



Gö%anther van Norden. *Politischer Kirchenkampf. Die rheinische Provinzialkirche 1934-1939.* Bonn: Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 2003. x + 284 pp. EUR 18.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-7749-3156-5.

Reviewed by Judith Becker

Published on H-German (January, 2004)

The history of the struggle between church and state (*Kirchenkampf*) in the Third Reich can be divided into three phases: the rise of the *Bekennende Kirche* (1934), the period of the *Kirchenausschuesse* and the struggle for control of the Protestant Church (1935-1939), and the war years (1939-1945). In his book *Politischer Kirchenkampf. Die rheinische Provinzialsynode 1934-1939*, Guenther van Norden describes the second phase of this struggle in the Rhineland. He argues that this second phase was characterized by a growing politicization of both sides in the conflict, the German Christians as well as the *Bekennende Kirche*. While during the first period, the confessional debates that resulted in the Barmen Confession of May, 1934, were more important than the context, increasingly that context came to determine the unfolding conflict. The political reality of National Socialism dominated the arguments between German Christians and *Bekennende Kirche*, as well as those within the *Bekennende Kirche* itself.

Van Norden shows how the *Kirchenkampf* in the Rhenish Church was--roughly-speaking--a struggle between the church board, which was dominated by German Christians, and the *Bekennende Kirche*, which had strong support in the parishes and among the superintendents. The political struggle over the Church in the Rhineland began, according to van Norden, with the attempts of the German Christian church board in

1934 to stabilize its domination. The president of the Rhenish Church, Propst D. Dr. Heinrich Forsthoff, created a draft of a new church ordinance in which he stressed the importance of leadership. He defined the German Evangelical Church as a temporal institution and declared that, as such, it needed leadership. Forsthoff wanted to deprive the parishes of their right to choose their own presbytery and pastors. He also thought there should be a hierarchical structure, composed of a *Praeses*, *Generalsuperintendent*, and *Konsistorialpraesident*, to lead the church. Van Norden terms the introduction of this hierarchy "Einfuehrung einer diktatorialen Gewalt" (p. 5). When most of the superintendents, whose assent to the new church order was required, declined to give it, Forsthoff dismissed them. They refused to give up the posts to which they had been elected. The reason the ordinance was not realized, however, was a veto from the *Ministerialdirektor* in Berlin, who thought that the draft still allowed too much participation to the people.

Another important area of conflict between German Christians and the *Bekennende Kirche* became manifest in 1934: the training and placement of *Vikare*, *Pastor zur Anstellung* and *Hilfspreadiger*. In the Rhineland, the vicars and young pastors in particular opposed the new regime. While the German Christian church administration tried to break their will by preventing them from serving in Rhenish parishes during their

training period, the *Bekennende Kirche* and a great number of individual parishes still employed them. Here, as in other areas, the church board experienced little success in its struggle for a German-Christianization of the Rhenish Church. In the same year, however, shortly after the synod meeting of the *Bekennende Kirche* of Germany at Dahlem in October, at which the *Bekennende Kirche* declared an ecclesiastical state of emergency (*kirchliches Notrecht*), proclaimed itself the legitimate government of the German Evangelical Church, and elected the *Bruderrat* as its governing body, Hitler dropped the German Christian Reichsbischof Mueller and the German Christians lost considerable power.

In the autumn of 1934, three blocks of the Rhenish Church were consolidated: the *Bekennende Kirche* of the Rhineland (following the Dahlem guidelines, more than half of all pastors, vicars and assistant pastors recognized the *Bruderrat*), the German Christians, and the *Rheinische Kirchliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ordnungsblock*. This latter group located itself between the two others. Politically, it was German national, it supported the German Christian church government, and it could still attract some of those pastors who had sympathies with the *Bekennende Kirche* but were troubled by the radical interpretation of Dahlem. By the end of 1934, negotiations began among the three groups in order to install a new, legitimate church government. After months of struggle, during which some thought there could be a compromise while others hoped for outright victory, an extraordinary provincial synod took place in May, 1935. Although the absence of delegates of the *Bekennende Kirche* damaged the synod's legitimacy (those of both the Inner and the Foreign Mission as well as more than two thirds of the superintendents did not attend), the synod installed a new *Provinzialkirchenrat* (PKR) dominated by German Christians. The PKR 1929/32, which was still accepted by the *Bekennende*

Kirche, then declared the unity of the Rhineland Church broken.

