

Application for a Presidential Faculty-Student Collaboration Research Grant
for the Summer of 2008

Applicants: Mary M. Solberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Religion, and David Lick, rising senior religion major

Project: The German Christian Movement in Print: Selected Texts from 1933-45 in Translation

Narrative

Introduction. A few years ago, a senior religion major and advisee approached me with an idea for her senior thesis. She wanted to write about the conduct of the Protestant churches during the Third Reich. She could not understand, she said, why these churches had not spoken out against both National Socialism and the persecution of the Jews.

Delighted that she was interested in tackling this distressing chapter in the history of the Church, I suggested she might look at the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians, hereafter abbreviated GC), a movement whose members believed National Socialism was utterly compatible with their faith. I also urged her to seek out any available primary sources, which would surely enrich her analysis.

Assisted by a reference librarian and online search engines, the student's literature search yielded one book, a collection of pamphlets published by the Deutsche Christen Verlag (publishing house). As it turned out, the collection was available at only one library in the world: the St. Olaf College library. (The pamphlets had been donated by their owner in the mid-1930s, and were apparently bound together because they were donated together.) When the student retrieved the book, we pored over the yellowing pages, fascinated; none of us had ever seen original GC publications.

The student did use portions of some of the documents in her thesis, but her limited facility with the German language and the German script in which they were published, made it difficult to take full advantage of these primary sources. It seemed to me, even at a glance, that they contained political, theological, cultural, and historical treasures waiting to be mined. But a host of other scholarly commitments kept me from "having at" them at that juncture.

Why this project? Over the last few decades, hundreds—perhaps thousands—of books and journal articles have been published on the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, and the flow of scholarship does not seem to be diminishing. Courses on the Holocaust appear in the curricula of more and more colleges (including Gustavus) and universities, and even of some high schools. In this burgeoning field, however, comparatively little work has been done on the role of religion and specifically, on the conduct of the churches during the Third Reich.

The German Christians, in person and in publications, articulated their desire to eradicate all traces of Judaism from Christianity; claimed Martin Luther, whose later writings vilified the Jews, as a hero of the Nazi revolution; "proved" Jesus was an Aryan; made of Hitler a messianic figure; and unapologetically argued for the activities and policies of the Nazi state. The pamphlet form, easily produced, sold for pennies, and often passed along to others, was ideally suited to spread GC ideology to the broader German public. Perhaps these same features contributed to its scarcity sixty-some years after the Third Reich ended. Original documents published by the GC movement are hard to come by, even in German; as I have discovered, they appear to be non-existent in English translation.

My research so far has persuaded me of the singular importance of bringing to light these virtually forgotten and highly revealing published "exhibits" from the 1930s and 1940s as evidence of the role this Christian movement played in Nazi Germany.* The goal of this project has been/is to track down extant German Chris-

* I have consulted about the project's potential value with some of the leading U.S. scholars on the conduct of the churches during the Third Reich, among them Professors Doris L. Bergen, Victoria J. Barnett, Robert P. Ericksen, and Larry Rasmussen. To a person, all responded that a collection of translated GC materials

tian publications and make available for the first time in English a representative selection. The "reader" in which the selections appear will begin with a substantial introduction setting out their historical and theological context and significance, and likely, shorter introductions to sections reflecting criteria for the particular selections (among them, Key Issues; Chronology; Authorship; Critics; Impact; Type of Document).

This application for a Presidential Faculty-Student Research Collaboration Grant requests funding to *continue working on—and integrating a student collaborator into—a larger project* already in progress.

Progress to date. Last summer, with the help of a Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I was able to get a good start on this project, which I estimate will probably take another two years to complete. I was able to compile a substantial list of documents owned by libraries worldwide. With the help of our Interlibrary Loan coordinator, I was able to solicit and obtain either original materials or photocopies of most of the pamphlets and books I had tracked down in the literature search. As they came in, one or two at a time over a period of several months, I looked each document over preliminarily to ascertain its potential significance. Most, I decided to photocopy for later examination and/or partial or complete translation.

I organized the documents chronologically, to see how "evenly" they were distributed over the course of the Third Reich (the first ones predate the accession of Hitler to power in 1933; the last date to the middle of the Second World War), and to make some preliminary judgments about how well they seem to match the categories or criteria I had established for their selection. I began translating three or four of them.

