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# An Interview with Carl Müller Frøland



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**Carl Müller Frøland holds an MA in Intellectual History from the University of Oslo and is working on a PhD dealing with religious and secular aspects of the Nazi worldview. He lives in Oslo, Norway. We will be discussing his recent book *Understanding Nazi Ideology: The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith* published by McFarland (2020).**



## 1. Tells us a little bit about your background and how you got started on this project?

My background is in Intellectual History, or «History of Ideas» as it is called in Norway where it is a separate discipline from regular «History», and one of my main interests has been the history of religious ideas (I have also studied religious history). Having finished my studies, I wished to write a PhD thesis on the role «Dionysian» conceptions played in the formation of Nazi ideology, how the German Romantics» rediscovery of Dionysus – the ancient Greek god of (among other things) vegetation and the life-death-rebirth cycle of nature, of ecstasy and madness – came to influence several aspects of fascist ideology (then I narrowed it to the German variant, Nazism). This project did not come to see the light of day but was partly carried over into this book that highlights two distinct ideas which I contend are crucial to Nazism, namely «the organic» and «the dynamic», both of which are strongly related to German Romantic thought.

## 2. What is fascinating about your study is that it seeks to examine Nazi ideology within the context of the history of ideas, you even reference Arthur O. Lovejoy and *Idea-Complexes*. Could you elaborate on why you chose this approach, and maybe compare it to how other scholars like Roger Griffin approach the subject?

I chose the approach of Lovejoy because it appeals to me; I find his theory of «ideas» as elements appearing in different configurations across socio-cultural and epochal boundaries. Despite the fact that this approach seems to have been somewhat out of fashion for a long time in scholarly circles, I find it is intellectually appealing. Moreover, this very approach can throw light on some traits of Nazism which, as far as I can see, previously have not been sufficiently explored.

Research on Nazi ideology is cross-disciplinary in an intriguing way, with contributions from scholars grounded not only in history (partly «intellectual history») but also in fields such as political science, philosophy, religious history, theology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and German philology. When it comes to Roger Griffin, his influential theory of so-called generic fascism as «palingenetic ultranationalism» and his wide-ranging explorations of this phenomenon have been an important source of inspiration for me. Griffin's work has enriched my understanding of the complex character of fascism and brought my attention to certain religious aspects of fascist (including Nazi) ideology. Griffin's scholarship is influenced by many theoretical currents. I am not aware of his view of Lovejoy's «history of ideas», but I do not really see any divergence between the latter and Griffin's approach.

In regard to other scholars dealing with this subject, I am not able to say that much specific about their historical method in light of Lovejoy's historiographical approach. Scholars with a Marxist orientation naturally work from quite different assumptions than someone like me; the whole conception of ideas as a form of separate entities



with some kind of causative power and traversing through different socio-cultural and political contexts is at odds with the Marxist understanding of ideas as part of society's «superstructure» generated by the material «base». When it comes to the study of Nazism (and fascism more broadly speaking), I honestly cannot see that Marxist historians have contributed much of value. Although capitalism did contribute in some ways to the establishment and workings of the Nazi regime – e.g., German industrialists' financial backing of the NSDAP, and the mighty industrial conglomerate IG Farben's active involvement in Nazi medical experiments and the Holocaust – Marxist historians have greatly overemphasized the significance of economic interests to Nazi Germany. And some non-Marxist historians are inclined to accentuate socio-economic conditions at the cost of ideational ones in their analyses of the phenomenon of Nazism.

My book is an attempt to underline (too strongly, according to some critics) the power of *ideas*, of how non-material intellectual and mental factors can shape people in a given historical context and, at least to some extent, drive them to act in certain ways. While critics think I go too far in this direction, I wish to show how necessary a classic history of ideas-perspective is in understanding how Nazi ideology arose and affected the politics of the Third Reich.

**3. You refer to Nazi ideology as a “political religion” and it seems to bear the influence of Eric Voegelin who coined the term in his own analysis of the Nazis. Could you elaborate on the influence of Eric Voegelin on your work here?**

The influence of Voegelin on my reflection in the book is quite strong. Although I do not necessarily subscribe to the Catholicly colored anti-secularization theory underpinning his concept of political religion, I believe Voegelin gave some highly important contributions to our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the interwar era. I concur with Voegelin with regard to Nazism as being something more than a mere political religion, as a worldview, a kind of substitute of genuine religion, which here means traditional Christianity. What makes something a genuine religion, though, I cannot adequately explain. Defining the concept of religion is of course an old scholarly debate, and I'm afraid the jury is still out regarding what makes a given phenomenon religious or not. But I do think Voegelin's 1938 work on “the political religions” is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of Nazism as an amalgamation of religion and politics arising from the need for religious meaning and transcendence in a time of rapid secularization undermining long-held metaphysical and ethical certainties, to put it like that.

