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REVIEW ARTICLE

POLITICAL RELIGION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: TWO NEW STUDIES ON THE GERMAN AWAKENING MOVEMENT

HANS-CHRISTOF KRAUS

DAVID L. ELLIS, *Politics and Piety: The Protestant Awakening in Prussia, 1816–1856*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, 186 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), xii + 337 pp. ISBN 978 90 04 30808 4. €189.00

ANDREW KLOES, *The German Awakening: Protestant Renewal after the Enlightenment, 1815–1848*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xvi + 328 pp. ISBN 978 01 90 93686 0. £64.00

Although the nineteenth century was by no means a ‘second confessional age’ in Germany, as is sometimes claimed,¹ religion still played a prominent role and profoundly shaped everyday life in social, societal, and political terms. Despite the general process of secularization taking place across Europe (albeit slowly and in various forms),² there were repeated periods of rechristianization—especially in the wake of particularly brutal and violent phases of dechristianization.³ The German Protestant Awakening movement arose

* Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL).

¹ See e.g. Olaf Blaschke (ed.), *Konfessionen im Konflikt: Deutschland zwischen 1800 und 1970. Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter* (Göttingen, 2002).

² For further detail, see the masterly and still seminal study by Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975); more recently also Rudolf Schlögl, *Alter Glaube und moderne Welt: Europäisches Christentum im Umbruch 1750–1850* (Frankfurt am Main, 2013).

³ See Hartmut Lehmann, ‘Zwischen Dechristianisierung und Rechristianisierung: Fragen und Anmerkungen zur Bedeutung des Christentums in Europa und in Nordamerika im 19. und im 20. Jahrhundert’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 11/1 (1998), 156–68.

partly in response to the years of conflict under the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the German Campaign of 1813 (as established over one hundred years ago in a famous study by Karl Holl),⁴ and it spread sporadically from 1815 onwards, with a particularly strong presence in northern and eastern Germany. During the decades leading up to 1848, it exerted a significant influence on the development of German Protestantism, particularly in Prussia—although that influence was certainly controversial at the time. The movement also played a fundamental part in the rise of political conservatism during the Vormärz, as well as in early attempts at Christian social reform. There is already a substantial body of scholarship on these topics, which raises the question of what new findings and insights these two recent monographs have to offer.

The confessional situation in Prussia after 1800, which forms the main focus of both studies, was highly complex. In the wake of the territorial expansion of 1815, which saw Prussia gain control over the mainly Catholic provinces of Westphalia and the Rhineland, the opposition between majority Protestantism and minority Catholicism expanded into an ecclesiastical and political problem that came to an initial head with the Cologne church dispute between 1837 and 1840. Meanwhile, the conflict between Reformed and Lutheran denominations may have been settled by the Evangelical union in 1817, but Old Lutheran opposition to the Prussian Union of Churches founded by Frederick William III caused significant unrest within Prussian Protestantism until 1840. Nor had the consequences of the older conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries been resolved—by which I mean the multiple rivalries between Lutheran orthodoxy, enlightened theology ('Neology'), and Pietism.

To a certain extent, the post-1815 Protestant Awakening movement arose at the interface of all these developments, and it has now been closely examined and re-evaluated by two American authors: David L. Ellis and Andrew Kloes. The question of the relationship between the Awakening movement and the modern world is central to both studies, though Ellis views it more through the prism of political history, while Kloes leans towards a perspective rooted in social

⁴ Karl Holl, 'Die Bedeutung der großen Kriege für das religiöse und kirchliche Leben innerhalb des deutschen Protestantismus', in id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 3 vols. (Tübingen, 1928), iii. 302–84.

and religious history. Both are at pains to treat the Awakening movement not as a purely German, or even a purely Prussian, phenomenon, but as part of an international rechristianization process that encompassed and shaped the whole of Europe and North America (albeit to varying degrees in different regions). And both keep their distance from certain early, undifferentiated, materialist approaches to understanding this religious, social, and political movement. In the process, it becomes clear that they do not see the Awakening solely as a backward-looking movement that politically and intellectually served the interests of a reactionary elite, as often used to be claimed, but that they recognize certain 'modern' elements within it.

