



FAITH AND FATHERLAND

Kyle Jantzen. *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. vii + 247 pp. \$25.42 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8006-2358-6.



Reviewed by Beth A. Griech-Polelle (Department of History, Bowling Green State University)

Published on H-German (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Protestant Church Conflict in the Local Arena

Kyle Jantzen's book offers readers valuable insight into the possibilities of Christian responses to National Socialism in Germany. More specifically, Jantzen traces parish experiences of German Lutherans living in three large towns: Nauen (northwest of Berlin); Pirna (southeast of Dresden); and Ravensburg (in the southernmost portion of Württemberg). His study seeks to examine how local church conditions were transformed during the Nazi regime and how the church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) impacted these three local churches. By offering readers a history of Protestant church-Nazi state relationships from the "bottom-up" perspective, Jantzen moves away from the usual "top-down" explanation of the *Kirchenkampf* and provides insights into the kinds of issues that interested average German Protestants of the 1930s. For specialists in the field of church history, Jantzen's work offers a broader understanding of the experience of some of the sixty million Protestants living under Hitler's regime.

In his opening chapter, Jantzen captures some of the fervor that gripped German Protestants in the first en-

thusiastic wave of support for Adolf Hitler. He asks what motivated so many Protestant ministers to embrace the new political climate in Germany and whether their enthusiasm translated into support for Hitler's policies. What Jantzen finds is that, in all three districts he researched, the desire for national, moral renewal was such that most clergymen advocated support for the new government. In most cases, the clergy were inspired, believing that they would become Hitler's partners in bringing about the moral renewal of a decadent Germany; many also believed they were helping in the fight against "godless Bolshevism," and finally, most of them endorsed the idea of obedience to the state. The second chapter flows naturally to the year 1933, when church leaders and parishioners alike had to grapple not only with a new form of government, but also with attempts by the German Christian movement to seize as much control as possible within Protestantism. Jantzen reveals that 1933 turned out to be a pivotal moment for most Protestants on the parish level; in the wake of the initiatives of local clergy, ecclesiastical politics often became polarized.

In Pirna, Jantzen's research reveals, many pastors were swept away by the excitement of potential moral renewal at first, but after realizing that most parishioners were motivated in their enthusiasm by politics and not out of true religious devotion, the same pastors either joined the Bekennende Kirche quietly or tried to join a group that advocated a moderate position.

Chapter 3 reveals just how important the church-political views of local clergymen actually were in parishes across Germany. Through an examination of pastoral appointments and their potential for conflict, Jantzen argues quite effectively that local power struggles reveal a great deal about the grassroots level of the church struggle. Factional struggles over the installation of pastors significantly impacted the daily lives of everyday German Protestants. In following Jantzen's discussion of each of his regions, readers can see the maneuvering, manipulating, and in-fighting that frequently occurred over the issue of just who the next pastor might be. In many of the case studies, Jantzen's work reveals the greater skills of the Bekennende Kirche in placing member pastors, or at least less regime-friendly clergy, in parishes, in comparison with the German Christians. This conclusion is particularly important, as it reveals the degree of weakness of German Christian influence in some regions of Germany and highlights the flexibility of clergy and laypeople in the often intense struggles of parish politics.

Once appointed, most local pastors had to grapple with National Socialist racial and antisemitic policies that surrounded their everyday lives. Jantzen asks whether Protestant clergy in his districts rejected Nazi antisemitism or the euthanasia campaign. His short answer is quite depressing: most Protestant pastors felt too overwhelmed and/or afraid to worry about German Jews or about the fate of the mentally ill or physically handicapped. Although a few pastors spoke out in defense of persecuted Jews, many others tried to separate Protestantism from its Judaic roots. Likewise, many of the ministers of Nauen, Pirna, and Ravensburg who discussed Nazi racial theories endorsed the idea of the spiritual unity of Christians, but not necessarily social or political unity for all. The euthanasia campaign was particularly hard to ignore for people living in the Pirna region, since the town of Sonnenstein housed one of the killing centers for the top-secret government program. Again, what emerges is silence on the part of the local clergy, with no

church press or local papers describing delivery of victims, smoke-filled air, or even the foul stench of burned corpses. Here, Jantzen's research underscores the willingness of pastors affiliated with the Bekennende Kirche to fight for local church rights, but an inability or unwillingness to confront the Nazi government in the name of justice for the weak and defenseless.

The final three chapters address the issue of the *Kirchenkampf* and how it impacted parish life. In each case study, Jantzen attempts to answer several questions about the ways in which local ministers might have engaged in the church-political struggle (if at all); what types of issues they were most concerned about if they did engage in battle; and how clergymen were affected by interaction with fellow pastors, parishioners, and local Nazi leaders. Here readers can see the diversity and complexity of each parish's experience. In some cases, confessing church pastors were willing to face jail, intimidation tactics, and loss of salary in order to maintain their beliefs. In other cases, one encounters men such as Pastor Friedrich Siems, a member of the Nazi Party and a German Christian leader who combined his anti-semitism with fervent nationalism and anti-Bolshevism. Jantzen also mentions moderates who desperately tried to steer a middle course between outright membership in the Bekennende Kirche and the German Christian movement. In all of the case studies, we see how an individual pastor's strength of character and his willingness to endure sacrifice and risk harm to himself, in combination with the attitudes of local parishioners, affected the outcomes of the church struggle.

Jantzen's study will be particularly useful for readers who do not have a strong background in the history of the *Kirchenkampf*. His work illuminates often-neglected parish histories and places the local arena in its proper place: where the everyday life of individuals intersected with state policy. For experts in this field, his work offers concrete case studies of the interaction of pastors with parishioners, Nazi officials, and German Christians, adding subtleties and nuances often missed in histories that view the phenomenon from the perspective of the state or ecclesiastical hierarchies. The only element missing from the work is a concluding chapter, which would have been helpful in summarizing the multitude of details and examples Jantzen presents about the experiences of local parishes in the National Socialist period.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Beth A. Griech-Polelle. Review of Jantzen, Kyle, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24524>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.