

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany*

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Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany. By Doris L. Bergen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 326 pages.

Doris L. Bergen's *Between God and Hitler* is an informative, sobering historical account of the role of military chaplains in Nazi Germany. She examines the nearly 1,000 Protestant and Catholic chaplains who served in the German *Wehrmacht* during World War II. Bergen draws on over a decade of research by using personal letters, military reports, and survivor testimonies. The animating question of the book is: "Whom or what does a chaplain serve?" The need to ask and answer this question is critical for understanding the institution of military chaplaincy.

Bergen does not outright indict these men as war criminals. Rather, she reports on how surviving personal and professional correspondence appears to reveal how these chaplains may have exercised their ecclesiastical authority and military officer roles during the Nazi regime—and how, by and through those roles, they may have explicitly or implicitly contributed to crimes against humanity.

Bergen paints an unsettling picture. The chaplains she studied fulfilled traditional clerical functions—offering sacraments, comforting the wounded, and burying the dead. Chaplains also remained silent about the atrocities committed by the very military institution with which they were formally affiliated. Bergen's portrayal is necessarily limited to broad brushstrokes because much of the correspondence on which she relies was undoubtedly subject to censorship by the regime. Moreover, those clergy who did object probably did not remain in uniform or stay alive.

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The value of Bergen's work is that it raises important concerns that warrant ongoing reflection about the praxis of military chaplaincy. *Between God and Hitler* poses a fundamental question that other works have addressed and all stakeholders in military chaplaincy must meaningfully engage: How does one serve two masters?

Members of the clergy who choose to don a military uniform and accept compensation from the U.S. Government to perform their religious functions for soldiers must understand as acutely as possible the risks inherent in that choice. Richard Budd, drawing on the insights of Charles Hedrick, articulates the nature of these risks with clarity:

Chaplains had the access they desired, the authority they needed, and the autonomy to which they felt entitled as a profession. This did not deliver chaplains from the necessity and the difficulty of living in what Charles Hedrick has called their 'dialectical ambiguity,' but it may have been the best they could do given the truth of the two-thousand-year-old dictum of Jesus that 'no one can serve two masters.'¹

Doris Bergen's *Between God and Hitler* illustrates those risk factors in compelling, sobering ways. In doing so, she arguably affirms the insights of both Jesus and Budd. Bergen invites intentional reflection on the enduring complexities of military chaplaincy.

Central to Bergen's work is her assertion that German *Wehrmacht* chaplains were complicit in the atrocities of the Nazi regime. She locates that in part through their silence, passivity, and legitimizing presence. Her findings suggest that the structural and institutional dynamics of military chaplaincy inherently predispose its members to complicity. Her guiding question is: "Whom or what does a chaplain serve?"² Bergen's question remains as relevant today as it was then, but the expectations she places on military clergy may overlook the practical, theological, and institutional constraints that define the chaplaincy.

Bergen joins her voice to others who pose this complex question. In his critique of the Vietnam War, theologian Robert McAfee Brown famously asked, "Where were the chaplains?" He continued: "On an issue of the greatest moral sensitivity, on which the representatives of the churches could have been expected to speak forthrightly and prophetically, why were the chaplains so silent [in Vietnam]?"³ Reflecting on similar theological,

1 Richard Budd, *Serving Two Masters: The Development of American Military Chaplaincy, 1860–1920* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 158.

2 Bergen, *Between God and Hitler*, 2.

3 Robert McAfee Brown, "Military Chaplaincy as Ministry," in *Military Chaplains: From Religious Military to Military Religion*, ed. Harvey G. Cox (American Report Press, 1971), 144.

sociological, and historical scholarship from the late 1960s and early 1970s, Edward Waggoner observes, “These scholars were appalled by U.S. military tactics in Vietnam and disappointed by the relative silence of military chaplains.”⁴

Bergen’s work serves as a cautionary tale for contemporary chaplains who navigate the tension between their clerical calling and their role as officers. Her study has enduring value because it illuminates the institutional risks facing clergy who choose to carry out their religious functions in uniform. By shining light in this way, Bergen’s book provokes critical reflection on the form and function of military chaplaincy.

Bergen’s vigorous critique of German military chaplains is that their conspicuous silence in the face of the Nazi atrocities rendered them complicit through omission. Is her critique thorough? What did Bergen specifically expect of those chaplains, and on what grounds does she base those expectations? Placing Bergen’s critique within the context of contemporary military chaplaincy is essential. She suggests that by virtue of their religious convictions and ecclesiastical commitments, Christian chaplains ought to have openly opposed the atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime.

Her assumptions regarding military chaplaincy prompt two important considerations. The first concerns the validity of imposing specific moral demands on a particular religious tradition from outside its own theological framework. The second concerns the reasonableness of expecting clergy to challenge an institution that grants them pay, promotions, decorations, and assignments, and cultivates a deeply rooted culture in which loyalty is both assumed and rewarded.

German military chaplains, like their counterparts today, may bear a legitimate and implicit obligation to perform religious functions for *Wehrmacht* personnel in accordance with their clerical vocation and ecclesiastical authority. However, Bergen’s assumptions that they were also obligated to redirect their religious functions and influence toward shaping state policy or influencing military operations is both theologically unfounded and institutionally untenable. Her critique conflates the role of ordained clergy with that of a moral advisor within the military command structure. This assumption lacks grounding in both ecclesial tradition and statutory law, and it exceeds the canonical and legal boundaries of chaplaincy as a defined ministerial office.

