

REVIEW

Derek Hastings

*Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism:
Religious Identity and National Socialism*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), hardcover, xv + 290 pp.

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Derek Hastings' succinct volume on the Roman Catholic roots of National Socialism marks a qualitative leap forward in our understanding of the religious identity of this extreme right-wing movement during its protean years in Munich. The title promises a sensational expose, and to his credit, Hastings does not deliver. What he provides instead is a highly nuanced and often dense work of intellectual history, in which the author painstakingly reconstructs the networks of priests, right-wing intellectuals, and early Nazi ideologues that worked together on behalf of the Nazi cause for a small number of years in the cultural capital of Bavaria.

Hastings argues that the formative years of the Nazi movement, 1920-1923 in Munich—he labels this the party's prehistory—were characterized by an often explicitly Catholic orientation. The movement was rooted not primarily in prewar *Kulturprotestantismus* but in the Reform Catholicism that came to prominence in Munich after the turn of the century. Finding a nexus among Catholic university students, fraternities, and young professionals, Reform Catholics (such as Josef Müller, who founded his *Reformverein*, or Karl Muth, the publisher of *Hochland*) were driven by their criticisms of ultramontanism and political Catholicism. Highly rigorous in their own religious practices, these critics derided the superficiality, speciousness, frivolity, and lack of openness of many of the Catholics they found in the Center Party (and later in the Bavarian People's Party) and in the Church hierarchy. What was necessary, they argued, was religious renewal that would stem secularism and reinvigorate the German nation. Such ideas, Hastings maintains, eventually found their way into notions of "positive Christianity," that sought to transcend confessional divisions in Germany and, more famously, underlay the Nazi party platform of 1920. More ominously, Reform Catholics showed a strong openness to racist and eugenicist ideas. Muth's *Hochland* even profiled the religious thought of Houston Stewart Chamberlain and extolled the racism of Arthur de Gobineau.

That this outlook took root in Munich was no accident. Catholics in the Bavarian capital, though registering high rates of attendance at mass, were notably lax in their support for political Catholicism and the *Vereinswesen* (tradition of ancillary organizations) so characteristic of Rhenish and Westphalian Catholicism. Even in the late 19th century, support for the Center Party in Munich was less than half that in other Catholic regions of Germany. By 1924, Hastings notes, 80% of Munich Catholics were voting for parties other than the Center Party and the Bavarian People's Party. The presence of earnest Catholics open to the racial ideas of the day and seeking alternatives to political Catholicism led to a relatively easy symbiosis between the early Nazi party and the heirs of Reform Catholicism after the First World War. Hastings highlights the roles played by Ernst Thrasolt, a student influenced by Müller, and Franz Schrönghammer, a devout Catholic

who postulated an apocalyptic struggle between the eternal German and the eternal Jew in his 1918 book, *The Coming Reich*, and contributed to a new journal, *Auf gut deutsch* (published by the Catholic poet, playwright, and friend of Hitler, Dietrich Eckhart). This Catholic support, Hastings notes, was necessary for the incipient Nazi party to survive in an overwhelmingly Catholic region like Munich and to differentiate itself from the various *völkisch* organizations in Munich rooted loosely in Protestantism or the occult.

Membership drives among Bavarian Catholics, spearheaded by a small number of priests and monks, led to a three-fold increase in membership in the Nazi movement between 1920 and the fall of 1923. The parish priest Josef Roth, the musicologist and monk Alban Schachleiter, and the priest Lorenz Pieper emerged as leading propagandists for the party. They delivered fiery speeches bearing titles such as “Can a Catholic be a Nazi?” and published articles in the Nazi newspaper, the *Beobachter*. They delivered eulogies on behalf of Albert Leo Schlageter, a deeply religious Catholic ultranationalist and a member of a Catholic fraternity in Munich who had been executed by the French for terrorist activity in the Ruhr. Schlagleiter’s eulogy and the Catholic membership drive appear to have been decisive in the recruitment of many young Catholic men, including Heinrich Himmler.

Yet this symbiosis did not survive the Beer Hall *Putsch* of 1923. Hastings attributes this to the increased influence of Protestants with strong anti-Catholic tendencies in the movement, most notably Erich von Ludendorff. By 1923 and 1924, Hitler had come to understand himself as a messianic figure called by providence to bring about the salvation of the German nation. Prayers once offered for Hitler were now offered to him. As Nazism evolved into a political religion characterized by an often rabid anti-Catholicism, its founders preferred to expunge the movement’s Catholic roots from the historical record. The stage was set for the persecution of the Church later in the 1930s.

Hastings challenges positions held by both critics and defenders of the Roman Catholic Church. In emphasizing the religious identity of the early Nazi movement, he significantly departs from those who saw mystical, occult movements such as the Thule society as the dominant influence on National Socialism. In emphasizing National Socialism’s Catholic origins, he provides a corrective to Richard Steigmann-Gall’s focus on Nazism’s roots in liberal Protestantism. The title notwithstanding, Hastings makes clear that his book is not so much “an examination of Catholics per se, or of the Catholic Church as an institution, but of the role played by individual Catholics—both clergy and laity” (p. 6). Not once does he descend into facile armchair moralizing. This is a work of serious scholarship, one that greatly enhances our understanding of connections between the early Nazi movement and early twentieth century Reform Catholicism.