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Zwischen Partei und Kirche. Nationalsozialistische Priester in Österreich und Deutschland (1938–1945).

By Lucia Scherzberg. Religion und Moderne, 20. Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus Verlag, 2020: Pp. 645. ISBN: 978-3-593-51225-9. Paperback, €50.40.

Dirk Schuster

Lucia Scherzberg (b. 1957), a professor of Catholic systematic theology at Saarland University, Germany, has produced a foundational work with her *Zwischen Partei und Kirche. Nationalsozialistische Priester in Österreich und Deutschland* (Between Party and Church: National Socialist Priests in Austria and Germany). During her academic career, Scherzberg has already written a number of books and essays on the connection between the Church and National Socialism, especially with a focus on Karl Adam (1876–1966), a German Catholic theologian who proclaimed the compatibility of Church and National Socialism.

It is well known that many Protestant theologians and lay people were open to the ideas of National Socialism. This went so far that Protestant regional churches even tried to “de-Judaize” Christianity, with Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) being seen as a “messenger of God” (Schuster 2016). Accordingly, the Third Reich was interpreted as the epoch in which Luther’s Reformation was to be brought to an end by creating a “Jewish-free” Christianity, in which the Christians would fight together with the National Socialists against the Jews (Heschel 2008; Schuster 2017).

With the exemption of some individual personalities like Karl Adam, such ideas were previously never related to German-speaking Catholic priests and lay people. With her book, Scherzberg closes this knowledge gap in an excellent way by outlining the history of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden* (Working Group for Religious Peace; henceforth: *AGF*) and its key protagonists. As Scherzberg shows in her extensive presentation of the state of current research at the beginning of the volume, the *AGF* has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention. While the *AGF* has been at least briefly mentioned (if at all) in the existing literature, its history has only been covered up to 1939. In contrast, having examined extensive archival material

in Austria and Germany, Scherzberg reveals that the *AGF* was active until 1945, despite being banned by the Bishops' Conference at the end of September 1938.

The book is divided into two main parts—"The Working Group for Religious Peace"¹ (pp. 47–275) and "The Successor Organisation"² (pp. 280–617)—which include both the official operations of the *AGF* and the period in which it was banned. In the first part, the subsection on Austria's religious situation before the *Anschluss* is very helpful. Here, Scherzberg clearly explicates the basic anti-Semitic attitude of Austrian politics and the Catholic youth movement before 1938. This formed the ideological basis for the group's actions. The members of what would later become a working group maintained close contacts with the banned Nazi party in Austria well before 1938, so that they were able to go public with the *Anschluss*.

On Easter Sunday of 1938, the *AGF* sent a letter to the Austrian clergy asking them to return a ready-made letter of thanks to the *AGF*. The letter that was enclosed with the request was addressed to Cardinal Theodor Inntzer (1875–1955) for his benevolent attitude towards National Socialism during the *Anschluss*. Although the *AGF* already existed before this "PR campaign," this was the first time that it made a public appearance. The aim of the *AGF* to reconcile the Catholic Church and National Socialism was already evident in its emblem: The cross of Christianity framed by swastikas—the same symbolism that the Protestant *Kirchenbewegung Deutsche Christen* (German Christian Church Movement) was using, which also strove for a compatibility between the Church and National Socialism (cf. Böhm 2008; Arnhold 2010).

For as long as it existed, the *AGF* had a conflict of loyalty between the Church and Nazi ideology, which was reflected six months after its first public appearance. Respect for state authority and love for the *Führer* were emphasised. At the same time, however, the priests and lay people swore loyalty to their own church. When the *AGF* publicly spoke in favour of the Third Reich with a view to the "solution to the Sudeten question" (*Lösung der Sudetenfrage*), the Bishops' Conference took this as an opportunity to ban the *AGF* on September 30, 1938. The *AGF* complied with the ban out of loyalty to its own Church and officially dissolved but continued to act in preparation for the day "when the Nazi state would need it" (p. 238).

The now forbidden priests' organisation tried to convince Nazi authorities that parts of the Catholic clergy would show absolute allegiance to the Nazi state—meaning, of course, themselves. They produced "mood appraisals" for

1 "Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden."

2 "Die Nachfolgeorganisation."

government agencies of how the Catholic believers and church representatives expressed themselves vis-à-vis the Nazi state. In this way, the members hoped to make themselves indispensable to the Nazi state and thus be entrusted with the leadership of an upcoming “German Catholic Church.” Theological elaborations were put forth about the race of Jesus, and position papers were drawn up on how to deal with Jewish converts who, in keeping with the racial doctrine, were not regarded to be Catholics but, instead, were still deemed to be Jews.

Scherzberg aptly sums up the anti-Semitic ideas of the priestly group, which were almost identical to those of the German Christian Church Movement: “The priest group demonstrated with this writing [by Richard Kleine (1891–1974)], which was positively received by other members of the group, his monstrous anti-Semitism, which combined traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes with a racial-biological anti-Semitism” (p. 272).³ It should be emphasised at this point that Scherzberg does not deem this to have been a form of Christian apologetics and clearly states that radical anti-Semitism was one of the driving forces of the group. Unfortunately, such a clear positioning cannot be taken for granted as a publication by Church Historian Johannes Wallmann (1930–2021) has recently shown, who tried to trivialise the anti-Semitism of the German Christians as an alleged defence strategy against National Socialism (Wallmann 2019). Scherzberg works with many direct quotations, making it clear that the attitude of the *AGF* members came from a steadfast conviction. Johann Pircher (1886–1953), priest, *NSDAP* member, and main organiser of the *AGF*, wrote in an unpublished manuscript, quoted by Scherzberg, that there was no fundamental contradiction between the ecclesiastical and National Socialist worldviews (p. 409). It is precisely with these passages that Scherzberg can lucidly demonstrate the intentions of the group’s protagonists.

