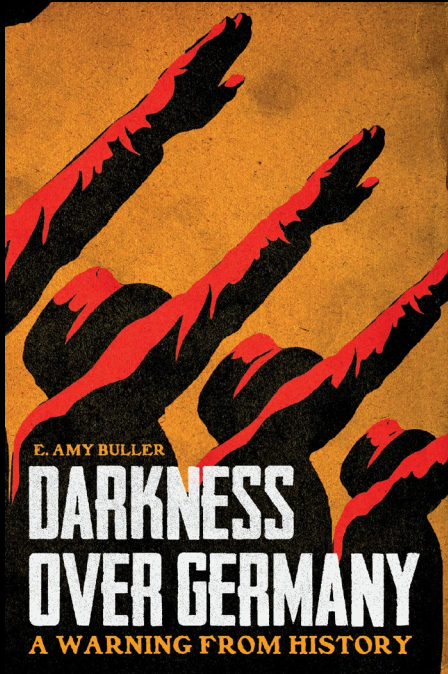


# Moral and Spiritual Dilemmas in Challenging Times



A study guide to  
*Darkness over Germany:  
a warning from history*  
by E. Amy Buller

Edited by Edmund Newell and Rob Thompson



Cumberland Lodge



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# Contents

Introduction.....	4
Opening reflections by Dr Rowan Williams.....	7
List of contributors.....	10
Session 1: 'A Catholic Priest Faces Conflict'.....	12
Session 2: 'The Tragedy of the Unemployed Student'.....	16
Session 3: 'In the Early Days - A Study in Contrasts'.....	20
Session 4: 'Professor Braun'.....	24
Session 5: 'The Courage of Children who Opposed Nazis'.....	28
Session 6: 'Epilogue'.....	31
Closing reflections by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg.....	35

# Introduction

The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) and Cumberland Lodge have much in common. Both organisations were established in response to the terrible events in Europe that culminated in the Second World War. In the case of CCJ, the antisemitism of Nazism and the realisation that centuries of persecution of Jews – often in the name of Christianity – had helped to justify and gain support for the Nazis' actions, led to its founding in 1942 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, the Chief Rabbi, Joseph Hertz, and other Jewish and Christian leaders.

William Temple was also instrumental in the creation of the educational foundation at Cumberland Lodge, although he died three years before it came to fruition in 1947. The foundation was the brainchild of Temple's friend Amy Buller and, with the support of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, it was given a home in a former royal residence in Windsor Great Park to be a place where people, especially university students, could meet to discuss the pressing social, moral, and spiritual issues of the day.

CCJ and Cumberland Lodge also place great emphasis on building good relationships among those with whom they work, and in facilitating constructive discussion between people of different faiths or beliefs. Both organisations share the view that these are essential tools for preventing differences or disagreements from becoming sources of division or conflict in society. These principles underpin *Moral and Spiritual Dilemmas in Challenging Times*, which is designed as a resource to help bring people together to discuss some of the most pressing and potentially divisive issues of our times. It does so through the lens of history, using Amy Buller's book *Darkness over Germany*, first published in 1943 and republished in 2017 with the sub-title *A warning from history*. We believe that Buller's observations and warnings concerning nationalism, populism, and extremism are as pertinent now as they were in the challenging times of the 1930s and 1940s, which is the focus of her book.

We have chosen six overlapping themes to explore, all based around the conversations Buller had with a range of people in Germany who were struggling with the dramatic changes in their society. The people you will meet in the chapters we have selected from *Darkness over Germany* include a Catholic priest whose ministry is under severe pressure, a previously unemployed doctoral student who has joined the SS, an anxious elderly woman, families, a university professor, and a group of British students.

This diverse group are all affected by what is happening in their society, and are all seeking to find ways to navigate through the dilemmas posed in challenging times. We hope that by reflecting on the experiences of these people, those who use this study guide will find inspiration for addressing the difficult societal issues of our times, and perhaps, too, gain a greater appreciation of the pressures those who opposed Nazism faced in Germany in the 1930s.

*Moral and Spiritual Dilemmas in Challenging Times* has been designed in part as a study resource for those who have participated in CCJ's annual seminar at the International School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and two of the sessions have been written by alumni from this programme. We hope, however, that it will have wider use.

This study guide has also been produced in time for churches to use it for Lent study groups in 2018, but would work equally as a resource during Remembrancetide or around Holocaust Memorial Day, for book groups at any time of year, and for retreats. Given Buller's focus on young people, it would be especially appropriate for use by university or school chaplaincy groups.

We recommend reading *Darkness over Germany* in its entirety first, and then re-reading the relevant chapter(s) before each session. If this is not possible, the course can be followed by using only the set readings, which are all short. Each session includes some suggested questions for discussion, but we hope that other questions and ideas will emerge from engaging with the texts.

We are grateful to Bonnie Evans-Hills, Amber Pierce, Salley Vickers and Jeremy Howard for contributing reflections and questions for each session, and to Rowan Williams and Jonathan Wittenberg for topping and tailing this study

guide with their own observations and insights. We are grateful, too, to Arcadia Books and for colleagues at CCJ and Cumberland Lodge, especially Helen Taylor and Elizabeth Harris-Sawczenko, for their involvement in this project.

We hope that you find *Darkness over Germany: A warning from history* as stimulating and insightful as we have, and this study guide a helpful way of addressing the moral and spiritual dilemmas of our own challenging times.

***Edmund Newell and Rob Thompson***  
***January 2018***

# Opening reflections

*Dr Rowan Williams, Lord Williams of Oystermouth  
is Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge  
and a Visiting Fellow of Cumberland Lodge.  
He was formerly Archbishop of Canterbury and  
Archbishop of Wales.*

There is a widespread sense at the moment that liberal democracy is globally not in a good way. The rise to prominence of charismatic and authoritarian leaders in several countries, the growing presence of populist and sometimes openly racist political parties at elections, the rising temperature of public debate and the deligitimising of opponents and minorities, the rhetoric of ‘the people’s will’ – all these very visible features of the international scene represent in different ways a rejection of some or all of the classical pieties of democracy. A certain suspicion of leadership cults, an emphasis on the rule of law so as to secure the rights and dignities of a whole citizen body, and the expansion of this into an international system of human rights, a recognition of the ongoing character of political debate (as opposed to the closing down of various issues by executive or majority fiat), these have been taken for granted as part of what we mean by democracy. It is in these ways that we have learned to distinguish democratic lawfulness from simple majority domination.

Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it; so the proverb goes. After rather more than half a century of relative peace and the prevalence of liberal democracy in most states, Europe is in danger of forgetting that this political vision did not come from nowhere and did not survive without passionate and costly struggle. The first half of the last century had seen a collapse of classical democratic systems in central Europe and the recreation of unchallengeable autocracy in much of Eastern Europe. In the half century or so between the end of the Second World War and the final dissolution of an ‘Eastern bloc’, it came to look as though some version of liberal democracy and the rule of law was after all the natural and rational form of government;

people could speak without irony about the triumph of the West and the end of history.

That sort of rhetoric sounds very hollow today. It is not that any country is directly menaced by moves to take away the franchise or impose permanent presidential autocracy. But the culture that supports democracy is wearing dangerously thin as democracy is identified with majority decisions and the collective self-interest of a population, and the language of debate becomes increasingly barbarised and short-term in its vision. Whatever political settlements are emerging in Europe, they are not uniformly characterised by the universalist, law-focused concerns that were once seen as absolute givens. As global anxieties deepen – about war, about environmental catastrophe, about displaced populations or about the nexus of globalised finance and localised pauperisation – there seems to be a hunger for rapid and simple solutions. Here and there, it is connected with a nostalgia for what is presented as strong and highly personalised leadership – readily identified with a commanding media presence, irrespective of any actual delivery of better standards or security (the US Presidential Election showed dramatically how such a process could unfold).

So the republication of Amy Buller's long-neglected classic, *Darkness over Germany*, is as timely as could be. Without insistently stressing any theory, she allows the central question about democracy's crisis in Germany to emerge from an astonishing variety of conversations with German citizens. And her conclusion is starkly clear: the collapse of German democracy and the rise of Fascism was rooted in a far-reaching collapse of any sense of the meaning of personal action in society. People had dwindling confidence in a broad range of historic institutions which had once offered attractive and credible narratives of a life well-lived; or else their work – or their lack of work – separated them from the possibility of meaningful activity, from a sense of making a distinctive and visible difference. To put it differently (and provocatively), Amy Buller identified the problem as the prevalence of a purely negative form of secularity, a disenchanting of traditional resources of meaning and a reduction of identity to a minimal and functional level, with only the most limited 'mythology' of human capacity or dignity to put in the place of what had been lost. Her commitment in later life to the work of Cumberland Lodge was grounded in this analysis. She was by no means an advocate of some sort of religious revival as a solution to all the ills of modernity, but she was



convinced that unless there was sustained public discussion of what counted as meaningful and creative action for human beings, the political future was bleak. The world of politics, the educational establishment, the churches, the networks of commerce and industry were all invited to address this with increased energy, and to do so with an informed awareness of the international context.

It was and is a formidable challenge, but one that has never been entirely silenced in recent decades. The institutions she addressed have changed greatly. The political world is narrower in many ways, a tightly defined career path dominated by communication and management. Educational institutions are both more diverse and more constrained, their ethos dominated by what seems an ever more feverish obsession with checkable results and preparation for the world of work. The churches are far weaker, seen as concerned with a limited range of personal moral questions, and they are part of a spectrum of religious identities. Global finance and the decline of manufacturing industry with its relative job security have created a working world shadowed by unprecedented financial volatility and pressure towards increasingly vulnerable employment patterns. But these very changes, once named for what they are, highlight why Amy Buller's challenge is so urgent just at the moment.

It is not easy to know where the leverage can be found to generate the kind of public conversation she longed for. But *Darkness over Germany* reminds us of two crucial things. One is very simple. We learn most about large-scale crises by attending carefully and honestly to what is actually being said by people. The second is the importance of thinking through these issues in appropriate depth, with appropriate patience and collaboration. Amy Buller was not a pessimist, but she worked with a deep sense of urgency. We need both that urgency and that fundamental faith in the future of 'the human phenomenon', which can still live, flourish and create, in public as well as personal life.

# Contributors

**Bonnie Evans-Hills** is an ordained priest in the Church of England and serves on the national Presence & Engagement Task Group, resourcing multi-faith parishes. She has considerable experience in inter-religious dialogue and spoke at the UN in New York for the launch of the Plan of Action for Faith Leaders on ending incitement to atrocities leading to genocide. Bonnie is co-author of *Engaging Islam from a Christian Perspective* (Peter Lang, 2015). Bonnie participated in CCJ's first seminar at Yad Vashem in 2007.

**Jeremy Howard** was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest for the Archdiocese of Birmingham in 1997 and is currently parish priest of the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in Hednesford. Jeremy is deeply engaged in interfaith affairs in Birmingham. He is Chair of the Birmingham Branch of CCJ and a member of the planning group for the annual Birmingham Jewish/Christian Study Day. Following participation in CCJ's seminar at Yad Vashem he continues to take an active part in Holocaust remembrance.

**Edmund Newell** is Principal of Cumberland Lodge and an Honorary Canon of Christ Church, Oxford. He was previously Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral and founding Director of St Paul's Institute. His publications include (editor and contributor) *Seven Words for the 21st Century* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005) and he is a regular contributor to *Pause for Thought* on BBC Radio 2.

**Amber Pierce** is the Amy Buller PhD Scholar at Royal Holloway, University of London and Cumberland Lodge, with a research interest in international criminal tribunals from the Nuremberg Trials to the present day. Amber has degrees in both History and Holocaust Studies from Royal Holloway, and is a volunteer at the Jewish Museum, London, where she gives talks on artefacts from the Holocaust.

**Rob Thompson** is a Programme Manager at CCJ. Rob graduated from the University of Oxford with a BA in History and Politics and is studying part-time for an MA in Jewish History and Culture through the Parkes Institute at the University of Southampton. He is the author of *At the bar of history, humanity and God: Archbishop William Temple and 75 years of the Council of Christians and Jews*, a free downloadable e-pamphlet from the William Temple Foundation.

