

# H-Net Reviews

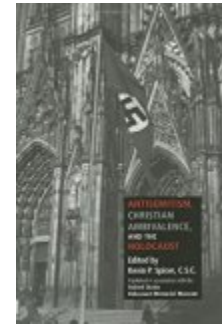
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin P. Spicer, ed. *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. xxi + 329 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34873-9.

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## Lingering Questions in Holocaust Studies

The twelve essays comprising this volume originated with a two-week workshop sponsored by the Center for Advanced Historical Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. One of the book's chief aims, according to editor Kevin P. Spicer, is to challenge the "strict but misleading separation between Nazi 'racial antisemitism' and 'Christian antisemitism'" (p. ix). The contributors specifically address the role of antisemitism in the Christian response to Nazism, chronicling multiple points of overlap between Christian and Nazi antisemitism. The volume's weakness is that it contains a wide range of cross-disciplinary essays not overtly connected to each other. At the same time, the book's range and scope give it two great strengths: first, it includes work by historians and theologians, thereby representing both disciplinary perspectives; and second, it represents a wide range of Christian perspectives, and includes valuable analyses of Jewish views of Christian antisemitism.

Organized into four parts, the book's first section addresses theological antisemitism. Essays by Thorstein Wagner, Anna Lysiak, Robert A. Krieg, and Donald Dietrich touch on a variety of expressions of antisemitism by priests, theologians, and other prominent religious figures in Denmark, Poland, Germany, and France. Ultimately, these authors show, Christian theology informed Nazi antisemitism in myriad ways that blended with national sentiment, and those bold Christian thinkers who sought to use their theology to resist Nazi anti-Jewishness found themselves bereft of the doctrinal tools

to do so. Indeed, as Wagner's essay on the Danish Lutheran Church and the Jews shows, even Denmark's Lutheran clergy, who played a key role in the remarkable rescue of thousands of Danish Jews to Sweden in October 1943, were not free of antisemitism. Challenging the "narrative of heroic humanism" that has emerged as a result of the rescue, Wagner finds that Danish assistance to Jews was less rooted in a belief in religious pluralism and a regard for Jews than in a Danish nationalism constructed in opposition to Nazism and Nazi antisemitism. Further east, Christian thinkers in Poland and Germany deliberately misinterpreted Jewish texts, held fast to supersessionism (the idea that Christians replaced Jews in God's plan for salvation), maintained precritical interpretations of the Bible, and rejected the concept of religious freedom—positions that enabled the rapid spread of Nazi antisemitism. Even those who did think progressively about Christian-Jewish relations during the Nazi era, Dietrich shows, would not see their ideas come into wider acceptance until the Second Vatican Council.

If those who sought to use Christian principles to resist Nazi antisemitism in the 1930s and 40s had difficulty doing so because of Christianity's inherent anti-Jewishness, it should come as no surprise that right-wing Catholic and Orthodox clergy were able to place antisemitism at the very center of their religious view of the world. The essays comprising part 2 of the book examining extreme right-wing Christian clergy in Germany and Romania are particularly good because of the authors' careful historicization of their subjects. Spicer,

who recently published a separate full-length study of “brown priests”—enthusiastic clerical promoters of the Adolf Hitler regime—(*Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* [2008]) focuses here on Dr. Philip Haeuser, one of the most well-known of the roughly two hundred such priests. Haeuser eagerly participated in the fashioning of a “Hybrid Catholic theology” that promoted the Nazi Party’s agenda and fused traditional Catholic theological antisemitism with Nazi antisemitism. Church authorities in a position to condemn Haeuser’s antisemitism chose instead to express concern over Christ’s mission and the church in Germany, which they knew would be jeopardized if they condemned avid party supporters like Haeuser. Though the anti-Jewishness present in Christian traditions throughout Europe informed support for Nazi antisemitism, Romanian antisemitism, Paul Shapiro points out, had particularly deep roots in the Romanian Orthodox Church. Members of the notorious Iron Guard, the most powerful radical Right movement in Romania, drank deeply of Orthodox symbolism, poetry, speeches, and songs. Shapiro carefully details the historical antecedents within the Orthodox Church shaping the antisemitism of the Iron Guard.

If the exigencies of the war prevented open discussion of antisemitism within Germany’s Christian churches during the conflict, the immediate postwar period saw the first tenuous steps toward dialogue on the matter. The second half of the book, divided into two sections, “Postwar Jewish Encounters” and “Viewing Each Other,” deals almost entirely with the Christian-Jewish relations during the postwar period. Supersessionism again is prominent in essays by Matthew D. Hockenos, who discusses the German Protestant Church and its *Judenmission* (mission to the Jews), and Elias H. Fullenbach, who focuses on German Catholic efforts to transcend Catholic antisemitism in the postwar years. The view that Jews needed converting to Christianity persisted (officially) until the issuance of the Berlin-Weissensee statement in 1950 by the German Protestant churches, which maintained some elements of missionary thinking, but rejected supersessionism. Fullenbach’s essay focuses on the work of Karl Thieme, Gertrud Luckner, and the Frieberg Circle, whose members sought to illuminate, among other things, how the view of Jews as potential converts was antisemitic. Their work, controversial in

the immediate postwar period, laid the groundwork for the issuance of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, which acknowledged the “spiritual patrimony” between Jews and Christians and rejected the idea of Jewish guilt in the death of Christ.

Gershon Greenberg, the author of one of this volume’s final essays, cogently argues that “attitudes and views should be studied in terms of the dialectical relationship that existed during the war, interrelating Judaism and Christianity in terms of each other’s perceptions; their separate study creates an independence and an active-passive dichotomy that did not exist historically” (p. 264). Greenberg focuses on Orthodox Jewish responses to Holocaust Christianity, while Suzanne Brown-Fleming examines the largely unsuccessful efforts of American Rabbi Philip Bernstein to persuade a series of Catholic prelates to renounce antisemitism in several forms. The book’s final essay by Richard Steigmann-Gall begins with a discussion of the controversies surrounding *Dabru Emet*, the statement on Christians and Christianity issued in 2000 under the signature of more than 170 rabbis and Jewish scholars. His essay, however, is more of an analysis of the writings and speeches of several prominent Nazi ideologues, including Joseph Goebbels and Hitler. Steigmann-Gall, who has authored a full-length study of Nazi conceptions of Christianity (*The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity* [2004]), finds that “the same antisemitism that is usually regarded as a function of racialism was for many Nazis conceived within a Christian frame of reference” (p. 304). This final disquieting essay of the volume, in concluding that antisemitism was for key Nazi figures a function of Christianity rather than racialism, reveals the least ambivalence concerning the relationship between Christian and Nazi antisemitism—for Steigmann-Gall’s subjects, Nazi antisemitism was forged within a Christian matrix.

This volume’s inclusion of essays on several different Christian traditions, as well as the Jewish perspective on Christian antisemitism make it especially valuable for understanding varieties of Christian antisemitism and ultimately, the practice and consequences of exclusionary thinking in general. In bringing a range of theological and historical perspectives to bear on the question of Christian and Nazi antisemitism, the book broadens our view on the question, and is of great value to historians and theologians alike.

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