For a time, the *Bekennende Kirche* was able to expand and strengthen its power base. However, once the state became involved, the *Bekennende Kirche* began to break openly over the question of collaboration with moderate church governmental institutions; that is, about the interpretation of the Dahlem decisions. In the autumn of 1935, Reichsminister Kerrl installed *Kirchenausschuesse* for the German Evangelical Church and for the individual provinces that were composed of members of the different groups and were intended to lead the church. A part of the *Bekennende Kirche* thought collaboration with them possible, while others stuck to the radical interpretation of Dahlem: no collaboration with anyone who compromises. Van Norden argues that the differences within the *Bekennende Kirche* were more of political than theological or ecclesiastical nature. However, this argument is only convincing to a certain extent, since the question of how much power a church allows politics to have over it is also a theological one.

According to van Norden, the final decisive period of the *Kirchenkampf* is located in the years 1936-37, during which there were disputes about the Rhineland *Provinzialkirchenausschuss* (PKA). The *Bruderrat* opposed the PKA because (following the Dahlem agreement) they saw the leading organs of the *Bekennende Kirche* as leading organs of the German Evangelical Church (DEK). Another part of the *Bekennende Kirche*, however, thought it better to lead the DEK in collaboration with the PKA, rather than to split from it and claim the leadership but not be able to execute it because of ostracism from the state. The superintendents supported the PKA, in which some members of the moderate part of the *Bekennende Kirche* were still serving. The *Bruderrat* lost considerable power. It was finally thwarted by the financial question: the parishes had to give the money to the PKA, not to the *Bruderrat*. However,

not only the *Bekennende Kirche* but also the German Christians split over the question of the PKA; some of the latter refused to collaborate with the *Bekennende Kirche*.

Beginning in August 1936, the *Bekennende Kirche* was actively repressed: pamphlets were forbidden and public defamation became common. In February 1937, the *Reichskirchenausschuss* retired while the PKA tried to continue its work. The first murder of a member of the *Bekennende Kirche* occurred in February 1937. At the end of September 1937, the tenure of office of the PKA ended. With the help of Berlin, a loyal church government was appointed. In February 1938, the *Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat* (EOK), which was the central organ for the *Evangelische Kirche der Altpreuussischen Union*, decreed that the president of the EOK govern the provincial churches, while the board of the provincial synod was limited to an advisory role.

After the 1938 *Anschluss*, Dr. Werner, the president of the EOK, demanded from all pastors an oath of allegiance to Hitler. Those who refused were to be dismissed. Half of the Rhineland pastors refused the oath as long as the state did not demand it and as no provision referred to the ordination oath of the pastors. Dr. Werner set a second and a third deadline for the oath and finally had to abandon it after Martin Bormann, NSDAP *Reichsleiter*, openly declared that the state was not interested in an oath from the Protestant pastors. Van Norden stresses that this was one of the rare points where the *Bekennende Kirche* was able to repulse an infringement by standing together. During 1939, up until the beginning of the war, discussions occurred within the Rhenish Church regarding church/state interaction and, at a more fundamentally theological level, concerning the definition of the relationship between visible and invisible church. The division within the Church became ever wider, and the Rhineland Confessing Synod (July 1939) discussed whether it could stay within the official church at all, given

that it had no longer a legitimate structure. Van Norden closes his book with a description of the strength of the *Bekennende Kirche* in the Rhineland in 1939: the funeral of the murdered pastor Paul Schneider in July, 1939, became a public demonstration in which the state did not dare to intervene.

In this book, van Norden once again demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the *Kirchenkampf*. He cites extensively from his own archives and thus makes much of this material accessible to the public for the first time. At the same time, this procedure has a drawback which one encounters in many publications concerning the *Kirchenkampf*: an overabundance of quotations often hijacks the author's writing style and makes the work as a whole a bit exhausting to read. In addition, descriptions of developments at the national level and at the provincial level are intertwined, and the reader is supposed to have sufficient background knowledge to sort them out. However, this depiction is the reflection of a complex historical interaction and should not diminish the value of the book for specialists.

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