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1a) Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis*, New York and London: Routledge 2006, xii + 218 pp. ISBN 0-415-29024-4 (hbk), 0415-29025-2 (pbk)

Were the Nazis Christians? Or were Christianity and National Socialism incompatible? Controversy over these questions was recently aroused by the publication of Richard Steigmann-Gall's book *The Holy Reich* (Cambridge University Press 2003), which sought to show the lingering attachment of many leading Nazis to some ill-defined form of Christianity. Karla Poewe starts from the other side. Her object is to depict the ideas and actions of those who deliberately sought to create a new religion of Germanic nationalism and racism to replace the now discredited Christianity.

Her principal proponent in this process is Professor Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881-1962), whose surviving papers, especially his extensive correspondence, have been well researched by Poewe, who is versed in the study of "fringe" religious movements. Together with kindred spirits such as Matthilde Ludendorff, the wife of the Field Marshal, Ernst Bergmann, the novelist Hans Grimm and the noted anthropologist Hans F.K.Günther, Hauer in the 1920s was determined to build up a new myth and religious sensibility, and to give support to the rising tide of National Socialism. Indeed, Hauer even aimed to make his beliefs the sacred religious centre of the Nazi movement.

Most scholars and orthodox churchmen have dismissed these persons as cranks or pseudo-religious bigots. Their advocacy of German paganism has been ridiculed. Steigmann-Gall downplayed their impact. But Poewe now seeks to rectify these partial judgments. In her view, these ideas played a significant role, especially among the young radicals who formed the cutting edge of the Nazi Party. With dynamic ruthlessness they seized on Hauer's German Faith Movement to undermine the established churches, even if they abandoned his creed later on once their political power was confirmed.

Hauer had been brought up in pietist circles, was sent out as a missionary to India, and was there greatly influenced by the impact of eastern religions. After the first world war, he shared the widespread disillusionment with both Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy, but was allowed to retain his professorship at Tübingen University in comparative religions. He used this platform to build up a network of youth groups, advocating a purely Germanic paganism, and harking back to the mythical roots of pre-Christian Teutonic traditions. In the climate of the 1920s, such ideas

found a considerable following, and could easily be linked to concepts of authoritarian and inspired leadership under a German Führer. This idea of a genuinely Nordic faith-based political community of a united nationalistic Volk took advantage of the widespread desire for a regeneration of German national life after the defeat and denigration of the Great War. Poewe rightly sees this trend as part of the popular resistance against the Versailles settlement, and as giving a considerable boost to the fledgling Nazi Party.

Hauer's attempt to build a faith movement based on völkisch experiences, elements of the Yogic tradition, pre-Christian Germanic beliefs and a touch of German philosophical idealism was, in effect, a deliberate challenge to the rationalist, democratic assumptions of the Weimar Republic's political ethos. It also rejected any notion of pluralistic society. Hauer's antisemitism was certainly ethnically based, and his antagonism to Christianity was in part prompted by his belief that Christianity was unable to shake off its Jewish roots. Instead, a German Faith, led by heroic individuals conscious of their historic bloodlines, would revitalize the Volk. The spiritual and the political tasks were to be intimately linked.

Hauer's creed was based on a belief in a primal religious force, linked to social Darwinist concepts of the superiority of the German race. The German Faith had its links to the Indo-Germanic cultures in ancient Asia, and thus could acquire a "history" with which to combat the Judeo-Christian tradition. By contrast with the latter's emphasis on original sin and guilt, Hauer offered a heroic German faith and a heroic ethics.

In 1933 Hauer's movement received considerable support from many prominent Germans who were already or soon became Nazi Party members. But his ambition to become officially recognized as the ideological promoter of the Party was rebuffed. Hitler's attitude towards religion was always politically calculated. So long as the majority of Germans remained attached to one or other of the churches, Hitler refused to endorse alternative world-views, or even the ideas promoted by his close associate, Alfred Rosenberg. Unofficially, however, it is clear that Hauer's movement attracted wide publicity. Poewe suggests an audience of at least twelve million people. Lower-ranking Nazis helped to get him organized on the local level with rallies to promote the Deutsche Glaube, and he gained support from sections of the SS, SA and the Hitler Youth, But it is now impossible to calculate the total number of adherents, since accurate membership records are lacking.

By the end of the 1930s, Hauer's activities were to be increasingly side-lined by the Nazi authorities. Nevertheless Poewe argues that they were an important component of the conservative revolution which sustained the fascist movement throughout Europe. The new paganism came to be a significant part of a religious populism. combined with a metapolitical elitism, philosophical vitalism and dreams of national renewal. Its negative effects should not be underestimated.

Indeed Poewe claims its influence is still alive today in Europe's New Right, long after the Nazi phenomenon was destroyed, based on a continuity of ideas in New Right and New Age publications. Rejection of Christianity paves the way for the recovery of neo-paganism. In support of this argument she quotes from the writings of a few little-known followers of the Nietzschean tradition. She seeks to point out the continuing danger of such anti-democratic, anti-liberal phenomena, and warns today's readers not to repeat the mistake of the 1920s in downplaying or ignoring the baneful influence of such forces.

Poewe's study includes helpful notes and an excellently comprehensive bibliography.
JSC