. Because of these beliefs the members of the White Rose sacrificed their lives to enter a dialogue they hoped would change their country for the better. Their story can be seen as dismal, but as Little notes, to measure the impact of the White Rose based on their role in overthrowing the Nazis is to miss the significance of their actions. Instead, we must realize that if there are people in the world such as those who formed the White Rose who are willing to stand up to injustice no matter the cost, even in the face of all the evil it can and does bring about there is hope for the human race and a reason for its continued existence.^{xli}

ⁱ Frank McDonough, “Student Protest: The White Rose,” in *Opposition and Resistance in Nazi*

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ The White Rose, “The First Leaflet,” in *Students against Tyranny: The Resistance of the White Rose, Munich 1942-1943*, trans. Arthur R. Schultz (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 73-75. First published in 1942.

^{iv} McDonough, “Student Protest: The White Rose,” in *Opposition in Nazi Germany*, 25-26.

- ^v “Gestapo Interrogation Transcripts: Willi Graf, Alexander Schmorell, Hans Scholl, and Sophie Scholl,” trans. Ruth Sachs, (Phoenixville: Exclamation Publishers, 2003), 267. First written in 1943.
- ^{vi} Richard Hanser, *A Noble Treason: The Revolt of the Munich Students Against Hitler*, (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979), 267.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 305-310.
- ^{viii} McDonough, “Student Protest: The White Rose,” in *Opposition in Nazi Germany*, 22-23.
- ^{ix} The White Rose, “The First Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 75. First published in 1942.
- ^x The White Rose, “The Third Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 81. First published in 1942.
- ^{xi} Hans Scholl, “Diary Entry, August 22, 1942 Sunday,” in *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl*, ed. Inge Jens, trans J. Maxwell Brownjohn (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 232.
- ^{xii} The White Rose, “Leaflet of Resistance,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 89-90. First published in 1943.
- ^{xiii} The White Rose, “The Fourth Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 88. First published in 1942; The White Rose, “The First Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 74. First published in 1942.
- ^{xiv} The White Rose, “The Second Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 78-79. First published in 1942.
- ^{xv} Michael Von Faulhaber, “What is the Stance of Christianity to the German Race?” in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. by Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 419-420. First published in 1934.
- ^{xvi} The White Rose, “The Last Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 91. First published in 1943.
- ^{xvii} Walter Grundmann, “Jesus of Nazareth and Jewry,” in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 436. First published in 1940.
- ^{xviii} Doris Bergen, “Nazism and Christianity: Partners and Rivals? A Response to Richard Steigmann, *The Holy Reich. Nazi Concepts of Christianity, 1919-1945*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 25 (2007): 28-29.
- ^{xix} Ernst Wolf, “Political and Moral Motives behind Resistance,” in *The German Resistance to Hitler*, (Berkeley: University Press California, 1970), 202.
- ^{xx} “Declaration of the German Christians,” in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 420-421. First written in 1933-1934 and published in 1948.
- ^{xxi} The White Rose, “The Fourth Leaflet,” in *Students Against Tyranny*, 85.
- ^{xxii} Shelly Baranowski, “Consent and Dissent: The Confessing Church and Conservative opposition to National Socialism,” *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 1 (Mar., 1987): 59, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1880377>.
- ^{xxiii} Richard Gilman, Preface to *At the Heart of the White Rose*, x.
- ^{xxiv} Inge Scholl, *Students Against Tyranny: The Resistance of the White Rose, Munich 1942-1943*, trans. Arthur R. Schultz (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 12.
- ^{xxv} Gilman, Preface to *At the Heart of the White Rose*, x-xii.
- ^{xxvi} Inge Jens, *At the Heart of the White Rose*, 1.
- ^{xxvii} Hans Steinhoff, *Hitlerjunge Quex*, produced by Karl Ritter, starring Jurgen Ohlsen (1933; Munich: Universum Film AG Studios.), film.
- ^{xxviii} Hans Scholl, “Hans Scholl to His Parents, Jun 11, 1940,” in *At the Heart of the White Rose*, 53.

^{xxix} Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, 89-100.

^{xxx} Hans Scholl, "Hans Scholl to Rose Nagele, February 16, 1943," in *At the Heart of the White Rose*, 279.

^{xxxi} Annette E. Dumbach and Jon Newborn, *Shattering the German Night: The Story of the White Rose* (Boston: Brown, Little and Company, 1986), 62.

^{xxxii} Wolf, "Political and Moral Motives behind Resistance," in *The German Resistance to Hitler*, 202.

^{xxxiii} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Resistance and Resignation," in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 441. Written in 1945 and first published in 1951.

^{xxxiv} Thomas Mann, "German Listeners," radio series, in *Students Against Tyranny*, 152. First broadcast June 27, 1943.

^{xxxv} Reich Attorney General, "'Indictment of Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst, 21 February, 1943,'" in *Students Against Tyranny*, 106, 109.

^{xxxvi} Secret Report of the Security Service of the Reichsfuhrer SS, "Reports on the Program to Combat Criminal Subversion," in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 857. First published in 1984

^{xxxvii} Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, 309.

^{xxxviii} Marc Rothmund, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, produced by Fred Breinersdofer et al., starring Julia Jentsch (2005; Berlin: X Verleih AG.), film.

^{xxxix} Else Gebel, "To the Memory of Sophie Scholl, 18-22 February, 1943," in *Students Against Tyranny*, 142.

^{xl} Inge Scholl, *Students Against Tyranny*, 62.

^{xli} Dumbach and Newborn, *Shattering the German Night*, 242.

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