Ellis presents a well-founded, chronologically organized overview of the movement's emergence and development, keeping a steady eye on its political effects. He begins with an international comparison before narrowing the scope of his study to focus primarily on 'Prussia's heartland'—the provinces of Brandenburg and Pomerania—which he rightly identifies as forming the centre of the neo-Pietist Awakening in the Kingdom of Prussia from 1815 onwards. After reconstructing the origins and early development of the 'pious conventicles' (*fromme Konventikel*), which were still apolitical and unconcerned with worldly affairs during the 1820s, he goes on to acknowledge and build upon my own research as he charts the increasing politicization of the 'Awakened'.⁵ These 'silent ones of the land' (*Stillen im Lande*), as they were known at the time, gradually transformed themselves into a religious and political community of conviction and soon began to engage with the ecclesiastical and political debates of the time by harnessing cutting-edge methods of religious-political public communication—in particular through the influential *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* and *Berliner Politisches Wochenblatt* newspapers (the latter of which was financed by members of the aristocracy).

Ellis also scrupulously traces Awakened Christian political activity during the late Vormärz, the revolution of 1848–9, and the subsequent period of political reaction that lasted until 1857–8. He commendably sheds light on the 1850s and re-examines the disputes over

⁵ Hans-Christof Kraus, *Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach: Politisches Denken und Handeln eines preußischen Altkonservativen*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1994), i. 74–113, 137–84 ff.

the new church constitution in Prussia, the municipal code (*Gemeindeordnung*) and the revised state constitution of 1850, and Prussia's role in the Crimean War (1853–6). In this respect, the span of Ellis's study exceeds that of Kloes's. Politicians, diplomats, and journalists who had been influenced by the Awakening movement before 1848 were deeply involved in all of these controversies—including none other than Otto von Bismarck—and Ellis is able to show in detail how religiously inspired mindsets and arguments contributed to the political debates of the time. This is made particularly clear through the example of the vehement controversy over Prussian neutrality in the Crimean War, which was led by followers of the former Awakening movement who consistently harnessed mainly moral and religious arguments.

Another important output of Ellis's study is the recognition that the devout, Awakened, conservative forces were in fact able to modernize politically, and were open to many of the challenges of their time. Ellis sums up their use of modern communication and public relations techniques, their formation of political parties post-1848, their gradual acceptance of parliamentarianism and the constitutional state, and the beginnings of modern social policy with the well-founded argument 'that Prussia's religious revival, which intertwined with new forms of advocacy for political conservatism, actually helped to create a more modern society. Through its theological egalitarianism and its neo-Pietist emphasis on the individual's direct experience of God, the Prussian Awakening was, however unintentionally, a powerfully transformative force which in practice enhanced individual agency' (p. 3). In this sense, as Ellis himself notes, his research fits seamlessly into the reinterpretation of Prussia's development that has been ongoing since the early 1990s. Even in English-language scholarship, the history of the Kingdom is now increasingly studied as a *sui generis* phenomenon, and is no longer seen solely as a precursor to the German catastrophe of the twentieth century.⁶ In this way, the study of history is increasingly moving out of the long shadow of the post-war era, and the simplistic confrontation between 'progressive' and 'reactionary' touted by GDR historiography has now been consigned to the past.

⁶ e.g. Christopher Clark, *The Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London, 2006).

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By contrast, Andrew Kloes's book situates the Awakening movement more in the context of the religious and theological debates and social changes that took place following the Napoleonic Wars and during the Vormärz. Yet he too distances himself from earlier interpretations of the movement that dismissed it as a 'premodern' and solely 'backward-looking' historical phenomenon. Instead, like Ellis (although differing somewhat in terms of emphasis and reasoning), he stresses the clear and significant contribution that Awakened Pietists made both to Prussia's socio-political development and to the processes of intellectual transformation taking place at the time, as many followers of the movement took up prominent positions within Prussia's churches and universities. Although Kloes studies a shorter timespan than Ellis, he also looks at the external impacts of the Prussian-German Awakening movement, whose developments were closely followed in the English-speaking world (for instance, by Edward Pusey in Oxford), in the Netherlands (by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer), and at times even in France. Periodicals such as the *Neueste Nachrichten aus dem Reiche Gottes* in Berlin (1817–56), the *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* in London (1793–1904), and the *Parisian Archives du christianisme au dix-neuvième siècle* (1818–58) spread the religious, social, and political ideas of the Awakening movement into neighbouring countries, as well as North America.