**Salley Vickers** is the author of many acclaimed novels including the best-selling *Miss Garnet's Angel*, *Mr Golightly's Holiday*, *The Other Side of You* and *The Cleaner of Chartres*, and has a particular interest in the connections between, art, literature, psychology, and religion. Her latest book, *Cousins*, was published by Penguin in 2017. Salley has been a trustee of Cumberland Lodge since 2009.

# Session 1:

## A Catholic priest faces conflict

*Darkness over Germany, part I, chapter 2, pp. 17-23*  
**Bonnie Evans-Hills**

‘Why don’t the Germans stand out against the Nazis?’ This is the accusation Amy Buller examines in the chapter ‘A Catholic Priest faces Conflict’, through the story of the courageous stance of her friend, the Catholic priest Dr Heim, in his small Bavarian market town.

How many times do we hear similar accusations levelled against the vulnerable victims of what can be life-changing and deadly abuse today? ‘Why doesn’t the woman subjected to domestic abuse just leave?’ ‘Why didn’t the victim of sexual abuse report it?’ And then there are those who do try to stand up but are put down, such as the young black men relentlessly targeted by stop and search, told to be quiet and take it or they’ll make it worse for themselves. Accusations of failing to confront abusive behaviour are so easily made, but, as Dr Heim reminds us, often ‘in the safe and quiet firesides of England’ rather than on the streets or in hidden rooms where the violence takes place.

Dr Heim takes a quiet yet firm line between struggling to resist oppression and enabling his flock to survive and live to fight another day. He refuses to compromise his faith - to ‘praise Caesar’ - by never letting ‘Heil Hitler’ pass his lips. He teaches the children in his local school, and all his flock, to use instead the old German greeting ‘Grüss Gott’ (‘May God bless you’ or ‘May God greet you’). This refusal helps earn him a spell in prison and a ban from public speaking, except for preaching on Sunday, which he fears he is also under threat of losing.

Dr Heim’s struggle, and that of the local Catholic press, is to keep hold of some means of reaching out to the people and provide spiritual leadership,

political pressures at bay, as the bullies are now in charge and growing in power. Dr Heim's main concern is to keep his people safe, something he cannot do if he is returned to prison or executed. And who is it that uses the greeting he has taught them, 'Grüss Gott'? It is 'the elderly at prayer in their church', stormed by a group of arrogant young Nazis, and it is 'the children at school', and 'stout farmers in the street'. It is the ordinary folk, the lambs he is protecting from the slaughter, who have the courage to stand up to the bullies.

Words and slogans have power. It is not the case that, unlike sticks and stones, words never hurt. Rather, sticks and stones are often used to suppress the power of words. Words can stir memory and faith, and as such can be used to inspire for ill as well as good. It is the words of confession that the torturer seeks, the words of faith the zealot seeks to overturn. And sometimes words of faith are corrupted by the corrupt in an effort to poison those who hear them. Words similar to those Dr Heim uses have a deep meaning to those of another faith in another language: 'Allahu Akbar', or 'God is great', is an expression of hope to many Muslims, a declaration of faith and a source of joy. Yet, for some, it has been turned into a cry of impending terror. It is declaimed as a battle cry in the media, and to utter these words in public in the streets of the UK could risk arrest in the wrong context.

For most Muslims it is a travesty that their words of faith have become words of fear to many of their neighbours. Yet, as they seek to reclaim these words in their true meaning, Muslims are fearful of the wrath that may be brought upon them by the ignorant and misinformed.

There are a number of parallels between what Buller discusses in *Darkness over Germany* and issues relating to the media portrayal of Muslims and immigrants in the UK and Europe today. One parallel is the fear of an 'other', with covert power to usurp all that is British with an alien 'sharia' (another word misunderstood and misused), and which also provides an easy target to blame for unemployment, overcrowding, and the scarcity of public resources. Abusive rhetoric and hate speech which would have been considered unacceptable a few years ago have now become normalised. The rise in post-Brexit hate crime has not reduced to pre-referendum levels, and anyone with a foreign accent, whatever their skin colour or mode of dress, is in more danger of abuse on the street.

Yet some, like Dr Heim, are acting with courage to oppose such attitudes and behaviour. Groups such as Hope not Hate and Faith Matters are advocating a practice of 'upstanding' as opposed to being a 'bystander' and watching when someone is being abused in the street. If it is possible to do safely, this involves standing with the victim, engaging them in conversation, reporting to police, and recording the incident. In other words, it is about being the presence that does not stand back and expect the victim to face bullies alone, and it is about making abusive behaviour unacceptable in society at large.

Buller also raises questions about the media, through her discussion of the Catholic newspaper. In our times that most valuable commodity of a free and open society, the freedom of speech, is being eroded through its abuse. Social media is coming under considerable blame for the preponderance of trolls - those who use abusive and threatening words to bully others into either silence or submission. There are those who call for controls on language, in an effort to put an end to this kind of abuse. But who decides the boundaries? Who decides what speech is dangerous? What happens when 'speaking truth to power', as in the case of the Catholic newspaper Buller refers to, is interpreted as a danger to the state? Is it possible that those who claim this freedom to abuse words are the very ones putting that freedom at risk?

*Darkness over Germany* poses vital questions for us regarding standing up to those who abuse others, whether through words, by the use or threat of physical violence, or the fear of terror. It also highlights the risks and difficulties of responding to such abuse. As Dr Heim put it, 'We don't know the answer [to what we ought to have done], that is the heart of the tragedy. This enslavement is such that we have been taken unawares. And, whereas it often seems easy enough to judge, it is only with agony that one makes any decision these days.' Yet the cost of doing nothing can be catastrophic. We need no other reminder than what *Darkness over Germany* describes: the descent of humanity into warfare and the Holocaust.

### ***Questions for discussion:***

What abusive attitudes and behaviour do we see in our own communities and in society at large?

What might we do as individuals, and as members of families and faith communities, to address abusive attitudes and behaviour?

What words do you find meaningful and helpful, and what words incite fear or distrust?

