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Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence and the Holocaust

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REVIEW

Kevin P. Spicer, C.S.C., ed.

Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence and the Holocaust

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.) hc, xxi + 329 pp.

Reviewed by Abraham J. Peck, University of Southern Maine

Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust, ably edited by Kevin P. Spicer, and introduced by Spicer and John T. Pawlikowski, seeks to present a contemporary balance sheet to the questions: What role did Christian theology and practice play in the Holocaust? Did members of the European clergy find comfort in and support the growth of European fascist thought and politics because they mirrored the churches' fear and loathing of godless Bolshevism and its Jewish cohorts? What did those interested in the answers find out about their religious traditions, and what did they do to create a mood of Christian *teshuva* or repentance? And, finally, did and do Jews and Judaism find examples of Christian *metanoia* worthy of engagement in a new atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation?

The twelve essays in the book were originally part of a workshop on the Holocaust and antisemitism in Christian Europe hosted by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2004. The book is divided into four sections. "Theological Anti-Semitism," the first section, seeks to show that theological anti-Judaism and its later variant, racial anti-Semitism, were comfortable bedfellows, so much so that one can hardly differentiate between the two in terms of where one stopped and the other began. Essays in this section are authored by Thorsten Wagner, "Belated Heroism: The Danish Lutheran Church and the Jews"; Anna Lysiak, "Rabbinic Judaism in the Writings of Polish Catholic Theologians"; Robert A. Krieg, "German Catholic Views on Jesus and Judaism 1918-1945"; and Donald J. Dietrich, "Catholic Theology and the Challenge of Nazism."

Section two, titled "Christian Clergy and the Extreme Right Wing," seeks to understand why certain members of the clergy in Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and the Romanian Orthodox churches embraced anti-Semitism in their pastoral activities. The authors of this section are Kevin P. Spicer, "Working for the Fuehrer: Father Dr. Philip Haeuser and the Third Reich"; Beth A. Griech-Polelle, "The Impact of the Spanish Civil War upon Roman Catholic Clergy in Nazi Germany"; and Paul A. Shapiro, "Faith, Murder, Resurrection: The Iron Guard and the Romanian Orthodox Church."

Section three, titled "Postwar Jewish-Christian Encounters," examines and evaluates the corruptive influence of National Socialism and the Holocaust on the Christian churches and the efforts of both Catholics and Protestants to confront the tradition of the negative teachings about Jews and Judaism in the years after 1945. Here one finds essays by Matthew D. Hockenos, "The German Protestant Church and its *Judenmission*"; and Elias H. Fuellenbach on "Shock, Renewal, Crisis: Catholic Reflections on the Shoah."

Finally, section four is titled "Viewing Each Other." The authors in this part examine Jewish reactions to the possibility of a new direction in Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue. Gerson Greenberg writes on "Wartime Jewish Orthodoxy's Encounter with Holocaust Christianity";

Suzanne Brown-Fleming discusses “Confronting Antisemitism: Rabbi Philip Sidney Bernstein and the Roman Catholic Hierarchy”; and Richard Steigman-Gall evaluates “Old Wine in New Bottles?: Religion and Race in Nazi Antisemitism.”

Like so many essay collections, the quality of the works presented varies according to a number of criteria: some of the essays allow the reader an abbreviated sense of a book just written, others are essays on the way to potential fuller length monographs. But what is clear is that most of the authors have moved away from the idea put forth by the renowned ethicist and Holocaust scholar John Roth, who some years ago stated that Christianity was not responsible for the Holocaust, but the Holocaust could not have taken place without it.

Indeed, such an understanding of Christianity’s role in the murder of two-thirds of European Jewry was strengthened by the September 2000 Jewish document on Christianity (*Dabru Emet—Speak the Truth*), in which dozens of rabbis and scholars of Judaism supported the statement that “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.” What was it then? The majority of contributors to the volume under review would not agree with this statement and would challenge it along various lines of inquiry.

