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Review of Peter Howson, *Britain and the German Churches, 1945–1950:
The Role of the Religious Affairs Branch in the British Zone*

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PETER HOWSON, *Britain and the German Churches, 1945–1950: The Role of the Religious Affairs Branch in the British Zone*, Studies in Modern British Religious History, 43 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2021), 305 pp. ISBN 978 1 783 27583 0. £80.00

In 2003, regime change was one of the most prominent and publicly promoted aims of the controversial military campaign by the United States and the United Kingdom to topple the Iraqi dictatorship and install a new democratic government, which aimed to transform a former 'rogue state' into a new liberal–democratic nation. With hindsight, we can see the shortcomings of both the military campaign and the political reorganization that came afterwards. Some now even regard Iraq as a failed state in a worse condition than it was before the war.

Regime change is the prism through which the theologian-turned-historian Peter Howson examines the transformation of post-war Germany under the British administration. He focuses on the Religious Affairs Branch in the British zone, a unique organization in the occupation system of the Allied powers in Germany. It mainly dealt with administrative questions, such as coordinating meetings with German clergy, maintaining communication channels with the churches in Germany, and organizing trips between Britain and Germany for clergy. Interestingly, it was established not least because the archbishop of Canterbury felt it necessary to have an organization that dealt with religious questions. It was evidently believed that the ideological reorientation of the German population required the cooperation of the Christian churches, which would create a Christian foundation for rebuilding a democratic state.

Howson's study connects with several current debates in contemporary history. It is obviously of interest to researchers seeking to understand how the occupation regimes in post-war Germany functioned. Howson's case study illustrates the kinds of issues the occupation authorities dealt with and in how much detail they attempted to address particular topics. However, he also shows how limited their room for manoeuvre could be and what resistance they encountered in a previously hostile country. Here, the study allows interesting conclusions to be drawn about the functioning of occupation regimes and regime change.

Interestingly, the British authorities' limited scope for action was not due to resistance from groups that were still committed to the National Socialist regime. Rather, according to Howson, it was partly the opposite: British interest in the politics of the churches after 1945 was perceived, not least by Catholic clergy and especially by Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen, as intrusive and unnecessary for Germany's ideological reorientation. Von Galen, who had been one of the most open critics of the regime within the Catholic Church during National Socialism, did not hold back with his censure of the British occupiers, criticizing attacks by the military on the civilian population and rejecting the imputation of German collective guilt. One of the main arguments put forward by critics of the British occupation was that National Socialism had disappeared almost overnight after the defeat. Nationalism, however, still seemed to be present, including among the clergy—but how could this be distinguished from National Socialism?

Dealing with the German past also proved challenging in relation to the Protestant churches, partly because it was not easy for the British occupation authorities to grasp the complex organizational and political structures of Protestantism in Germany, and partly because the Protestant churches were more politically entangled with National Socialism. However, this made it possible to strive for a political reorientation in German Protestantism, which was successfully reflected in the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt in 1945.

Findings such as these place the study in a context that goes beyond the everyday difficulties of an occupation regime in a formerly totalitarian country. In both Britain and Germany, the post-war years saw a partial renaissance of organized Christianity. Callum Brown (among others) has shown this impressively for the British context,¹ and for West Germany, Kristian Buchna has asked how far the 1950s can be described as a 'clerical decade'.² In his magisterial study of the Oldham Group, the historian of religion John Wood demonstrates the extent to which even intellectual agnostics felt society should be based on

¹ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*, 2nd edn (London, 2009).

² Kristian Buchna, *Ein klerikales Jahrzehnt? Kirche, Konfession und Politik in der Bundesrepublik der 1950er Jahre* (Baden-Baden, 2014).

Christian foundations in order to prevent it from slipping into following dangerous totalitarian integrative ideologies.³ In Germany itself, the debate continues to this day and is known as the Böckenförde dilemma.⁴ Only at first glance is it surprising that the occupation regime by a country which undoubtedly went on to become one of the most secularized societies in Europe relied on significant help from the Christian churches in the late 1940s to bring about a successful regime change. Britain was still a very Christian country at this time, and until the late 1980s the Church of England played an unusually strong political role compared to that of churches in other European nations.

Unfortunately, the relevant debates in Great Britain and in the British occupation zone sometimes play a rather incidental role in Howson's investigation. Howson himself points out that many British files from the occupation are no longer available. However, the fact that debates often play a secondary role in Howson's book is also related to the tasks of the Religious Affairs Branch, which were primarily administrative in nature. There is a lot to learn in Howson's study about the specific problems of German bishops' trips abroad or the organization of the visit to Germany by the bishop of Chichester, George Bell. But here, despite its otherwise impressive precision and meticulous evaluation of sources, the study sometimes gets lost in technical detail. Nor do the very long source quotations, sometimes extending over more than one page, contribute very much to the coherence of Howson's argument. Careful reading is required to avoid overlooking interesting observations amid the detailed descriptions of everyday life and the long source extracts that are not always interpreted and fully explained.

Howson is obviously concerned with doing justice to his object of research by assiduously describing and documenting its activities. He seeks to assess the practical role of the Religious Affairs Branch in facilitating cooperation between British and German clergy and in

³ John Wood, *This is Your Hour: Christian Intellectuals in Britain and the Crisis of Europe, 1937–49* (Manchester, 2019).

⁴ Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, 'Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation', in id., *Recht, Staat, Freiheit*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt am Main, 2006), 92–114, at 112: 'The free, secular state lives by preconditions that it cannot guarantee itself. That is the great risk it has taken for the sake of freedom.'

enabling Christian life in post-war Germany – not least because the organization's work has gone largely unnoticed until now. In any case, Howson succeeds in demonstrating the importance assigned to church structures and Christian thought in British occupation policy. The influence of certain individuals also becomes clear, such as George Bell, but also August Marahrens, the bishop of Hanover, who stood for a Protestant church that had cooperated with the regime under National Socialism and partly followed its ideology. In describing personal encounters and differences between these two churchmen, Howson notes important details: for example, Bell's biting remark about Marahrens that there would have been no ecclesiastical resistance if all church officials had behaved as he did.

This is a study that could make an important contribution to understanding the role of religion in transitional societies and the processes behind the founding of the Federal Republic. In any case, it is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the foundations of a Western-style liberal democracy. Yet how important a role the Religious Affairs Branch played in establishing a democratic mentality based on Christianity is not easy to deduce from Howson's observations. There is no doubt that the organization could make only a small contribution on its own. Reading Howson's book, however, leaves one somewhat sceptical even of that limited role. In the end, perhaps the practical experience of an economically successful democracy was more important for the establishment of a democratic society and culture than the external attempt to promote the reconstruction of a Christian-oriented culture.

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