Is there something you can draw upon from your faith tradition to inspire and empower you and your community to stand up against abusive behaviour?

# Session 2:

## The Tragedy of the Unemployed Student

***Darkness over Germany, part II, chapter 1, pp. 127-135***  
**Amber Pierce**

In the chapter 'The Tragedy of the Unemployed Student', Amy Buller raises some important issues about being a young person that are as relevant today as they were in the 1930s. Although the context is very different, Walter and Wilhelm's experiences parallel those of many young people now, in particular the struggle to find a place and role in society, and the resulting tensions that can develop with older generations.

The chapter describes two key interactions involving young people who have joined the Nazis: between Walter – who has faced a long period of unemployment – and his parents; and between Buller and Wilhelm, who is a friend of both Walter's family and of Buller.

While Walter and Wilhelm may feel a sense of redemption and renewed purpose having joined 'the Party', the older generation (represented here by Walter's parents and Buller herself) struggle with the young men's life choices. Walter's parents, who are Christians, voice opposing attitudes that are frequently expressed within society when someone is perceived to be misguided. On the one hand, Walter's father is abrupt and unforgivingly judgemental about his son's decision; on the other, Walter's mother takes a softer approach, whilst searching for a logical justification for her son's actions.

Buller's attitude represents a middle way between these two stances. She is highly sympathetic to Wilhelm (and no doubt to Walter, also), understanding the pressures that he is under, but at the same time she is deeply concerned



about what he is now involved with, and about the dark undertones behind the Party's ethos. This concern leads to a sharp exchange about Nazism and religion, with Wilhelm asking her, 'how can you ... say we are anti-Christian? ... tell, me, is it not religious to believe that there is a purpose for everyone in this life?'

In their dialogue, Wilhelm expresses his frustration about Buller's generation and its reliance upon what he perceives as 'false hopes'. This is clearly demonstrated by his response to Buller's bewilderment about Karl, another bright student known to Buller and Wilhelm who committed suicide because he felt there was no place for him in society. 'What do you mean? There must have been a place for him?' exclaims Buller. Wilhelm responds: 'God, how awful it was!' His exasperation demonstrates how the disillusioned student population, of which Wilhelm was a part, were indeed 'living by an experience which people outside just don't understand'.

It is something of a cliché to say that each generation feels it is misunderstood by its elders. Wilhelm felt that, whilst Buller was attempting to understand the psychological logic of the Nazis, she could never truly grasp it because she could not comprehend the suffering of his generation. Wilhelm had a point. Nonetheless, what also becomes clear is that deep-down Wilhelm knows that Buller understands more about his state of mind than he is initially willing to let on. She can see he is compromising his principles, albeit for very understandable reasons. He eventually concedes: 'For God's sake, don't raise any further conflict in me.'

The pressures that students and young people are under today, at least in the UK, are very different to those faced by Walter and Wilhelm. Nevertheless, there are significant pressures, and they are still causing tensions between generations, not least between children and their parents. The burden of high levels of student debt, the high cost of getting onto the property ladder, the temptation to move back to live with the parents, the prospect of a very long working life, and ultimately of being less well-off than the post-war 'baby boom' generation are all stark realities for the twenty-first century student - and all issues that can be contentious across generations.

Most notably, a clear difference in generational goals and 'life landmarks' has

emerged due to the changing nature of society and the different economic pressures that students now live under, compared with a generation ago when many students benefited from a free or else heavily subsidised higher education. Consequently, many young people have begun to make compromises to get by – just as Wilhelm did – whilst trying to avoid too much judgement from peers. For example, there is more pressure than ever on graduates to seek lucrative employment rather than careers that are more vocational or beneficial to society. Finding meaningful employment as a graduate can also be tricky in a job market where experience is required in order to gain experience, and this can drive graduates into life choices that are either unfulfilling or else looked down upon by older generations.

Despite the increasing costs of higher education, more students are extending their time at university beyond an undergraduate course than ever before. There has been a significant rise in the number of postgraduate students in the UK in recent years, many of whom are attempting to gain a stand-out CV with a master's degree or doctorate to secure that ideal job. However, the concept of the 'perpetual student' who delays 'earning a living' can be viewed judgementally by those who never faced such employment pressures themselves. The phrase, 'When I was your age I was ...' seems to be banded about all-too frequently in relation to today's students, who face very different pressures to their parents and grandparents before them.

These issues extend beyond employment. The generational differences in voting seen in the EU referendum also exposed a fault-line in attitudes and outlook that created fresh intergenerational arguments within families and across society more broadly. This is not surprising, given the pace of change in society over the last two decades. Perhaps young people who have grown up with digital media and communications have a more global outlook than those who grew up in less well-connected times.

Walter's interaction with his father is a classic example of the tensions that can emerge in relationships with a generational gap. Arguably, it is the fear of judgement from our own families and the older generations, and the subsequent pressure to please, that is the greatest emotional burden on students today. But, as the chapter on 'The Tragedy of the Unemployed Student' suggests, perhaps this has always been the case, and there is a perpetual need to try to understand the pressures that young students are

under at such a formative time in their lives. An understanding of these pressures is what drove Buller, first of all in her work for the Student Christian Movement and later at Liverpool University and then Cumberland Lodge. As *Darkness over Germany* demonstrates, failure to address these pressures can have very serious consequences, not only in the short term but in shaping the future, and not only of individuals but of societies as a whole.

**Questions for discussion:**

What do you see as the biggest pressures facing today's student population?

Do you sympathise with Wilhelm or find him intolerable? Might people of different generations respond differently to him?

Are there contentious issues between people of different generations in your own families or faith communities? If so, how might they be addressed?

How could your faith community engage more with young people and support them?

# Session 3:

## In the Early Days - A Study in Contrasts

*Darkness over Germany, part I, chapter 13, pp. 116-121*  
**Salley Vickers**

To begin with, I must declare an interest. Before becoming a full time writer I worked for many years as a Jungian analyst. Amy Buller was a very close friend of Irene Champernowne, who was the training analyst for my own training analyst, Anthony Stevens (to clarify: a 'training analyst' is one by whom a prospective analyst is psychoanalysed while undergoing a professional training). Anthony became first a colleague, then a dear friend and consequently I knew about Amy before reading this book. And I also know that Irene, who was analysed by both Adler and by Jung, travelled to Germany, encouraged by Amy, immediately after the war to work with families, both German and those English families stationed in post-war Germany, where she brought many of her Jungian insights to bear.

