



Book Reviews

Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 384 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-12531-2, \$29.95 / £20.95.

Susannah Heschel's book *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* is a detailed study of the "Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life" (*Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*), operating in the Third Reich between 1939 and 1945. With the help of painstaking research into archives and some interviews with people who still remember those days, this more or less forgotten institute, its general ideas, its institutional contacts with the state and with the protestant churches of Germany, and its destiny during the Third Reich, are thoroughly discussed. The members of the institute, under the leadership of Walter Grundmann, viewed themselves to be in a "defense war" against the "satanic powers of world Judaism," and thought of themselves as taking part in a cosmic battle where their job was to clean Christianity of Jewish impurities. The members of the institute belonged to the fraction within the Protestant churches in Germany known at that time as German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*). This fraction strived to harmonize the glad tidings of Jesus Christ with the message of the *Führer*. Sometimes these theologians were motivated by pure and simple opportunism, but more often they deeply believed that once Christianity got rid of the stains put on it by those who had murdered Jesus, Christianity would appear identical with National Socialism. While they were trying to transform their religion according to the will of the new regime, these German Christians, however, also had to fight neo-pagan trends among leading party members—neo-pagans who argued persuasively that Christianity was an altogether Jewish affair.

It is fascinating to learn from Heschel's book how these German Christian theologians used the methods of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* to argue that, among other things, Jesus was not of Jewish descent and that the Jesus movement had no connection at all to the ideas and practices of the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars affiliated with the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* were indeed motivated by anti-Semitic ideas (as discussed in Horst Junginger's *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, 2008), but I believe it is important in this context to stress that e.g. theories of a strong Iranian ("Aryan") impact on Judaism in the centuries before the birth of Jesus are not in themselves anti-Semitic. The main focus of the most heated debate in which members of the institute participated was the

status of the Hebrew Bible. Where “German Christian” theologians of the institute, like Grundmann and Wolf Meyer-Erlach, wanted Jewish scripture erased from Christianity altogether, theologians belonging to the main rival fraction, the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*), argued that the “Old Testament” was valuable, not least because it was already soundly anti-Semitic in itself: “Just listen to the Old Testament prophet’s harsh criticism and disgust for the Jewish nation!”

As an originally “heretical” movement within Judaism, Christianity is in a sense inherently anti-Judaic (in the same way as Buddhism in a sense is inherently anti-Hindu, or at least anti-Vedic), but at what point did Christian theology become anti-Semitic? When Baptism was no longer seen as sufficient to save the Jews? Considering the importance of the debate over the Old Testament and the impact of the Confessing Church in the Federal Republic of Germany after the fall of the Nazis, Heschel’s study would have gained by a terminological discussion on the concept of “anti-Semitism” and its relationship to (or, as she seems to think, identity with) “anti-Judaism.” We do have a terminological problem if every position that states that Christianity is superior to Judaism is labeled anti-Semitic. In that case we blur the crucially important line that separates criticism and animated discussion from persecution and ultimately the gas chambers. In the case of the theologians analyzed by Heschel, there can however be no mistake about the fact that these people did not criticize Jewish culture or Judaism out of any concern for the well-being of the Jewish people. These theologians were hard-headed racists.

Heschel’s book ends with a section on “Institute theology in post-war Germany.” I can only concur with Heschel’s amazement over how easily and quickly the churches of Germany, the priests, bishops, and theologians, managed to present their world as untainted by Nazism and as one of the possible pillars on which the new Federal Republic could be erected. Students and professors of theology were disproportionately represented in the National Socialist party and its affiliated organizations, but this fact was somehow concealed after the war—and still is. It is symptomatic that when, after the war, victorious members of Confessing Church interrogated the accused German Christians about their faith, the issue was never, according to Heschel, their anti-Semitism but whether or not they believed that Christ stood above politics (in line with the Barmen Declaration of 1934 that was the starting point for the Confessing Church). Thus, anti-Semitism was swept under the rug; in some cases this probably had to do with personal friendships, sometimes the reason was the belief that West Germany had to be built on a solidly anti-Communist Christianity, and most often, one might guess, the theologians who were interrogating were themselves unable to separate the anti-Semitism of the German Christians from the similar (or, depending on the definitions, identical) tradition of anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism in Christian rhetoric and theology.

One of the many merits of *Aryan Jesus* is Heschel's strong emphasis on the deeply "metaphysical" aspect of racism: no racist has ever argued that Jews are inferior solely because of their physical characteristics; that their eyes or ears, for example, do not function as well as Aryan eyes and ears. We should not forget that racism, contrary to what many theologians argue today, is only based on "physical" or "material" human traits in very particular meanings of these words. Racism in fact, as Heschel reminds us, projects into, and then "discovers" within, the bodies of other people, moral or "spiritual" qualities. In this sense racism is closer to religion than to (pseudo-)science—a fact that only makes Heschel's book on the historical effort to harmonize Christianity and Nazism all the more important.

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