Writing at the end of the Second World War, a non-Jewish New York cultural critic and editor of the *Partisan Review*, Dwight Macdonald, puzzled over the events that had taken place in Europe from 1933-1945. “Something has happened in Europe,” he wrote. “What is it? Who or what is responsible? What does it mean about our civilization, our whole system of values?”¹ Across the Atlantic, in the continent most affected by his questions, Christian clergy and Christian intellectuals asked themselves a similar set of questions. No doubt they feared an answer that might bring their entire history and theology into question. Was Christianity responsible for fostering an atmosphere that led to the murder of millions? Did the Christian Churches do enough, or indeed do anything, to warrant a place in the history of resistance to the National Socialist effort to bring about a “Final Solution” to Europe’s long standing “Jewish Question”?

In early post-World War II meetings in places as diverse as Seeligsberg, Switzerland, and Oxford, England, these concerned Christians, aided by invited rabbinical guests, sought answers to MacDonald’s penetrating and potentially devastating questions. More than six decades later, while Christianity has continued to seek answers and has reshaped itself vis-à-vis its relationship to Judaism at many levels, Spicer warns us that despite advances, “anti-Semitism is still quite present in Christianity; in its Scripture, in its worship, and in its everyday rhetoric (p.xi).”

A number of the essays in this volume point to the depth of Christianity’s anti-Jewish teachings, an ideology that conditioned Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism for well over a thousand years. Those teachings and their associated actions – from the introduction of distinctive Jewish clothing and the creation of ghettos to the dehumanization of Jews themselves and their portrayal as servants of the Devil or as devils – were simply retooled by the National Socialists, who added a well-conceived organization, technological advances, and the fanatical will to see the destruction through to its horrific conclusion.

It is therefore no surprise that Thorsten Wagner’s outstanding essay on the position of the Dutch Lutheran Church concludes that Danish Lutheranism exhibited a considerable contempt for

¹ Quoted in George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (New York, 1980) 1.

Judaism as a religion, in both its ancient or modern forms. It was thus not a pro-Jewish theological attitude that pushed the Danes to resist rather than collaborate with the Nazis, but a question of national opposition that immediately included the rescue of their Jewish community. It is a surprise to learn, however, in the essay by Anna Lysiak, that despite negative Catholic theological perceptions of Jews in pre-war Poland and the growing urge to pursue their conversion, dioceses in Warsaw and other parts of Poland joined a new movement founded in Rome in 1926, the Amici Israel (Friends of Israel), an organization that at its zenith consisted of 3000 priests and 328 bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. The Amici Israel sought reconciliation between Jews and Christians, in particular Catholics. Its newspaper, *Pax Super Israel*, sought to end the charges of deicide against the Jewish people; the removal of negative terms about Jews in Christian liturgy, especially in the Good Friday service; and any further use of anti-Semitic language in general. Despite great excitement in Rome, the Vatican's Congregation of the Holy Office ended the organization's activities in March 1928, because it presented a perceived danger to the spirit, teaching, and liturgy of Roman Catholicism.

The final essay in the book, Richard Steigmann-Gall's essay on "Religion and Race in Nazi Antisemitism" carries forward the arguments presented in his controversial volume, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity*, published in 2003. In that book, Steigmann-Gall argued that to label Nazism as anti-Christian and pro-pagan was to miss the point that many convinced Nazis saw no incompatibility between National Socialism and Christianity as long as the Marcionite exclusion of the Hebrew Testament, along with the depiction of Jesus as an Aryan and as the greatest anti-Semite, highlighted the new teachings of the Christian churches.

Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust is an important contribution to the continued reshaping of Jewish-Christian relations. It asks new questions and provides new answers, not to arrive at an outright condemnation of Christian teaching and history as a direct linear predecessor of National Socialism – the issue is far too complex for such a direct accusation – but to allow Christians and Jews to understand with greater depth and clarity the troubled relationship between the younger and older brothers in the Abrahamic religious tradition and to point them in a new direction that avoids a repetition of the past.