One of Jung's most valuable theoretical concepts was that of 'the shadow', the aspect of our psyche that he suggests we repress, relegate, refuse to recognise and project on to others where they become objects of our hate. This propensity is discernable not only in relationships between individuals but in the larger relationships of international politics, most significantly in the conflicts which lead to war. Hitler's projections onto the Jews is a classic example of how a collective shadow projection works. Only a Holocaust denier could nowadays fail to observe that the very 'evils' that the Jews were accused of - rampant greed, exploitation, and hunger for power - were to be found in horrific abundance in the character of Hitler himself and in the Nazi policies he nurtured and promulgated. It is also a well-established fact that at times of deprivation a focus for blame can provide psychic relief. Sadly, despite the evidence of Nazi Germany, we are still all too familiar with this

phenomenon today, when lack of jobs or housing, lowered incomes or educational disadvantage leads to racial and religious intolerance and all the consequent injustices and atrocities that this can spark. The economic effects on Germany, resulting from the now infamous Treaty of Versailles, produced a population in desperate need of an explanation for their parlous economic state and unwittingly seeking an easy target to blame. Nothing was simpler than to ignite a latent antisemitism which, for reasons that have never been adequately explained, has been simmering within the murkier depths of society for centuries. (I have never bought the old canard that this has to do with the so-called Jewish involvement with the death of Jesus: Jesus is only another excuse, poor man, for something much less visibly identifiable).

One of the features of Buller's book is that it is without the bias that inevitably coloured post-Second World War accounts of the German people. She is able to write with unselfconsciousness about the seemingly positive aspects of the Nazi influence – as she does here with her account of the energised youth of Germany expressing an optimism and unity which, as she says, 'rightly directed [might] prove very valuable' – in contrast to the dissolute aimlessness of the generation before. As it happens, I have had a first-hand experience of someone brought up in this regime. My class teacher in my penultimate year of primary school had been a member of the Hitler youth. He was captured and became a POW in England and after the war he met and married an English woman, settled in England and trained as a teacher of mathematics. But the prejudice evoked by his German nationality made employment in the secondary school system impossible and it was only the lucky fact that the head of the state primary school I attended was a rather exceptional character that Mr Leibschner was appointed to teach in our school.

Over time, he and his family became close friends of my family and he was initially astounded to learn that my mother, a double amputee, had lost her legs aged twenty-two in a German bombing raid and that my father had spent the greater part of the war in German POW camps, latterly in a punishment camp where he expected to be killed. Astounded, because he couldn't credit my parents' willingness to forgive him his youthful political naivety, the more so because he had taken as universal the punitive habits of thought of the system for which he had fought. He talked very openly - with

regret and shame - of the effect of the Nazi propaganda on young people like himself: the hope it seemed to offer, the apparent appeal to patriotism, the captivating sense of camaraderie and purpose, and most of all the blatant twisting of truth of a kind that has reasserted itself in our own 'post-truth' times.

I owe this teacher a good deal (not least that observing my general boredom in class he sent me, aged nine years, off by myself to 'write a novel' – my first). But above all he taught me that it is possible to be a decent human being and be persuaded of wholly wrong and dangerous ideas, indeed to be the victim of wrong and dangerous ideas which few of us, during our years of innocence, would have the necessary experience or critical capacity to see through. And through him I first became aware of how propaganda works at the deepest psychic levels to relieve us of the anxiety of existential uncertainty.

In this regard, Buller's setting of the Jewish situation, the frightened but stalwart old lady and the equally terrified but plucky young wife of the Pastor who stood by his Christian principles, against that of the exultant heedless Aryan youth is especially telling. It illustrates another common psychological tendency which is to boost self esteem through the degradation of a certain kind of perceived strength. The proposed Aryan superiority, the *Übermensch*, which became the trademark of Nazi ideology, is in reality a flight from a sense of inferiority. Jewish culture has always been defined by the very high premium it places on family, on family loyalty and support and the religious rites that sustain this. It is this, I suspect, that incited in pre-war Germany the kind of envy that needs to destroy what appears a threat, be it the threat of Jewish or Christian integrity, much in the way that cultivated intellectuals were perceived a threat in Stalinist Russia. The wealth that became the palpable target of German envy was only the outward index of an inner wealth that showed up a corresponding poverty on the part of those who ruthlessly grabbed it for their own, a psychic process which is by no means uncommon in contemporary forms today.

Buller's account is a sobering reminder of the kind of dangers inherent in any populist movement. And it warns too that we can never assume that any of us are immune from the kind of self deception or failure of awareness that my old school teacher was honest enough to admit to and lived to lament.

**Questions for discussion:**

What instances of projecting 'the shadow' do we see in society today?

What 'wrong and dangerous ideas' might we have been unwitting victims of during our lifetime?

How can we protect ourselves and others from being swept along by populist movements?

What are the most valuable insights you have gained from encountering those with strikingly different views or experiences from your own?

# Session 4:

## Professor Braun

### **Darkness over Germany, part II, chapters 2-4, pp. 136-154**

#### **Edmund Newell**

Professor Braun is one of the most engaging characters in *Darkness over Germany*. Amy Buller describes this philosopher, who is both a scholar and ‘a man of the world in the best sense of the term’, as ‘one of the most remarkable Germans I have ever met’. Given her description of his intelligence, warmth, lively mind, and sense of humour it’s little wonder that Buller enjoyed Professor Braun’s company.

Professor Braun appears first in ‘A Professor Meets the SS at Midnight’. In this chapter we hear of how he and his wife are being monitored by the Gestapo, under suspicion – probably correctly – of harbouring scholars, including Jews, who were under threat from the Nazis, with SS officers paying regular visits to search their home. Professor Braun is unfazed by these encounters and greets his unwelcome visitors with good humour and hospitality. ‘Just decide which room you want to examine while I tell my wife it is coffee and cakes for four’, he tells one group of young officers. Such a response was clearly unexpected and no doubt disarming, but it also enabled the professor to strike up an unlikely rapport with one of the officers, 19 year-old Hermann. We are told how Hermann returned alone one night, in distress, to see the professor and to bare his soul, especially his fear of being posted to work in a concentration camp.