Church reform and social reform in the context of the German and European Awakening form the central focus of Kloes's study, who announces from the very beginning his intention to concentrate on the four 'distinct areas of Protestant religious life: preaching, academic theology, organized evangelism, and caritative initiatives' (p. 17). He also goes into great detail and draws on many sources to reconstruct the religious and socio-political origins of the Awakening movements in the pre-1789 controversies between old Pietism, new devotional movements, and the rationalist Enlightenment. Kloes is equally well-informed on both the theological developments of the decades following 1815 and the 'New Religious Societies for Evangelism', which are often neglected in this context (pp. 147 ff.). He quite rightly points out the significance of the Awakening movement not only from a religious and denominational perspective, but especially in terms of social reform, as manifested in the active association life surrounding the movement. This included healthcare and

nursing associations; organizations dedicated to caring for neglected children, prisoners, the poor, and the deaf; societies to distribute the Bible and religious tracts; and associations that combated alcoholism, gambling, and cruelty to animals. We should also make special mention here of the highly active missionary societies (including the now little-known mission to the Jews), though there were many other examples.

Finally, Kloes highlights five key characteristics of the German Awakening in the context of the Protestant renewal after the Enlightenment (p. 223 ff.). The first of these is the fundamental *orthodoxy* of the Awakening movement, which rested on the core elements of Christian doctrine. The internal consistency of that orthodoxy stemmed from an intense, decades-long confrontation with the theological rationalism of the Enlightenment, which regularly came in for sharp criticism. Second, the Awakening movement, and especially its Prussian incarnation, saw itself as staunchly *Pietist*. It expressly understood itself as following in the tradition of August Hermann Francke and Philipp Jakob Spener, and focused on the inward renewal of individual faith and, ultimately, of the church itself. Third, Kloes emphasizes the movement's *ecumenical* outlook, with particular reference to its active efforts to settle the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism as part of a general renewal of the Christian faith after 1815. That said, the movement continued to express strong criticism of theological rationalism, both within Protestantism and beyond.

According to Kloes, the fourth key aspect of the Awakening movement was its *internationalism*. Previous work by scholars such as Gerhard Kaiser argued for close links between Pietism and patriotism,⁷ and therefore that the Awakening movement was associated with early German nationalism in the context of the German campaign against Napoleon in 1813. Yet Kloes relativizes this hypothesis by examining the at times very close contacts between Awakened Protestants in the German-speaking areas and the United Kingdom—although it is naturally important to remember that both sides were allies in the war against France. Fifth and finally (and this is where Kloes's findings overlap with those of Ellis's book), the

⁷ Gerhard Kaiser, *Pietismus und Patriotismus im literarischen Deutschland: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Säkularisation* (Wiesbaden, 1961).

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Awakening movement proves itself to be *modern* in a certain specific respect—provided that secularization is not counted as one of the key aspects of modernity, in any case. As Kloes convincingly argues, the Awakening movement modernized itself and its aims in part by taking advantage of the new opportunities presented by the post-1800 reforms: ‘Awakened Protestants benefited from the greater degree of liberty that the Enlightenment had brought to German society, which enabled them to act publicly upon their religious beliefs in new ways’ (p. 225).

These two works may not present an entirely new picture of the north German Awakening movement, but they offer a nuanced and thus more accurate account than previous scholarship. Both books analyse the Awakening movement from different perspectives, but come to very similar conclusions. They do so not only by illuminating particular details more clearly than before, but by decisively doing away with old prejudices and clichés. For instance, the authors demonstrate that Christian revival, even when acting in opposition to rationalism and secularism, is in no way equivalent to backwardness or anti-modernism. As the history of the Prussian Awakening shows, social and political change can still be wrought by people acting under Christian convictions and from religiously inspired motives. Socio-political progress and religious secularism are in no way identical, in any case. To take another example: the German Awakening movement in the first half of the nineteenth century shows that religion has been an important shaper and driver of socio-political developments not just in the premodern era, but in the modern age too. As such, it must not be neglected by historians. Whatever the personal motivations that have underpinned recent scholarship in religious, ecclesiastical, and denominational history—whether pure academic interest or religious conviction—the paramount importance of this research field is no longer in any doubt.

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recently *Versailles und die Folgen: Außenpolitik zwischen Revisionismus und Verständigung 1919–1933* (2013); *Bismarck: Größe – Grenzen – Leistungen* (2015); *Der Wendepunkt des Philosophen von Sanssouci* (2017); and (as ed.) *Fritz Hartung: Korrespondenz eines Historikers zwischen Kaiserreich und zweiter Nachkriegszeit* (2019).