Similarly, Scherzberg proves in detail and from a wide range of sources that such considerations were not merely discussed internally. The members of the *AGF* also tried to initiate an “ecumenism on a völkisch basis” (*Ökumene auf völkischer Basis*; p. 426). From 1939 onwards, the *AGF* regularly met and corresponded with the German Christian Church Movement and the remnants of the *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung* (German Faith Movement), a diffuse ethnic-religious umbrella organisation centred around the Marburg Professor of the Study of Religions and Indology, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962). The goal was not a new unified church, but a kind of “religious

3 “Mit dieser Schrift, die von anderen Mitgliedern positiv aufgenommen wurde, demonstrierte der Priesterkreis seinen monströsen Antisemitismus, der traditionelle katholische antijüdische Stereotype mit einem rassenbiologischen Antisemitismus verband.”

National Socialist people's welfare" (*religiöse Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt NSV*) (p. 372). The positive attitude towards National Socialism formed the common thread among these different religious belief systems. Although the representatives of the former German Faith Movement did not play a significant role in this "ecumenical movement" and were soon entirely eliminated due to their overall weakness, their co-operation with the German Christians led to an ideological time of prosperity and a simultaneous radicalisation of the *AGF*.

In this collaboration, the theological similarities between these two groups also become apparent: in their internal communication, the representatives of the *AGF* demanded that the Catholic Church be subordinated to the Nazi state (p. 418). The same ideology can be found among the German Christians. This is related to the idea circulating among these two groups that Hitler had been given a divine mission (p. 602; see also Schuster 2016).

These shared basic convictions, which of course also included radical anti-Semitism, resulted in the collaboration of individual representatives of the *AGF* with the *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* (Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life). Founded in 1939 by the German Christian Church Movement and supported by several Protestant regional churches, including the Austrian Protestant Regional Church, this research institute wanted to completely "de-Judaize" Christianity, which also included the publication of a New Testament "devoid of Jewishness."

Alois Closs (1893–1984), a *Privatdozent* at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Vienna and, after the end of World War II, Professor of Comparative Religious Studies in Graz, was one of the *AGF* members who also took part in the work of the aforementioned "Institute for De-Judaisation" (*Entjudungsinstitut*). Also, most of the professors at the University of Vienna's Faculty of Evangelical Theology worked in that institute. This interdenominational co-operation could only succeed because of the National Socialist convictions and the radical anti-Semitism of those involved, which was always the unifying bond between all of them.

Although the new *Reichsstatthalter* (governor) of Vienna and Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach (1907–1974) initiated party exclusion proceedings against Pircher, this could not prevent Pircher and his fellow believers from preparing for the day when they would be called upon by the Nazi state. This behaviour is characteristic of groups that received no support from the Nazi party but imagined that this was only the case due to the actions of local party representatives. Once Hitler would become aware of the group, they believed, he would assure them of his full support. Since the representatives of the *AGF* had no opportunity to present their ideas to the *Führer*,

they continued to work towards the day Hitler would call on them—which never happened. Even so, they continued to work out new ideas for a future Catholic Church and developed “de-Judaised” concepts for a new liturgical order.

The fact that the group was nevertheless able to have an indirect effect far beyond 1945 is shown by the publication of the *Deutscher Psalter* (German Psalter) in 1950. Even if this was not written by members of the *AGF*, Scherzberg (p. 585) correctly identifies the indirect influence:

Between the reform of the liturgy that the National Socialist priests wanted to promote and the reforms actually carried out by the Liturgical Commission with the approval of most of the bishops, there was a large overlap with regard to the motives and the actual, if only partial, “de-Judaisation” of the liturgical texts and the desire for a selection of the Psalms. [...] The group of priests was not directly involved in the implementation of the liturgical changes, but there were a number of contacts between the protagonists of each side [...].⁴

Scherzberg successfully combines detailed historical analysis with subsections in which she explains the respective source situation and introduces the relevant protagonists in detail. This gives a very nuanced impression of the ecclesiastical, university, and/or political backgrounds of the protagonists of the *AGF* and their sympathisers. This non-classical structure of the book enables the reader to understand the different epochs of the *AGF*.

This book must be seen as a milestone in assessing the ideological entanglements of some Catholic clergy and lay people with National Socialism. Future research cannot overlook this volume. The findings also provide a basis for the future comparison of the intersections of that Catholic circle with the evangelical German Christians. This will then enable a more critical assessment of the relationship between churches and National Socialism compared to what has been done to date.

4 “Zwischen der Reform der Liturgie, welche die nationalsozialistischen Priester vorantreiben wollten, und den mit Billigung der meisten Bischöfe faktisch durchgeführten Reformen durch die Liturgische Kommission gab es eine große Schnittmenge hinsichtlich der Motive und der tatsächlich, wenn auch nur teilweise erfolgten ‘Entjudung’ der liturgischen Texte und dem Wunsch nach einer Selektion der Psalmen. [...] Die Priestergruppe war zwar nicht unmittelbar an der Durchsetzung der liturgischen Änderungen beteiligt, aber es gab etliche Kontakte zwischen den Protagonisten der einen und der anderen Seite [...]”

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