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Review of Andrew Chandler, *British Christians and the Third Reich: Church, State, and the Judgement of Nations*

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ANDREW CHANDLER, *British Christians and the Third Reich: Church, State, and the Judgement of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 422 pp. ISBN 978 1 107 12904 7. £90.00

In this book, Andrew Chandler brings together more than three decades of his own research into the study of how British Christians viewed and interacted with Nazi Germany, returning, indeed, to the subject of his 1991 PhD thesis. This is hardly an unresearched topic; however, most studies have considered individual aspects of what British Christians thought about the 'Church Struggle' (*Kirchenkampf*) in German Protestantism, the British government's appeasement policies, the Nazi persecution of Jews, the Allied war effort and the moral issues raised by Allied victory, or the churches' post-war social policy. Chandler attempts to bring these topics together into a more organic whole. The 'and' in the main title covers a multitude of contexts, whether at the official level—the churches' leadership receives significant attention—or on the part of individual lay thinkers and activists. He focuses on the Church of England and on the substantial, increasingly institutionalized ecumenical movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Mainstream Christian opinion in Britain was clearly, consistently, and adamantly opposed to Nazism; nonetheless, there were sympathies towards aspects of National Socialism to be found in some prominent corners of British Christianity. Overall, Chandler emphasizes the Christian interest in and active support for resistance to Nazism, while exploring the many ambiguities, frustrations, and failures that prevented Christians from acting upon these commitments.

Chandler has organized his thoroughly empirical study chronologically. After a couple of introductory chapters that set the overall scene, provide some background to the interwar period, and introduce key figures in the story to follow, the remainder of the book is broken into sections that consider two- to five-year time spans starting in 1933 and ending in 1949. Without advancing any sweeping or especially bold theses, he uses this approach to methodically reveal the incremental back-and-forth of British–German relations in a tumultuous era. The motive force in this story lies within Germany: British churches are depicted as reactive, being constantly forced to seek coherent responses to political, social, and military events occurring beyond Britain's shores. Much more space is given to the pre-war period 1933–9 than to the war years that followed. The denominational diversity of British Christianity's intellectual world is made clear: each church had not only its own theological traditions and political affiliations but also varied networks and arenas for intellectual debate (such as journals, meetings, councils, conferences, and so on), and each denomination had different degrees and kinds of relationships with Germany in the decades before the 1930s.

The Church of England is at the heart of this story, particularly at the level of its archbishops (Cosmo Lang and William Temple are the key figures) and bishops. Anglicanism had a particular prominence as the 'national' church, and, not least because of its seats in the House of Lords, it had a distinctive political visibility. As Chandler observes, 'for the most part Free Church opinion did look to the Anglicans to take a lead' (p. 5), the culmination of an increasing friendliness in Protestant relations by the interwar years. Roman Catholics played a much smaller role on the national stage at the start of this period, but in the crises that followed, the church—under the leadership of the Cardinal of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley—increased in both stature and relevance. Some individuals stand out. The bishop of Chichester, George Bell, was one of the most active and knowledgeable Anglican figures with regard to German affairs, and he made several notable interventions in public debates. The bishops of Gloucester (Arthur Headlam) and Durham (Herbert Hensley Henson)—who often clashed publicly over German issues—also receive recurrent attention.

Those Christians who took up the fight against National Socialism had a distinct set of perspectives (p. 33):

> They shared a belief that the Christian church mattered in the world, that it had a responsibility to it and the prospect of influence within it. They found themselves at home in an essentially political milieu because they were sure that they were a defining dimension of it.

