

Annette Jantzen:

Priester im Krieg. Elsässische und französisch-lothringische Geistliche im
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The present study examines the First World War, focusing on the war experiences of Catholic clergymen from the German-French border region of Alsace-Lorraine and from the French parts of Lorraine. These territories are especially interesting because regional and cultural identities overlap and intersect with national ones. Comparing the war experiences of Catholic priests both at and behind the front proves to be especially suitable to historical investigation of the identity-shaping relationship between religion and nation. Whereas priests from Lorraine had a secure national identity, their Alsatian counterparts – inhabitants of a contested borderland, a historic bone of contention between the great powers Germany and France – remained much more strongly fixated on their region. The scope of this comparative study takes in not only those clerics who served directly at the front but others as well, for example priests who were considered »indispensable« and remained in their pastoral posts, or those who served as nurses. Organized chronologically, the text analyzes and compares these clergyman and their war experience as civilians, prisoners, mobilized soldiers, and, finally, returnees.

The comparison reveals that a clear national orientation was an important precondition for a religious interpretation of the war. The authors from Lorraine had to reconcile what seemed irreconcilable; on the one hand, they saw the war as God-given, but on the other hand, they considered it a criminal war of aggression. They dealt with this dilemma by conceiving of war itself as belonging to divine providence and by discrediting the enemy in particular. In doing so, they maintained the distinction between normal wartime occurrences and violations of these norms. The German invasions of Belgium and Lorraine, for example, and the execution of civilians were condemned by the clergymen from Lorraine, as was the bombing attack on Paris; these were not occurrences that could be expected in war but fell into the category »war crimes.« The religious interpretation of the war, by which the opponent in war was also seen as a religious enemy and one's own nation as validated by God, prevented efforts to create a post-war memory that focused on prevention of future conflicts and on reconciliation.

Irrespective of whether they saw themselves as victims, loyal citizens, or as non-participants, in the matter of interpreting the meaning of the war, the Alsatian clerics did not often express themselves in clear theological terms and even less frequently than in political matters. The few known religious interpretations by Alsatian priests fall exclusively into one

of two categories: their hopes that God would end the war and protect the priest. They were most likely to view the war as an event that God had permitted to happen.

The central question driving this study – how the experience of war was reflected on and reconciled with existing patterns of religious interpretations – can be answered unequivocally for priests from Alsace as well as Lorraine: their firmly anchored, theologically grounded interpretations were not shaken by the course of the war. The notion of divine providence continued to be held in the sense that all historic development was believed to comply with the will of the almighty God and His unfathomable divine plan. Indignation toward or rebellion against, let alone rejection of this notion in the face of the enormous destruction wrought by the war were not options for these priests. Indeed, they were unthinkable, despite the punishingly long war of attrition.

Of undoubtedly decisive importance for these stable religious interpretations was a mode of thought shaped by a scholastic view of God and a faith in providence that emphasized not the betterment of the world but the salvation of the individual soul. To be sure, the clergymen were confronted with doubts about this worldview, with their own uncertainties and those of other soldiers as well. But these doubts were formulated only in the extremely private sphere of diaries. That they were nonetheless recorded demonstrates that, beneath the surface, the notion of providence lost some of its persuasiveness. With its overwhelming mechanization, war changed in a manner that was no longer easily reconciled with traditional religious interpretations of war, and tensions ensued.

Whether in a tuberculosis hospital on the Atlantic, as refugees in Württemberg, in a prisoner of war camp, on the Western Front or in East Prussia – Catholic priests may have understood the war as a test, which they hoped would be over soon, but this did not change the nature of faith in providence. That, in turn, led to a rupture that proved impossible to reconcile theologically.