I also gathered and began to examine research materials, especially books and documentary films, to lay as rich an historical foundation as possible, with two key goals: first, to assist me to appreciate the context, tone, intention, and style of the German texts I am translating; and second, to assist in drafting accessible and solid introductions to the reader as a whole and to the individual sections.

Anticipated outcome of this project. The publisher of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's complete works in English, Fortress Press, has expressed interest in publishing the reader that is the planned final result of this project. As a teacher-scholar, I am chiefly concerned to make English translations of these German Christian publications accessible to teachers and students in colleges and universities. If they become accessible, historians and scholars in other disciplines may also find them useful in their teaching and research.

Where does this project fit into my career as a teacher-scholar? One of the courses I taught this past fall semester was a First Term Seminar (FTS) titled, "In the Face of Evil: The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Hitler's Germany." In addition to the information about and "sense" of the so-called church struggle that I was able to share with my FTS students, based on my research to date, I was delighted to be able to encourage and advise one in particular who decided to write his research paper on the German Christian movement. Depending on departmental needs and possibilities, I hope to teach a course during the near future either on Bonhoeffer's life and theology, or on the church in the Third Reich, or both. In either case, my research and translation work will be of great value.

Translating and interpreting the published work of the German Christian movement will inform and enrich my work as a constructive theologian. For the past two decades my work as a theologian (an integral dimension of my vocation as a teacher-scholar) has been inspired and informed by my own faith tradition (as a Lutheran), my commitments as a feminist woman, and my professional and personal experience representing an international Lutheran NGO in Central America during periods of civil war.

would be a very welcome addition to scholarship and teaching materials on the Third Reich and the Holocaust.

I came to theological study and teaching as a seasoned adult—and as someone who, in part because of experiences like these, had developed a keen sense of what my faith tradition and community, if they were to claim intellectual, theological, or moral integrity, had to account for. My first book, *Compelling Knowledge: A Proposal for a Feminist Epistemology of the Cross* (SUNY Press, 1997), which is still widely cited and adopted for college and seminary courses in Luther's work, feminist theology, and constructive theology, reflects my commitment as a theologian to respond to the challenges of global events and interdisciplinary scholarship.

I am quite intentional as I now turn to the Third Reich and the role of Christians of many stripes as they engaged questions of government, nationalism, other nations, war, the persecution of Jews and others considered "undesirable" in Nazi Germany, etc. My life experience includes three lengthy sojourns in Germany (one of the reasons for my fluency). On two of those occasions, my parents were engaged in humanitarian work to help repair and rebuild church communities and institutions marked by precisely the history my project seeks to illuminate.

To study carefully and write circumspectly about the German Christian movement will, I believe, refine both the historical sense and the theological sensibility I seek as I contribute to Christians' understanding of our responsibility in the world today. Despite the decades that separate their world from ours, I believe that we face challenges not so far from those they faced, nationally and globally. The "quality of the provocation" (as one of my graduate professors phrased it) offered by a study of this kind will compel careful and sober investigation. My conviction of the deep significance of this project, underscored by the encouragement I have received from those colleague-scholars who are most knowledgeable about this period, has given me reason to believe that it will contribute something of lasting value.

My student collaborator. David Lick has been my student in two religion classes, one his first year and one his second. I have admired the thoughtfulness, intelligence, and diligence that have characterized his work. I was intrigued to discover that he had attended a German immersion school in Milwaukee, that he thoroughly enjoyed using his fluent spoken German, and that he was very competent in reading German, even in the Gothic script in which the German Christian documents appear. When I told David—perhaps 18 months ago—about my hope to translate some number of German Christian documents into English, his face lit up immediately. Over the last six months or so, I have "checked back in" with David, who continues to express great interest in the possibility of assisting me—"in any way I can," to use his words.

The Presidential Faculty-Student Research Collaboration grant would make it possible for me to offer this capable young man a contractual, remunerative opportunity to use his very good German-language skills, his theological and historical interest in the subject under study, and his developing research capabilities, to both learn from and contribute to a collaborative effort. I have every reason to think he will find our work as exciting as I will!