

# Book Review on Lutherans in Hitler's Germany

Colleagues,

This past semester I was asked to sit in for one session on a graduate seminar at St. Louis University where the topic was: The Church's Response—both Catholic and Protestant—to Hitler. The professor, Mark Ruff, is a rising star in that era of European history. We're both ELCA Lutherans—yes, even both with LCMS roots.

When the seminar got around to examining some of the German Lutherans who were my professors back in the 1950s (and Mark knew that) he asked me to join in the discussion. The assignment for that session was to discuss Matthew D. Hockenos's recent book *A CHURCH DIVIDED. GERMAN PROTESTANTS CONFRONT THE NAZI PAST*. Bloomington IN: Indiana UP. 2004.

For my part I presented a book review. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Matthew D. Hockenos.**

**A CHURCH DIVIDED. GERMAN PROTESTANTS CONFRONT THE NAZI PAST.**

**Bloomington IN: Indiana UP. 2004. [US\$30 at Amazon]**

Matthew Hockenos is Associate Professor of History (Modern Europe, Germany) at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs NY. His book is the story of good guys vs. bad guys in 1945-50 in

Germany, the first five years following World War II. He chronicles the differing ways the good guys and bad guys—"German Protestants" all of them—"confronted the[ir] Nazi past." Let the reader be warned: my teachers wind up among the bad guys. So you may not wish to read any further.

The bad guys are the Lutherans, regularly given the adjectives "conservative" or "orthodox," and for the baddest of the bad "ultra-conservative."

The good guys are Karl Barth [not really a German at all, but a Swiss citizen] and the German theologians/pastors for whom he was guru. Their identifiers are the words "Barmen" and "Dahlemites," sometimes "radical," most often "the reformers."

We are never told why "conservative, orthodox, ultraconservative" are dirty words. Nor are we told why Barth and the boys are "better." That's just the way it is.

Except for this one reason, I guess. The good guys (though not perfect—and we are told of their defects) most often did what the author finds good [and here "good" = morally right, yes even "Christian-ly" right], whilst the Lutheran crowd didn't.

And the main (only?) yardstick for what was "right" was that the good guys did "speak out" against Hitler, whilst the bad guys didn't. What all the bad guys may also have done that didn't get into the media is never told us. They are bad guys because they didn't speak out. Never are we shown that the strategy of "speak out" had palpable success in stopping anything Hitler was doing. Nor that the possible "not speak out" of the bad guys whilst working "camouflaged" or "just" in the faithful execution of their callings, whether that achieved anything positive. I do have data to document that—by one of the allegedly baddest of the bad guys, Werner Elert.

The author's posture as a moralist –and the arbitrary yardstick he uses for measuring right/wrong–was for this reader gosh-awful throughout the book.

We are told that behind those negative adjectives for the Lutherans are the fundamentals of their Lutheran theology–drawn straight from the Lutheran Confessions of the 16th century. Over and over again the author gives us the laundry list of the bad stuff. Summarized in this sentence at the end of the book: Even “after the war, many conservative Lutherans continued to subscribe to the orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders, and the theory of supersessionism.” 175

The author doesn't discuss whether or not these no-no's are at the heart of the Lutheran reformation–as they indeed are–and that if the bad guys were indeed to follow his counsel and “move” to be the good guys, they would cease to be Lutherans. Perhaps that is his message.

So his deeper historical claim is: Calvin (Barth's hero) was right, Luther was wrong. But to argue THAT thesis you can't confine your essay to five years of 20th century German history.

I'm told that Hockenos is a Roman Catholic. If so, that alone still doesn't say much given the broad spectrum of theologies within the Roman communion today. It too is replete with good guys and bad guys–and I get these evaluations from RC folks themselves. Especially at St. Louis University, a Jesuit school! Yet from having been around the theology marketplace for a few years, and entangled in ecumenical conversation for half a century, I can “divine” why Barth's fundamental theological blueprint and the standard “nature-grace” graph-paper of classical Roman theology are sympatico for Hockenos. And I do know that nature/grace Roman theologians regularly twitch when

they confront Luther's duplex/paradox proposals (in that laundry list above) for getting to the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Hockenos would be helped if someone told him that THE issue at the center of the 16th century Reformation was hermeneutics. HOW to read the Bible, and from that kind of Bible-reading, HOW to read the world. Luther himself says that his AHA! –the eye-opener that moved him away from his RC theology–was just that, namely, his finding the “discrimen” between God's law and God's Gospel RIGHT in the Bible itself. After years of teaching Bible at Wittenberg, the penny dropped. Here's the macaronic last line of Tischreden 5518: “Do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riß ich her durch.” [WA. Tischreden V p. 210, #5518.] “When I found the distinction, that the law is one thing, and the gospel something else, that was my breakthrough.”

That difference in hermeneutical Aha! is also at the center of the difference between Luther and Calvin. And that's the continuing cornerstone difference between the good guys and bad guys that Hockenos presents.

But here too it is lousy history simply to affirm (and give no adequate warrants): Calvin and the boys are right, Luther and the boys are wrong.

