

Angela Strauß, Freigeister und Pragmatiker. Die preußischen Feldprediger 1750–1806, Göttingen (V&R unipress) 2021, 396 S., 1 Abb. (Herrschaft und soziale Systeme in der Frühen Neuzeit, 28), ISBN 978-3-8471-1305-8, EUR 55,00.

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This excellent doctoral dissertation is far more than a history of the Prussian army chaplaincy in the second half of the long 18th century, from the Seven Years' War through the Wars of Liberation.

As a collective biography, well-situated in the institutional, political, intellectual, religious, and cultural historical context, this book engages and illuminates several historiographical conundrums. First, this is a close study of the age-old problem of the role of the clergy at the nexus of religion, politics, authority, and disciplining. Second, this book takes seriously the relevant religious issues, such as the unique position of military chaplains vis-à-vis the church and the army, their everyday activities, their relations with their congregations and fellow officers, etc. Finally, Strauß closely examines the chaplains (current and former) and their discourse to place them in the context of the waning of Pietism and the ubiquity of Enlightenment in the late 18th century.

The book begins with a laudably brief and clear introduction, most of which is focused on the states of the various relevant fields of study. Here Strauß shows how her book will contribute to the social history of Enlightenment, to the history of Prussia, the new military history, and the history of religion. First, Strauß reviews the many works regarding the social and intellectual roles of the clergy in the 18th century. Second, Strauß convincingly places the chaplaincy at the center of the history of militarism and nationalism in late 18th-century and Sattelzeit Prussia by referencing earlier works on »social militarism« and the transformation of the enthusiasm of Pietism into patriotism. Third, this book's contribution to the new military history is so obvious that Strauß says little about it. Finally, Strauß argues that this book will contribute to the history of religion, which against the backdrop of the secularization master narrative has identified in the 18th century a broad-based transformation in religious practice, spirituality, and theology.

In the introduction Strauß makes no claims to especially innovative methods or unconventional sources – this is simply a thorough and cogent study. It makes perfect sense that she has researched the history of the 800+ chaplains as a collective biography – distinguished from prosopography by its reliance on ego documents – even as she differentiates »sub-groups« based on cohorts and thereby can show not only change over time but also



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the impact of wartime experiences (or lack thereof). She describes a »collective mentality« among chaplains, which influenced their discourse (and vice versa, presumably). Similarly, the demise of the military archive in WW II is well-known to anyone working on 18th-century Prussia, and Strauß's admirable workaround has been to use the archives of the religious (*geistliche*) department as well as the archives of Prussian cities. Finally, Strauß has tracked down seemingly every relevant publication from the period, not only those written by chaplains (or former chaplains), but also those about them or intended for them as readers.

After the introduction, the book is organized in six further chapters. The second is an institutional history of the chaplaincy and a political history of the controversies that surrounded it, especially the perennial feuding between civilian and military clergy. The latter culminated at the turn of the 19th century in widespread calls to abolish the military church, which provoked explanations of the chaplaincy's value. The third chapter is the prosopography of the chaplaincy, which establishes a »social profile« of the chaplains and their backgrounds and further careers. Here Strauß debunks the idea that a chaplainship was the first step into the hierarchy of the church and that former chaplains dominated the civilian church. Instead, she makes it clear that (at least in the later 18th century) chaplains served longer than before (on average more than nine years) and they made up only a small minority (10 of 57) of superintendents.

The fourth chapter specifically investigates the »group identity« of the chaplains, especially their collective experience of war. Wartime experience for chaplains was characterized by various physical miseries and the spiritual challenge of ministering to soldiers facing combat. For most chaplains, though, war remained abstract: something imagined, even a constant reference point, but not a reality. In this way Strauß differentiates three cohorts (*Generationen*) of chaplains: a »war generation« who came of age in the early 18th century and served in the War of Austrian Succession and/or the Seven Years' War; a »postwar generation« who first served after 1763; and a »revolutionary generation« who served after 1790.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters are interrelated, regarding practical religion, educating society, and the politicization of the clergy, respectively. The fifth chapter places the chaplaincy and the controversies surrounding it in the context of the broad-based »theological Enlightenment«. That chaplains were »Aufklärer« was unproblematic, but more damaging was the recurrent suspicion that the chaplaincy was a haven and breeding ground for »Freigeister«. This vague pejorative and its allusions to heterodoxy, rationalism, and neology tainted the chaplaincy, especially under King Frederick William II and his minister of religious matters, Johann Christoph Woellner (of the eponymous infamous religion edict). Meanwhile, chaplains followed the trend of the rest of the clergy in Protestant Germany, who were focused more and more on Enlightenment »practical religion«, by which they meant



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that they (and the church) should make themselves useful to their congregations, generally by leading them to happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) and virtue (*Tugend*). Strauß convincingly shows how these Enlightenment keywords (practicality, happiness, virtue) were constantly used in discussions of the chaplaincy and its social utility and relevance.

Chapter six delves into the role of the chaplaincy and the army in educating society. First, Strauß shows that chaplains were expected to (and did) play key roles in founding and running local schools, and though the influence of Pietism was waning by the late 18th century, Halle continued to be a source of the pedagogical training and materials. More significant, chaplains were increasingly understood to be *Volkslehrer* teaching virtue and morals to the soldiery. Building on the last chapter, Strauß shows that there was decreasing emphasis on religious »truth« or soldiers' salvation, and that the role of newly useful chaplains was to foster useful subjects for the army and the state.

Finally, chapter seven shows how teaching morality seamlessly segued into teaching patriotism, for example, because the greatest moral imperative was to sacrifice one's life for the fatherland. Strauß places this in the context of contemporary discussions of the common good and the widespread discourse regarding the *Opfertod*. Harkening back to the last chapter, again, Strauß shows how war came to be less dreaded as divine punishment and more welcomed as a divine test or »school of virtue«. Contemporary clergy criticized the politicization of the chaplaincy, but chaplains (and especially former chaplains) themselves seemed to embrace this kind of militarism. By 1806, then, the military defeat of Prussia was seen as the result of moral failure.

In sum, this well-conceived and well-executed book is not only the authoritative work regarding the Prussian army chaplaincy in the late 18th century, but is also a serious contribution to the history of religion, Enlightenment clergy, the rise of nationalism, state-building, etc.



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