

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Doris L. Bergen. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xiii + 341 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4560-8; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2253-1.

Reviewed by Dirk Moses (Australian National University, Canberra)  
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The German Christians were a relatively small but highly disruptive element within German Protestantism that pursued the goal of harmonizing Christianity (or what they understood Christianity to be) with National Socialism. Their project was to “arianise” both Holy Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ—in short, to rid traditional Christianity of all putatively Jewish components. The German Christians were thus committed to a cult of the *Volk*, to the idea of racial purity and to adulation of the *Fuehrer*. All these things, so they argued, were inherent in the being of the true unadulterated Germanic people. Their religious practice consisted in preaching a manly, anti-effeminate, essentially Germanic gospel and the singing of patriotic songs and hymns of praise to the Fuehrer, who was equated with the Saviour. It was a movement without serious theology, which refused to countenance any intellectual debate or dogma. Its only binding principle was a sentimental feeling of belonging together.

There are many reasons to welcome Doris Bergen’s diligently researched and clearly written investigation of this curious movement. First, it shows that even in the country where theological studies had been developed to their most sophisticated level, there could emerge a totally unscientific, irrational and essentially anti-Christian movement claiming that there was no essential difference between National Socialism and the Gospel of Christ. This raises the problem of how academic theology is received at the grass roots, indeed, how people, including pastors, appropriate “twisted” ideas, regard them as normative, and actually base their lives on them.

Second, the study is important because it contributes

to the discussion about the essential character of National Socialism itself as a religion of nature (see Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* [London: Croom Helm, 1986]). Here Bergen shows how close the German Christians were to the Nazis, and at the same time how far they were from comprehending the Nazis’ real agenda with regard to Christianity. The project of bringing the two into alignment was naive and hare-brained, but the mystery is that so many people thought it could be done. Thus the book helps us better to understand the religious dimension of National Socialism and that era in Germany.

Third, Bergen underlines how basic to nationalism religion can be. Her book may be profitably read in conjunction with *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, edited by William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Lehmann’s chapter on Germany, “‘God Our Old Ally’: The Chosen People Theme in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Nationalism,” reveals the roots of the German Christians’ central idea, namely that the Germans, by virtue of their historical experience, having rescued true Christianity at the time of the Reformation, and by their supposed purity of blood and sheer cultural superiority, were destined to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

Bergen shows that several strands in German intellectual history were bound together in the German Christian movement. It is comprehensible as a product of popular piety (*Volksfroemdigkeit*) in German Protestantism, amalgamated with the *voelkisch* movement of the nineteenth century, which saw in blood and race the main forces of history. But what also contributed were the

German schools of scientific theology. The so-called liberal school associated with Adolf von Harnack, which argued in Hegelian categories that the will of the state was virtually in accordance with the will of Almighty God, created a climate of thought that led to an apotheosis of the German state. Certainly under these conditions, theology could never become an instrument of political criticism. This was reinforced by the *Ordnungstheologen*, who in the 1920s designated the *Volk* as a God-given factor—that is, an “order” in Creation, which had a divine right to realize itself as an essential part of *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of salvation. Thus race was prioritized over those apparently “color blind” and racially inclusive sections of the New Testament which, in the Western liberal mind, make Christianity a source for cosmopolitan values. Bergen, of course, refers to this, but it is an aspect of the origins of the German Christians that could have perhaps been fleshed out more. German scientific theology reflected the self-perception of German society; alternatively it was an expression of the *Zeitgeist*.

That said, it is valuable to have this case study of an extreme form of religious bigotry that is by no means unique in the world today. People still tend to believe what they want to believe and to marginalize, dehumanize and even exterminate those who do not conform to their version of how the world should be constituted. From today’s Western perspective the German Christians are a grotesque curiosity. But it is sobering to be reminded that very little separated them from the more conservative elements in the Confessing Church. In many cases the latter supported the Nazis’ foreign and domestic policies with the great exception being the Aryan paragraphs of the Civil Service law of April 1933, which required the dismissal of pastors of Jewish extrac-

tion. This unleashed considerable debate because the old Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, which denied the state the right to interfere in the church’s competence to order its own affairs, was invoked. If the church baptized Jews and even ordained them to the pastorate, that was its business. Seen in retrospect, it was the key factor in the resistance that was mounted by the Confessing Church led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Martin Niemöller. And here Bergen’s work reminds us to maintain a differentiated assessment of the actual role of the Confessing Church in the Third Reich. Not all adherents, by any means, endorsed the theology or actions of a Bonhoeffer who struggled against the odds to make his Church free of anti-Semitism and to become enthusiastically ecumenical and pacifist.

Finally, Bergen’s book is important because it illustrates the paradox between those who could still prioritize the mythic claims of the national community and thereby justify all manner of injustice and the violation of human rights, and those like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He emerged from the same Lutheran tradition, yet was able, out of that tradition, to become a martyr for human rights. In that Bergen lays bare the bizarre racism, crass anti-intellectualism, blatant sexism, and brutal sentimentality of the German Christian movement and demonstrates the extraordinary difficulty of providing a rational explanation for human behavior. That not a few German Christians found their way back into the German Protestant Church after 1945 as though nothing had happened is a chilling thought.

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