U.S. Army chaplains are ordained clergy who serve in uniform; they are both legally mandated and ecclesiastically accountable to provide religious support to service members whose military duties prevent them from freely

⁴ Edward Waggoner, *Religion in Uniform: A Critique of US Military Chaplaincy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), 3.

practicing their faith. Put simply, chaplains are expected to perform the same core functions as rabbis, priests, pastors, or other recognized religious leaders. I use the terms “clergy,” “clergy in uniform,” “cleric,” and “chaplain” interchangeably to denote what U.S. federal law defines as a “duly ordained minister of religion:”

The term ‘duly ordained minister of religion’ means a person who has been ordained, in accordance with the ceremonial, ritual, or discipline of a church, religious sect, or organisation established on the basis of a community of faith and belief, doctrines and practices of a religious character, to preach and to teach the doctrines of such church, sect, or organisation and to administer the rites and ceremonies thereof in public worship, and who as his regular and customary vocation preaches and teaches the principles of religion and administers the ordinances of public worship as embodied in the creed or principles of such church, sect, or organisation.⁵

The U.S. Army Chaplain Corps exists in accordance with statutory mandates for the express purpose of providing “duly ordained ministers” to mitigate the burden that military service inevitably places on service members’ ability to freely exercise their religion. Travis Weber’s testimony before the Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel, neatly describes the purpose of military chaplaincy:

When Americans join our nation’s military, they give up certain liberties. Yet, they retain Free Exercise rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution. Thus, the military has a responsibility to provide them the means of Free Exercise—this includes in part, providing access to the chaplaincy.⁶

Bergen’s expectations of the German military chaplains are clearly articulated, but the underlying foundation of those expectations is less fully developed. She is clearly unsettled by the dissonance between theological ideals and the chaplains’ failure to oppose the Nazi regime. Yet her critique seems to derive not from a legal or institutional framework, but from a moral and theological one that is shaped by her own worldview and her broader understanding of the role of military chaplaincy, the Christian faith, and their intersection.

Military chaplains today should recognize that a wide range of expectations exist for their praxis—as military chaplains and clergy more broadly. These expectations can at times be unrealistic, unfair, or even fundamentally

⁵ War and National Defense Act of 2015, *US Code 50* (2015), § 3814 (g) (1).

⁶ Travis Weber, *Testimony Provided to the U.S. Congress Regarding Religious Accommodations in the Armed Service*, on January 29, 2014, before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel of the Committee on Armed Services, 113th Congress, 2d session: 181.

contradictory in ways that negatively impact the performance of their religious functions. For this reason, the more closely clergy within the military can anchor the performance of religious functions to their religious bodies that ecclesiastically endorse them and to the provisions of U.S. statutory law, the more secure they will be from the pressures of unreasonable expectations and confusion around their roles that results from dialectical ambiguity.

Bergen's analysis emphasizes the unique tension at the heart of military chaplaincy: that of dual allegiance. This tension is inextricably linked to, and perhaps even a result of, her unrealistic expectations of Christian clergy. Military chaplains occupy a hybrid role: they are commissioned by the state while simultaneously ordained by a religious body. This dual status raises profound theological and institutional questions—not only about where a chaplain's ultimate loyalty resides, but also about what should occur when those loyalties come into conflict. Civilian clergy, not bound by such dual commitments, are largely insulated from this dilemma.

Military chaplains often occupy a precarious position: expected by some to use their ecclesiastical authority and religious functions to support the military institution and its leaders, while criticized by others for not using that same authority and functions to resist or rebuke them. Bergen's expectations and critique of German military chaplains appear to stem, at least in part, from the fact that these individuals wore military uniforms adorned with officer rank while representing the Christian faith. This dual affiliation—military and religious—seems to elevate her expectations for their response, or at the very least, reinforces the strength of her critique. It may be, then, that the military affiliation itself is the heart of Bergen's concern.

Former World War II chaplain Robert McAfee Brown openly criticized the policy of commissioning clergy as soldiers, arguing that doing so effectively “legitimizes war.” For Brown, the chaplain's status as a military officer “implies a virtually uncritical sanctioning or condoning of war.”⁷ Similarly, theologian Harvey Cox noted, “There are an increasing number of people, not all of them pacifists by any means, who argue that the very presence of the chaplain, particularly in his presently constituted role as military officer, implies a virtually uncritical sanctioning or condoning of war.”⁸

Bergen holds military chaplains to a higher standard than their civilian counterparts based on several interconnected factors. First, military chaplains were embedded within the Nazi war apparatus. Unlike civilian clergy, who operated largely outside the military structure, these chaplains served directly

⁷ John Dart, “Frontline Theologian: Robert McAfee Brown (1920–2001),” *Christian Century* 188, no. 27 (October 10, 2001): 14; Brown, “Military Chaplaincy as Ministry,” 144–145.

⁸ Brown, “Military Chaplaincy as Ministry,” 144–145.

within the *Wehrmacht* and were regularly present during mass violence. To Bergen's point, their institutional role and physical proximity to atrocities arguably increased their situational awareness, access to sensitive information, and thus their moral accountability.

Second, the uniform itself carried significant symbolic weight. By wearing the insignia of the German military and holding officer rank, chaplains became public representatives of the regime irrespective of their intent. Their visible association with the armed forces served—whether by design or implication—to legitimize both the military institution and the broader objectives of the Nazi state.

I wish Bergen had contextualized and theorized the chaplains' silence—particularly when considered against the backdrop of pervasive censorship, constant surveillance, and the very real personal risks posed by the Nazi regime, not only to the chaplains themselves but also to their families. Her argument would have been strengthened by a more precise geographic mapping of chaplain assignments in relation to known atrocity sites, which could have more clearly established proximity and the likelihood of awareness. Additionally, the inclusion of counterexamples—chaplains who resisted or responded in ways consistent with her expectations—would have added balance and enhanced the academic rigor of her critique.

Between God and Hitler is a valuable and original contribution to Holocaust scholarship and offers important insights for ongoing reflection on the complex role of military chaplaincy.

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