These views were common in Christian ecumenism—'one of the great progressive movements of post-war liberal internationalism' (p. 22). Its nascent bodies and networks connected German and British

Christians and coordinated many Christian responses to Nazism. Such contexts are key to Chandler's stress on the transnational dimensions of national historiography. He seeks to present British figures—from bishops and archbishops to ecumenical activists—as *participants* in the internal conflicts of the German churches: 'National Socialism', he emphasizes, 'was not simply a German catastrophe but more truly a part of a wider European crisis' (p. 392). In this emphasis on the participatory role of British Christians in German affairs, Chandler at least implicitly draws a contrast with Tom Lawson's depiction of British Christians as 'bystanders' to the Holocaust.[1]

British churches shared overlapping concerns across the 1930s: the threats posed to the international order, to those resisting the Nazis within Germany, and to Jews. But what could they actually *do*? Above all, they sought to mobilize public opinion through meetings and statements, resolutions by church governing bodies, and commentary in books and periodicals. Church networks were politically well connected, and when opportunities arose—such as during travel to Germany for church gatherings—face-to-face meetings between British churchmen and high-ranking Nazi officials were arranged (though rarely made public). British Christians also organized aid for refugees and, in a more limited sense, for prisoners in Germany through visits to concentration camps.

The Church Struggle involved a set of complicated conflicts—some theological, some political—between those German Protestants willing to submit the faith to Nazi control and those who refused to do so. At first, its contours were ambiguous, and British responses correspondingly mixed. In 1934, the efforts of the 'Confessing Church' to take a more strongly articulated independent position provided a focus for British church action, and the mobilization of international opinion initially bolstered a counter-offensive against the pro-regime *Deutsche Christen* (pp. 134–5). Chandler foregrounds a shifting framework of possibility for British action: the stabilization of Nazi rule made the regime less concerned about foreign opinion, reducing opportunities to exploit internal divisions. Nazi success also emboldened their sympathizers (or those at least critical of the Nazis' opponents) in other countries (pp. 139–40).

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[1] Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge, 2006), 167.

Apart from the intra-Protestant Church Struggle, the increasingly desperate plight of German Jews was the most prominent recurring issue in British Christian discussions in this period. Chandler identifies residual antisemitism within British Christianity—disproportionately, but by no means exclusively, among Roman Catholics—but insists the Christian 'consensus lay elsewhere' (p. 67). Even so, he recounts statements by leading churchmen, such as the bishop of Gloucester, expressing understanding for the regime's reasoning even if they condemned the persecution that followed from it. Chandler stresses the depths of British Christians' concerns about Nazi antisemitism: public demonstrations against the mistreatment of Jews began in April 1933, and the issue preoccupied the Christian press and church organizations. The official statements by the churches, however, were often curiously mild, a point that some previous historiography has strongly emphasized.[2]

This institutional timidity derived, Chandler shows, not from disinterest but rather from uncertainty about which kinds of intervention would *help* the Jews rather than further endanger them. The resulting strategy of 'sympathetic criticism' meant that official critiques of the Nazis were mixed with praise of the 'new Germany' or even of the regime itself. The concurrent reliance upon their contacts in the Confessing Church was, in turn, stymied by the latter's own ambivalent stance: while adamant about church independence, many in the Confessing Church sympathized with various tenets of National Socialism. Christians were thus hindered in developing an effective *strategy* and had few levers to influence Germany's emerging totalitarian system.

The years of the Second World War are given relatively compact treatment, with a focus on Christian views on the morality of the British war effort, debates concerning 'war aims', and visions of an improved post-war society. Christian pacifist opinion receded, though it remained a small, insistent current. It was more mainstream to support the war effort while avoiding the jingoistic nationalism common in the Great War. This consensus suffered under the reports of German atrocities in Poland, the rout of British and French forces, and, of course, as a result of the Blitz; nonetheless, Bishop Bell and others sought to combat 'Vansittartism'—the harshly anti-German views of government adviser Sir Robert Vansittart (later Baron Vansittart)—throughout the war. From 1942 onwards, in the press and in church statements, British Christians condemned reports of the mass killing of Jews. Against some claims that British Christians had failed to sufficiently recognize the unique dangers and suffering of Jews—by folding their struggles into a threat to faith generally or to Christianity specifically[3]—Chandler argues convincingly not only that such an 'alliance of faiths' had been the goal of both British Christians and Jews, but also that in this way much was accomplished in long-term interfaith relations that might not have been anticipated at the time (p. 310).