**4. You begin the book with a study of German Romanticism as providing the foundations for the Völkisch ideology from which Nazi ideology would later grow. What is the relationship between the two that would later influence the Nazis?**



In the era of Romanticism, especially in German territory, emerged a new awareness and celebration of the nation, of one's ancestral land or «homeland» (*Heimat* as it was called by Germans). Linked to such conceptions was the strong Romantic proclivity to nature mysticism or pantheism, the understanding of nature as an ensouled totality pervaded by an impersonal divine force. All of these elements were to contribute to the genesis of the *völkisch* ideology in German culture around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The key concept of this ideology was *Volk*, signifying more than simply «people»: The *Volk* was conceived as some kind of agrarian romanticism, accentuating the allegedly healthy and authentic life in rural areas that was «unspoiled» by urbanization and industrialization, conceived as the twin evils of modernity.

**5. One of the most peculiar traits of Nazi ideology or even Völkisch ideology in general is the emphasis on race, especially emphasizing a religious significance to it. This meant that traditional Christianity (even Lutheranism) had to be either rejected in favor of neo-paganism or reinterpreted as though having a Völkisch core but was perverted by the churches. This contrasts with other nationalist ideologies that sought to work with traditional Christianity. What explains this contrast and the emphasis on race as the supposed foundation of religion?**

The relationship between Nazism and traditional Christianity is quite complex and thus not so easy to explain in a reasonable concise way. Other types of nationalism have often allied themselves with traditional Christianity, that is true. The result has been different kinds of religious nationalism, regularly presenting the nation as «chosen» and endowed with historically significant «mission» by God. In a way, this also goes for Nazism (to which I will shortly return). However, the Nazis – unlike many other nationalists – had a distinctly anti-clerical orientation. This was most evident concerning the Catholic church, an institution vehemently opposed by the Nazis. But the Nazi regime's relation to the Protestant churches also was strained, and leading Nazis (perhaps including Hitler) envisioned the eradication of organized Protestantism some time into the future. The Nazi regime made an alliance, however, with the *Deutsche Christen*, a *völkisch* Protestant grouping that agitated for a “de-Judaized” Christianity, meaning that the Old Testament and some parts of the New Testament were removed, linked with the belief in Christ as an Aryan rebel against Judaism. This interpretation of Christianity was, in other words, racist. And race was indeed the foundation of the Nazi “religion” or political faith.

The concept of race, intimately connected with that of blood, was rendered the object of devotion – it was *sacralized*; my understanding accords with the leading fascism expert Emilio Gentile's important theory of “sacralized politics” which in turn is influenced by Voegelin's reflections on “political religion”. Like Voegelin and Gentile, I find this elevation of race/blood to something sacred – something one is willing to sacrifice one's own life for – as a result of the process of secularization that before the rise of Nazism had generated a vacuum of faith and loss of meaning for a great many people in Western society. The racist faith of Nazism, then, can be understood as a substitute of genuine religion.



**6. Do you have any other thoughts to add concerning the complex relationship between Nazi ideology and Christianity?**

Nazism was a rejection of traditional Christianity, with its belief in a transcendent and personal God and in an eternal afterlife through personal immortality, as well as its ideals of universal brotherly love, of peace and non-violence. At the same time, Nazism incorporated some elements of the Christian (actually the Judeo-Christian) tradition. The idea of the «chosen people», God's elected people that shall lead mankind towards salvation; equality and «brotherly love» in a nationally and racially restricted sense; a racialist sense of «sin» and «fallenness» in the form of «sin against the blood» (racial mixing) and «the Fall» from a once racially pure state in a distant past into racial mixing.

**7. This fascination with the connection between mysticism and race was most pronounced in the SS headed by Heinrich Himmler, who as you mentioned sought to create a new warrior caste to defend these ideals. Can explain how this came to be and its impact on the Nazi movement?**

The connection to which you refer can be traced to two sources. In his bestselling 1890 book *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, the völkisch ideologist Julius Langbehn presented an irrationalist mysticism of the blood, where a basic premise was that the «German» *Volk* had a unique connection to nature's «life force» through their blood or race and their home landscape, endowing them with genuinely intuitive and creative powers.

The connection between mysticism and race also stemmed from a certain Austrian thought current from the same period, namely so-called *Ariosophy* arising around 1900. This was a combination of «theosophy», the set of occult doctrines or ideas established by Madame H. P. Blavatsky in the 1870s, and racialism that emphasized the «Aryans» as the most impressive and valuable of all races, a race that had access to a higher «Wisdom» – hence the term «Ariosophy». The impact of Ariosophical thought on such prominent Nazis as Himmler and Alfred Rosenberg was significant, and perhaps (although to a lesser extent) Hitler was impacted who was exposed to Ariosophy in his youth in Vienna was impacted by these ideas, but here one ought scholarly to tread rather carefully.