In the following two chapters, ‘The Professor Discusses Nazi Philosophy and Students’, Buller recalls two meetings with Professor Braun in which he explains why he thinks young people like Hermann are so susceptible to Nazism. He traces it back to the immediate period after the First World War, and the search by young Germans for something positive to strive for after such a catastrophic time. The search, he said, was initially idealistic, but as



economic conditions improved and society became more stable, idealism gave way to pragmatism and the opportunities afforded by new technology and through sport. This brief period of hope came to an abrupt halt with the economic collapse following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and youthful optimism was replaced by disillusionment and pessimism – not least among the highly educated, with extremely high rates of unemployment for recent university graduates.

The professor goes on to argue that this caused young people to revolt against a political system that had failed them, and against the standards and values of the older generations. He believed that these shattered hopes made young Germans of the 1930s particularly susceptible to Nazism, which offered something different and radical - not only the political rebirth of the nation, but a new philosophy of life. In this sense, according to the professor, Nazism is more than a political movement, it is a 'political faith' – a substitute for religion – and one in which young people, in particular, projected their longings for and expectations of better times onto its leader, or Führer.

For people such as Hermann, this initial enthusiasm for Nazism dissipated once they realised its more sinister dimensions. But Hermann, by then, was trapped both by the hold the movement had gained over society and by peer pressure. The Brauns were worried that unless Hermann could escape quickly he would become desensitised to what appalled him about Nazism and give in.

Hermann's plight is an extreme instance of what many of us experience. Seeking something to believe in that can offer us a sense of belonging and purpose seems to be part of the human condition. Perhaps this is especially the case for those in early adulthood who are starting to make their own way in the world – perhaps even self-consciously rejecting the standards and values of their parents and grandparents in the process. No doubt it is also one reason why people are drawn to organised religion.

Yet it is also the case that this spiritual stirring in early adulthood often leads to a time of questioning and struggle, sometimes prompted by events in our personal lives or in the world at large. It might lead to something as fundamental as doubting the existence of God, or challenging the doctrines

and teaching of our faith community – for example, over sexuality, or the use of artificial contraception. These are perfectly understandable responses as we grapple with the uncertainties and complexities of faith and of living faithfully.

Hermann's initial enthusiasm and idealism were eroded by the reality of what he experienced. Nazism did not give him the latitude to express or discuss his concerns, or the freedom of choice to say 'no' – it was all or nothing. The result was inner turmoil and an urge to seek help, but with little prospect of being able to escape.

Religious cults that operate along similar lines can be deeply harmful, but there can also be a coercive dimension to mainstream religion. Faith ultimately involves placing trust in that which cannot be proven, so doubt and uncertainty are natural aspects of faithful living. Faith communities that fail to help their members explore and discuss their doubts and concerns do them a deep disservice. If these questions are ignored, it is all too easy for people to drift away from their faith because they do not feel that they belong, or else to stay put but to feel inadequate or guilty.

Hermann found in Professor Braun someone who took him seriously and did not judge him for the situation he was in. The professor understood Hermann's anxiety and how it had arisen from his search for a better world, and he gave Hermann the time and confidence to share his innermost thoughts and feelings. Professor Braun set an example that we can all learn from, both as individuals and as faith communities. Perhaps his understanding attitude towards Hermann was rooted in his own experience of faith, which we glimpse in his response to the young officers who retorted that, like the professor, Hitler also believed in God. The professor answered, 'Well, it's funny how differently it takes different people!'

**Questions for discussion:**

How could your faith community meet the needs of young people searching for meaning and purpose?

How comfortable do you feel when discussing doubts or troublesome issues within your faith community?

How might you respond to someone like Hermann, who has got trapped in something and wants to escape?

What are the 'false religions' of our age, and how might we respond to them?

# Session 5:

## The Courage of Children who opposed Nazis

*Darkness over Germany, part I, chapter 12, pp. 106-115*  
**Jeremy Howard**

In the chapter 'The Courage of Children who Opposed Nazis', Amy Buller provides four vignettes or 'pictures' of young Germans acting in defiance of the Nazi culture. The first is of a 15 year-old schoolgirl during a lesson at a Silesian Girls' School. We are told that after her Nazi teacher describes the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War, as 'the most vindictive and brutal treaty of modern times', the schoolgirl bravely asks, 'what sort of treaty do you think the Germans would have made if they had won the war?', for which she is thrown out of the classroom. Later that evening, the schoolgirl meets with her friends to draw up the imagined treaty, which is left on the teacher's desk. Described by her mother as 'good young Germans', the schoolgirl replies, 'we are bored young Germans', and says of the teacher, 'it was great fun to make her so angry.'

This picture shows the girls enjoying their schoolgirl prank, which is an act of resistance against their stifling oppression. It also shows, in the attitude of the teacher, the great danger of talking down to young people.

The second picture is of Esther, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. As her family sing hymns at their home, 11 year-old Esther opens the windows to 'let other people know that we are as proud to sing our Christian hymns as the Nazis are to sing their songs.' Esther then tells Buller how she has formed a group for other Lutheran girls who have committed to Bible reading and prayer, and to leaving the Nazi League of German Girls. While this is happening, Esther's small brother Fritz builds a street scene with bricks and spits into it, explaining that one of the people on the street is a Jew and that he had been told by his teacher to spit when passing a Jew. Fritz, of course, did not

understand what he had absorbed in the classroom.

In this picture, we see how the faith of Esther's family gives her strength and the ability to see through Nazi propaganda as she joins with others to find strength; yet the family is unable to protect young Fritz from the poison of Nazism at his school.