WHY is the Lutheran hermeneutic [two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders] wrong? The only proof that Hockenos cites is that the Lutherans (obviously operating on their Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the Bible and for reading their world, yes their Hitler-world) did and said things that Hockenos finds reprehensible. So it is a moral argument–using his chosen moral yardstick–that he invokes over and over again for why Lutheran theology is bad. What kind of historiography is that?

To my utter amazement my name appears in two bibliographic references of this book! So he might have interviewed me! Of course, that's silly, but if he had talked to me he'd have heard some things that might have been helpful.

1. First of all, what those reprehensible "two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders" are all about. My conviction from going through the book is: he hasn't a clue.
2. The plausibility of Bishop Wurm's and Professor Thielicke's critique of Allied occupation policy and action right after 1945.
3. The absolute madness of the de-nazification program. In Christian terms = "convincing" unbelievers (in democracy) to convert to democracy, just because you've beat the hell out of them. All this when your alleged moral superiority is at best a mixed bag—especially when viewed in the long stretches of European history. The parallel, in my judgment, is Maoist "camps" to re-educate incipient democrats into the "right" ideology. Or even the example which Hockenos details in his last full chapter as clear folly: German pastors seeking to move surviving Jews to become Christ-confessors. If that is madness, why isn't de-nazification insane?
4. The reality of the genocide against any and all Germans carried out by the Russians and the Poles in former German areas of eastern Europe.
5. What the Barth vs. Lutherans stand-off in the first half of the 20th cent. was all about. 'Twas my doctoral dissertation—with Thielicke as my Doktorvater.
6. Some insight into Thielicke—also into that Stuttgart Good Friday sermon that Hockenos critiques. Which makes Hockenos' treatment—a moralist's rejection—sound sophomoric.

Vexing to this reader is the “(b)ad hominem” labels over and over again about the bad guys. Sometimes signalling that the author was almost inside the head/heart/gut of the bad guys to read their entrails.

- a. they were “vague, they shied away.”
- b. one piece of their prose is “riddled with unwieldly Biblical aphorisms”
- c. they “contrived” their own self-justification
- d. Bishop Wurm “equivocates.”
- e. they “embellish”
- f. Bishop Meiser “conceals.”
- g. make a “watered-down confession.” After a string of such ad hominem, the author says, “therefore one can only conclude....” To draw conclusions from ad hominem arguments is an abomination both in logic and in history-writing. So it seems to me
- h. “wisdom was not forthcoming” from these leaders.
- i. “deliberately employed religious rhetoric to blur their failings.”
- j. “attempted to manipulate the discourse” by resorting to “Lutheran doctrine,” and thus “shied away” from being specific.
- k. Pastor Assmussen “tried to spin Wurm’s letter.”
- l. Wurm’s “desire to elevate his own stature . . . (his) distasteful prejudices . . . rewriting history . . . misrepresenting the facts . . . desire to gain popularity.”

I’ll stop here. This sampling is from but 1/3 of the book.

**Summa:** If this had been Hockenos’s dissertation and I had been his reader I would have returned it for serious reworking.

1. Although he has indeed read everything and accumulated great data. he’s clueless about the core of Lutheran theology which he finds defective. How can you write a

dissertation on that topic and get away with being clueless?

2. Granted, even after he did get more clarity here, I could guess that he'd still say no to the better-understood theology of the bad guys.
3. One place, btw, where his RC heritage (if that's what he is) shimmers through, I think, is his mis-reading on what "Guilt" is when one reads the Bible (and the guilty world) with a Luth. hermeneutical lens. When the post-WWII German Lutherans keep on insisting that guilt is a "coram deo" reality, my interface with God, that needs fixing FIRST, before any other guilt-fixing is possible, Hockenos regularly says: "Yes, of course, guilt before God is not unimportant—but what about your guilt, you bad guys, your guilt 'coram hominibus,' your interface with humankind? . THAT's where it's at in the Nazi era. And with your 'unwieldly Biblical aphorisms' YOU make that sound so secondary. Shame on you." "Precisely," say the Lutherans, "and we can show you why those 'Biblical aphorisms' constrain us to do just that." But Hockenos doesn't understand that.
4. And those ad hominems! How did the Indiana University Press editors let him get away with that?

**Summa:** To write history as bad guys vs. good guys is the way Hitler himself wrote history. Better said, "re-wrote" history. As do most all "winners" after the conflict. And so do all Manichaeans write history. [Our President Bush has been doing that from the bully pulpit for lo, these last 8 years. It's been our national tradition from the git-go. Most American citizens today do likewise. So in that regard, Bush is indeed OUR president.] But that's not writing history. It's ideology. Even worse, propaganda. Worse still, fiction. If the bad guys were treated without ad hominem put-downs, if their Lutheran commitments were understood and given a fair shake, Hockenos'

book would be much better history.

Them's my sentiments.

P.S. Oh, yes, besides my Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke, I did encounter "live" the following major players in Hockenos's study: Karl Barth and Karl Ja spers, Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, Hans Lilje, and Martin Niemoeller.