

Hastings, Derek: *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism. Religious Identity and National Socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0195390247; 312 S.

Rezensiert von: Chris Szejnmann, Department of Politics, History and International Relations, Loughborough University

This is an important book about the relationship between the Nazi movement and Catholicism before Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. Derek Hastings argues convincingly that Nazism transformed in the mid-1920s from a political movement that was intricately intertwined with Catholic identity in Munich and championed the principle of Positive Christianity, to a political religion in its own right that was based on the messianic Hitler cult and practised pseudo-religious symbolic aesthetics. The significance of the book is to demonstrate for the first time in detail the existence of a Catholic-Nazi Synthesis that peaked in 1923. Crucially, this also helps to explain and put into perspective the further development of the Nazi movement. Hastings does this by tapping into a rich selection of primary sources and by meticulously piecing together the complex evolution of the Nazi movement in Munich and Bavaria up until after the failed Beerhall Putsch.

Hastings argues that there was a distinctive Catholic tradition in Munich before the First World War that opposed ultramontanism and political Catholicism and led to a rabidly nationalistic brand of Catholicism. The concept of a pure religious Catholicism was contrasted with the allegedly immoral compromises Centre Party politicians made with Jews and Socialist. Racist-eugenic ideas added another dimension to 'Munich's Catholic peculiarity'. Whilst priests like Johannes Bumüller advocated 'a joining together of the Catholic religion and German culture' (p. 36), the Catholic student Ernst Thrasolt called 'for the surgical excision of the Jewish racial presence within the German Volkskörper' and demanded racial and cultural purity from völkisch Catholics: 'Let German blood and German character reign on German soil!' (p. 44). Finally, reform Catholics commonly used the phrase 'Positive Christianity' to express an

interconfessional ideal.

Hastings shows how the early Nazi movement evolved in this 'Catholic context within which the principle of Positive Christianity was initially formulated and publicized as the official Nazi antidote to the „Jewish-materialistic spirit,“' (p. 46f.). Among others, the author charts the activism of two racial Catholic publicists – Franz Schröngamer and Dietrich Eckart – the former focused on the 'fusion of völkisch-Nordic ideology with the Catholic faith' and the eradication of international Jewry (p. 52), whilst the latter became growingly fixated with the claim that superficial Jewish materialism 'was in danger of destroying the Christian-Germanic soul' (p. 60).

The strength of the study is to unpick the web of relationships and mutual influences between a myriad of political activists, writers, priests, völkisch organisations, public events and publications with the emerging Nazi movement, its newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, and Hitler and other Nazi leaders. The backdrop of this was the often chaotic and dramatic events in Munich after the First World War, the use of apocalyptic language and ideas, and the political dynamics between the BVP, who increasingly turned away from radical anti-Semitism, and the distinct Catholic-völkisch orientation of the early Nazi movement that distanced itself from Protestant-oriented (and anti-Christian) völkisch groups (p. 79).

The zenith of Catholic-Nazi activities came in 1923. The *Vorwärts*, the Social Democratic daily, documented the aggressive agitation of Catholic priests for the rapidly expanding Nazi movement who acted as 'Nazi Storm-Troop Preachers' (pp. 108, 115). At the same time the Nazi leadership based much of its membership drive on the Catholic faith of 'their' fallen hero, Albert Leo Schlageter. In Munich, Nazi and Catholic identities, including full-fledged racial anti-Semitism, were not in conflict then.

In fall 1923 then appeared the first decisive crack in this synthesis due to the influence of the protestant-nationalist orientation of Ludendorff and his followers and the formation of the *Kampfbund*. Hitler's decision to lead the *Kampfbund* also signalled that his interests now went well beyond Munich and that

he was ‚consumed by an increasingly messianic sense of his own political mission‘ (p. 142). The anti-Catholic sentiments sweeping through völkisch circles in the aftermath of the failed Beerhall Putsch then cost the Nazi movement much of its Catholic support and the movement shifted towards Protestant imagery before it ‚increasingly cultivated a striking form of secular-political religiosity‘ (p. 144). In the mid-1920s then, Hastings argues, the pseudo-religious symbolic aesthetics and the messianic Hitler cult merged for the first time and National Socialism was transformed from a champion of Catholicism and Positive Christianity into ‚a political religion in its own right‘ (p. 163). Whilst Schlageter had served as an embodiment of a powerful Catholic-Nazi synthesis in 1923, two years later this changed to a ‚growing (secular) cult of messianic heroism, martyrdom, and blood‘ (p. 167).

Hastings’ study sheds new light on the complexities of Catholic-Nazi identities, and in particular, on the ‚important and very real role played by Nazi Catholic clergy and laypeople who, acting as Catholics and in pursuit of what they perceived to be a legitimate form of Catholic identity, were indeed central to the stabilization and spread of the early Nazi movement‘ (p. 179). Hastings argues that with the crystallisation of Nazi ideology in the second half of the 1920s ‚a purer, more overtly secular form of racial anti-Semitism‘ replaced the ‚religious-oriented proto-racial approach‘ (p. 180) which crystallised the exclusivity of the Nazi and Catholic world views. According to Hastings, Hitler’s own self-perception of his dramatic transformation from drummer to messianic Führer left little room for any ‚„genuine“ [...] Catholic or Christian substance during Hitler’s tenure in power‘ (p. 182).

This study provides new insights into why the early movement survived when it was very vulnerable, why it was able to break out of the limited confines of the specific Munich milieu, and how it developed into celebrating the ‚totalizing secular messianism and pseudo-sacral pageantry‘ during the Third Reich. Hastings also provides further proof how right it is to emphasise the fluidity of the evolution of the Nazi movement, and also the

fluidity of the religious identity of Nazi leaders and followers. Whilst important research over the last two decades have provided us with differentiated interpretations about the complex relationship between Nazism and Catholicism that emphasised the harmony between both rather than focusing on differences and conflicts, there seems to be much scope left in this area to increase our knowledge.

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