The third picture is of a teenage girl, Hilda, a member of the Hitler Maids who has become disillusioned with Nazism after the imprisonment of the famous Lutheran pastor, Dr Martin Niemöller. Hilda is late for a family lunch on Whit Monday, the day after the Christian feast of Pentecost. When she finally arrives we discover that earlier she had gone with her school, where she had endured a hate filled, pro-Nazi sermon. Hilda was also enraged to learn that morning of the arrest of her friend's father, a well-respected pastor and war hero, and so had stormed off to the house of the local Nazi leader to complain about the arrest and to warn him that she and many other keen members of Nazi youth groups will leave the Party if this sort of thing continued.

In the discussion that follows, Hilda's father expresses mixed views about Nazism. He is positive about the employment the Nazis has given young people, but also aware of the bad things that they have done, which he attributes to leaders who are 'ignorant and vulgar'. He hopes that the Nazis will be reformed and that the excesses of Nazism will die down. Her grandfather, however, thinks this is naive hope and warns, 'we shall pay bitterly for our apathy and compromise.'

The final picture is of 16 year-old Johann, a member of the Hitler Youth. In November 1938, during the notorious *Kristallnacht* pogrom, Johann is shocked to see elderly Jews being beaten in the street by SS men as his school mates jeer. Soon after, when Johann's school gathers for a Christmas celebration, the local Nazi leader makes a coarse speech and gets the school to sing an anti-Jewish song, followed by the infamous Nazi anthem, the 'Horst Wessel'. Immediately Johann, whose attitude to Nazism has changed as a result of these experiences, pushes his way through to the piano and nervously begins to play 'Silent Night'. Some boys hum along. After rushing home from school, Johann is visited by a sympathetic teacher and then resigns from the Hitler Youth, knowing that for the foreseeable future he cannot go to university. Despite all this, Johann finds happiness and inner strength.

These four examples show how young people can get caught up with groups, movements and causes, and the tensions this can lead to. At least three of the four young people had joined Nazi youth groups. No doubt they had been encouraged to do so, perhaps by their teachers, and were swept along with their friends. They probably thought joining a group would be fun and worthwhile. All of them, however, begin to see through the sham, and their moral awareness leads them to take a stand against what they had become involved with. This took considerable courage. Many of their contemporaries, of course, did not share either their sense of outrage, or have their courage of conviction.

### ***Questions for discussion:***

Hilda has to push past the guards to confront the local Nazi leader and explains that you can do things 'if you are angry enough.' What things should make us angry today and spur us into action?

With the benefit of hindsight we can condemn compromises with Nazism, but can we think of compromises that we have made that we should perhaps question?

Distorted versions of history (including antisemitic tropes) are widely disseminated on the internet. How should we respond to this?

How can we help our young people meet and enjoy the company of their counterparts from other faiths and cultures?

# Session 6: Epilogue

## ***Darkness over Germany, epilogue, pp. 229-337*** **Rob Thompson**

Amy Buller's epilogue marks a change in comparison to the previous chapters of *Darkness over Germany*. She is no longer visiting the Germany of the 1930s but is, instead, back home in the UK talking to students at Liverpool University in the summer of 1942.

It is worth noting that Buller's conversation with her students takes place at a critical juncture in the Second World War, six months after the entry of the United States into the conflict and just five months after the Wannsee Conference, at which senior Nazi officials met to coordinate their plans for the Final Solution, the destruction of European Jewry.

Millions of deaths were to come in the final three years of the war, and victory for the Allied nations was, at this point, by no means certain. But Buller and her students are looking to the future. They discuss the need, through education and dialogue, to build a community where young people are able to meaningfully contribute to the public sphere, and in doing so create a better future out of wartime destruction. The theme of this chapter is, therefore, the potential for reconstructing life and hope, even after the greatest crisis or tragedy.

In her epilogue, one of Buller's primary concerns is to encourage realistic hope. She begins by reflecting on the uncertainty of the 1930s for young people, noting how precarious the future seemed for her students, especially in the latter part of the decade. When she notes the hope that students had for the future, she asks the potent question, 'But what if there were no future?'

Such a question will seem familiar to many of us at the present time. After all,

the millennial generation is the first since that of Buller's students to be entering society with worse prospects in many aspects of their lives than their parents. The fear of the great expanse of opportunity that is out there but so difficult to grasp is a very real one in the contemporary world.

Countering the danger of an unfulfilled hope is the realistic appreciation of how hope might be put into practice. Buller writes of the 'unexpressed but profound demand that life should not be thwarted'. Hope is not enough on its own. Hope must be realistic enough to have the possibility of being put into practice; hope must reflect practical potential for steps towards fulfilling the dream and bringing it into being.

The need for action alongside ambition is therefore essential for not missing the opportunity which hope expresses. There is a palpable feeling of urgency in the questions Buller poses her students about reconstruction after the war. Out of the awareness of hope she directs the reader towards the choice of how to make a better future. She sees the active participation of young people in society as essential for giving them a sense of purpose and creating a feeling of involvement in working for the common good. Buller's students put it well: 'as a generation left school or university, it should know it was wanted' having 'a part to play in fulfilling a purpose, which means that they can look into the future with confidence.'

If the future seems difficult to grasp, the only possibility for its fulfilment is for purpose to be given to people so that they are in a position to choose to make it a reality. Nevertheless, Buller does not suggest that this will be easy. She does not pretend that progress is inevitable or change is simple. Instead, she challenges her own community to work continually for better days to arrive. Whilst she acknowledges a 'British version of the Nazi Party' is unlikely, she argues that the extreme nature of Nazism should mean her community should have even greater resilience against its creeping potential to gain ground even there.

While it is true that history does not repeat itself in exactly the same way, it is often said that history rhymes. Precisely because history seems so distant, we must know history in order to warn against the signs of extremism, division, and hate in our own communities. What then, does Buller suggest we do?



The epilogue concludes with a reflection on the moral duty each of her students has in shaping the future:

[I]t will also be your responsibility to avoid two dangers. In the first place to refuse to invest any political, economic, or social organization of society with a pseudo-religious significance in which you put your whole faith. On the other hand to avoid having a religion or faith which fails to make an attempt, or if need be by many attempts, to order society, whether nationally or internationally, on a pattern that is a true, if only a partial, expression of the faith and fellowship you profess to accept.