**8. Both the SS and the Nazi movement as a whole built on a series of archetypes that were both seemingly traditional and modern at the same time. For example, the SS sought to portray themselves as a new order of Holy Knights but also built on the frontline-spirit of World War I and the Freikorps of the 1920s. What does this explain about the nature of Nazism as a political religion of its ability to mix traditional and modern archetypes together?**



The bridging of modern and traditional (and partly *anti*-modern) elements is a

characteristic feature of Nazism (also to be found in other variants of fascist ideology, not least the classically Italian type). I like to think of this as the paradox of “runes and rockets”. On the one hand, Nazism looked back to the glorious past of the so-called Aryan or Nordic race. The Holy Knights with their «fanatical» religious devotion, the Vikings with their martial energy, the Germanic tribes with their «community spirit» and nature worship – in all these historical phenomena the Nazis found what they saw as exemplary ideals and virtues reflecting essential traits of their own «racial soul». On the other hand, this ideology glorified modern technology as an expression of the «racial will», as manifestations of their racial inventiveness, their ability to make new tools to sustain themselves in the struggle for life, one might say – and of their access to nature’s own vitality and potency (in a comparable way to the inherent futurism of Italian Fascism). Moreover, Nazism looked into the future. There was the evolutionary outlook, emphasizing nature’s constant progression upwards through higher levels of organic complexity with humanity (represented by the Nazis) on top. And there was the utopian striving for the «perfect», racially pure society, a new order with a new man – «the Third Reich».

### **9. The Nazi regime was defeated in 1945, but many of its legacies still live on so many decades later. What are some of these legacies that you notice?**

That is a highly challenging question, which I can only answer in a more tentative way. Nazi ideology was highly composite, and some of its elements can be traced here and some there in the post-war ideological and mental landscape.

The term «neo-Nazism» tends to designate a type of racist and authoritarian nationalism which justifies violence against Jews, (especially non-Western) immigrants and perhaps also homosexuals and several other minorities. So-called neo-Nazis are often self-declared «National Socialists». As already hinted at, at least some of the conceptions of (classical) Nazism can be found in «neo-Nazism».

Then we have adherents of other totalitarian ideologies such as communism and Islamism (political Islam) that like Nazism aim at a utopian society, whether «classless» or truly “Islamic”, and an all-embracing, all-controlling state to enforce the full realization of the ideology with all means necessary, even grand-scale violence. These ideologies, and the way they have been politically institutionalized, resemble Nazism in a number of ways, and the key concept is totalitarianism. However, we are dealing with different ideologies, in some crucial regards widely different variants of totalitarianism – communism being grounded in atheistic materialism, Islamism being an interpretation of a traditional religion (Islam), Nazism being a kind of racist nature mysticism (among other things), just to give a few examples.

It would have been possible to move on to a series of topical issues and heated political controversies of our times and identify certain Nazi conceptions, pertaining to for instance millennialism and pantheism, leader adoration and social Darwinism, ecology and eugenics. But then one ought to tread carefully. That some contemporary groupings or thought currents in some ways may resemble the Nazis do not make it correct to classify the former as «Nazi» or basically similar to Nazism or the Nazis. Such



fallacious reasoning is being demonstrated on a regular basis.

#### 10. Any concluding thoughts not touched upon already?

I can conclude by pointing out a major objective with my book, namely my intention to approach the historical phenomenon of Nazism in a completely objective manner. Despite making a great number of solid contributions, historians and other scholars dealing with this subject all too often make value-judgments on the Nazis and their ideology. I wish to defend the ideal of value-neutrality without reservations and hence also with regard to Nazism. How did Nazism arise? How did it convince, even spellbind, so many Germans (and non-Germans)? How could this ideology have such an impact, not least in a physically destructive sense? Such questions ought to be answered in a spirit of moral self-abnegation. The extreme violence of the Nazi state, culminating in the Holocaust, has created some kind of mental barrier between the Nazis and us, but the historian ought to get beyond that barrier and strive to study the Nazis and their mental world with “sober” detachment, dispassionately – in other words, *objectively*. I am well aware that this message can appear quite upsetting to some. Nevertheless, if we are to attain genuine insight into what the Nazis believed and what motivated them, we need to put aside our moral judgments.

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#### Stephen Satkiewicz

Stephen Satkiewicz is an independent scholar from Michigan. He is a graduate of Oakland University. His research areas are related to Civilizational Analysis, Big History, Historical Sociology, Military History, as well as Russian and East European history. He served as the editor for the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC) newsletter from 2016-2018.

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