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[2] E.g. Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity: 1920–1990* (London, 1991), 327, 342–5.

Discussions about the shape of the post-war society to come led to a flood of new publishing formats. For example, Bell's *Christianity and World Order* (1940) was in fact the first of the popular 'Penguin Specials', Archbishop Temple's *Christianity and Social Order* (1942) was one of the bestsellers of the war, and, starting in late 1939, the *Christian News-Letter* rapidly attracted some 10,000 subscribers. 'Christian ideas', Chandler shows, 'occupied a firm place in the foreground of this broad discourse' (p. 296). Discussions of post-war social reconstruction can be seen as the most successful of the causes around which Christians organized in this period. Social policy and the moral issues involved in the rebuilding of post-war Britain were home territory for the churches, and the broader shift towards 'planning' gave Christians new means to influence society. The churches also threw themselves into meeting the vast needs of post-war humanitarian assistance.

Chandler summarizes the German Church Struggle as 'a vast, diffuse controversy which sprawled untidily, configured and reconfigured, often by the month' (p. 80). This is an apt description of the events related in this book as a whole, and it speaks to Chandler's skills that they are so clearly depicted. British Christians, broadly speaking, flowed with wider cultural currents in Britain: disturbed and concerned about Nazi oppression and violence, rapturous about Munich, inspired (and then deeply disillusioned) by appeasement, patriotically supportive of the war effort (with occasional misgivings about area bombing), and, finally, consumed by visions of a British society after the war that would be better than the one that had entered it. Nonetheless, within such broader commonalities they set their own emphases. Unsurprisingly viewing the age as in the throes of a 'spiritual' crisis, their focus on religious freedom and the role of the sacred in modern societies gave them a distinct standpoint from which to judge politics. As Chandler notes, Christians were already familiar with the language of 'totalitarianism', seeing threats to the rights of Christians as a faith community as part of a wider set of endangered freedoms. (As Markus Huttner has shown, Christians were, indeed, pioneers in such narratives.)[4]

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[3] Ibid. 345; Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust*, 6, 167.

However, the strategy of 'sympathetic criticism' proved a losing and, in retrospect, morally questionable game. Even in November 1935, after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws and in the process of passing a resolution in the Church Assembly condemning the treatment of German Jews, Bell felt the need to reference the 'creative' aspects of Nazism and stress that some of his German friends were committed National Socialists (p. 157). Chandler convincingly refutes the suggestion that British Christians ignored National Socialism or the plight of the Jews. At the same time he shows the many missteps made by church leaders. Ultimately, the churches (like much of the democratic world in the 1930s) seem out of their depth in confronting a force that was immune to—indeed, contemptuous of—appeals to Christian morality. The tools available were simply inadequate to the job.

Nonetheless, this period was a historically important one for Christian social thought, which achieved a creativity, visibility, and relevance that it had at no other point in the twentieth century. The intensity of the British involvement in the Church Struggle, the leadership of British Christians in the early years of the ecumenical movement, and, not least, Britain's place as one of the victors in the Second World War ensured that *British* Christians were especially prominent in international Christian dialogues and debates. (The strong relationship between British Christians and the rest of the Anglophone world—including the United States—also contributed to their status, though this is an issue that Chandler addresses only glancingly.) 'National Socialism', Chandler writes, 'drew British Christians into the forefront of a vigorous national discussion about political justice, persecution and war and saw them shaping its terms and trajectories' (p. 390). Christian thought expanded its purview, finding much to say about justice, the social order, and freedom; perhaps more surprising, it discovered that there were many, whether committed Christians or not, who were willing to listen.

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[4] Markus Huttner, *Totalitarismus und säkulare Religionen: Zur Frühgeschichte totalitarismuskritischer Begriffs- und Theoriebildung in Großbritannien* (Bonn, 1999).

This is a masterful and important study that will be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding mid twentieth-century British Christianity.

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