The current generation faces a different world to the one which Buller and her students looked out upon over 70 years ago. The challenges which we contend with are not the same as those of the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, challenges there are. Indeed, compared with the choices which troubled Buller and her students in the summer of 1942, our communities have a startlingly similar moral dilemma to confront: it is the question of how to make a positive contribution to the future when our hopes seem so far away from what is possible in a hostile world.

In her epilogue, Buller conceives a link between understanding people, giving space to individual fulfilment for the benefit of the community, and enabling the practical choice of good over evil. The moral dilemma might be a question we struggle to answer, but in attempting to contend with its challenges then we are, at least, closer to its reckoning. It is therefore left for us, in all of our situations, with the weight of history behind us and the unknown challenges ahead, to have the courage to act: to conceive of our own potential to shape the fate of our communities. 'The chance', as Buller puts it, is enough.

With the opportunity to act on the ideals of our faith, comes the realistic hope that those beliefs may be put into practice for the benefit of the future and the stories of everyday folk, whose lives may be forever changed as a result. It is up to us to make it a positive change for all.

### **Questions for discussion:**

If history rhymes, how can we use memory of the past to make a better future?

What are your hopes, for yourself and for your community? Can you see a way for you to participate in making hope a reality?

What role should people of faith have in shaping our society's future?

What is the most important insight you will take away from studying *Darkness over Germany*?

# Closing reflections

***Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg is Senior Rabbi of Masorti Judaism UK, Rabbi of the New North London Synagogue, and a President of the Council of Christians and Jews***

An essential question when we finish reading as courageous and remarkable a book as *Darkness Over Germany* is how we take its insights into our own social and historical context and embrace them as part of our own attitude and actions.

Among the many remarkable qualities of Amy Buller's writing is that she is sharply alert to the wider resonance of the issues she describes. Her purpose is not solely to explore the evils of Nazism, but to examine its causes. Unemployment, hopelessness, the feeling that one's life is useless and one's talents unwanted; these reasons are brought up time and again by the young people she encounters in their accounts of why they have become devotees of Nazi ideology. They feel that the party has restored to them a sense of hope and purpose; it has provided them not only with employment but with a higher goal, a sense of destiny. Buller is well aware that these social and existential concerns are by no means unique to Germany.

Eighty years later, following another world recession, we are once again witnessing the rise of nationalism and religious fanaticism. We too need to ask what dangers our own society may be courting when many, especially young, people feel left out of the wealth bubble, deprived of opportunity and in search of a sense of purpose.

An equally striking feature of Amy Buller's interviews is her readiness to listen. She never categorises the Germans as 'them' in opposition to some superior 'us'. Time and again she travels across an increasingly risky divide, geographically, politically and emotionally, to listen to the discourse on the other side. She wants to comprehend why; she wants to understand the moral and psy-

-chological struggles both of those who turn to Nazism and of those who refuse to do so. She rejects a simplistic discourse of 'for us or against us', ally or enemy, treacherous or true. In so doing, she implicitly challenges us to do likewise in the way in which we think and speak about groups with whom we disagree, however radically.

Some of the most moving moments in *Darkness over Germany* are those in which Buller touches on these complexities, such as in her meeting with Wilhelm, the young Nazi who says to her 'I cannot face uncertainty and conflict again', or in her encounter with the brilliant Nazi lecturer Dr Weber whom she describes as a traitor to his true self. While exposing their inner weakness, she also appreciates the apparent benefits which Nazism has brought them: a new sense of meaning, discipline and the readiness for self-sacrifice. She thus invites her readers, too, to reflect on the temptations proffered by seductive ideologies and their false gods, especially when devotion to them brings the benefits of passion and motivation seemingly absent in the arid range of dull alternatives. These issues are sharply relevant across the globe today.

However, Buller never confuses understanding with agreement. While trying to fathom the causes which made so many embrace Nazism with such misguided enthusiasm, she never loses her own moral compass. She knows that those who have become Nazis have 'sold themselves to the Party', degrading themselves and the positions they represent. This poses the question of how we gain significant insight into attitudes with which we disagree, sometimes powerfully, while maintaining our own values and moral clarity.

Among the subtlest portraits Buller draws are those of the men and women opposed to Nazism. She reveals with great empathy the complexity of the dilemmas with which they are faced: the teacher who decides that flight would leave his students with no alternative voice to the strident Nazism of the new young teachers at his school, yet who knows that he cannot oppose them openly without courting dismissal or arrest; the priest who, in God's name, quietly imbues his community with the higher values of spiritual resistance.

These men are forced to display not just courage but cunning in the face of a brutal regime with ears and eyes in every corner. In drawing us in to their multi-layered worlds, she once again rejects a simplistic formula in which people are either for Nazism or stand up publicly against it. She thus forces us

to consider how hard it can be to reject tyranny and what inner strengths such resistance must require.

Altogether, *Darkness over Germany* is a protest against over-simplification and populism. Unlike the Nazi Wilhelm who begs Buller not to complicate his world, we are called upon to face complexity and reject one-sided propaganda. Perhaps even more than in the 1930s, we live in the age of the soundbite when the story which wins out on both social and conventional media is frequently not the most true but the most retweeted. The very foundations of empiricism are at risk, with its key claim that, at least in certain areas of life, there is such a thing as verifiable evidence as opposed to alternative facts and fake news. We therefore need to ponder very carefully the dangers of sloganism, populism, and prejudice, and affirm, if not so much our commitment to single unshakeable truths, at least our categorical opposition to the promulgation of what is verifiably false.

Last, but not least, should be the impact on us of what we know today about the brutality, violence, larceny, and mass organised murder for which Nazism was responsible. We know today how quickly both perpetrators and bystanders disclaimed responsibility, averring that they 'knew nothing', that they had no idea of the crimes committed by the regime they supported and from which they gained, often greatly and grossly, while turning a blind eye.

We don't want to be counted among those whom future generations will judge to have known but refused to notice, watched but failed to act, while we benefitted from social injustice, climate crime, bigotry and prejudice. We owe it to each other, ourselves, and our common humanity to engage with right and wrong.

# Notes

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