

The Chalcedon Foundation Book Reviews

A Review of *New Religions and the Nazis*

New Religions and the Nazis by Karla Poewe (Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, New York and London, 2006) Reviewed by Lee Duigon, Posted on February 21, 2006.

“Few scholars have taken seriously the simple fact that a limited number of determined radical believers could do formidable damage in a relatively short period of historical time.” Poewe, p. 146

Anthropologist Karla Poewe (University of Calgary) has written a difficult book on a difficult subject — the role played by “new religions” in making the German people receptive to the excesses of Nazism.

Sixty years after the end of World War II, we still wonder how the Third Reich happened: how it could have done what it did, gas chambers and all, with the full support of a whole nation of modern, educated, supposedly Christian Europeans.

The movie *Godfather III* offers us an insight that may help us to understand the events analyzed in Professor Poewe’s book. In one scene, Mafioso Michael Corleone meets Cardinal Lamberto at the Vatican. The cardinal shows the don a stone lying in a water fountain.

“Look at this stone,” says the cardinal, holding it. “It has been lying in the water for a very long time, but the water has not penetrated it.” He breaks the stone to reveal its interior. “Perfectly dry,” he says. “The same thing has happened to men in Europe. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ doesn’t breathe within them.”

The German Faith Movement

To keep the topic manageable, Poewe focuses on the career of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, founder and fuhrer of the German Faith Movement, the largest and most influential of a host of “new religions” devised to replace Christianity in Germany.

The neo-pagan movement made the Germans receptive to Nazism, Poewe says; the Third Reich couldn’t have happened without it.

Unlike earlier scholars, Poewe has mined a vast lode of primary sources — letters, diaries, flyers, magazine and newspaper articles, the texts of lectures, popular literature of the time, and conference agendas. She reveals close personal links between Hauer and the Nazi hierarchy, disaffection, apostasy, and disloyalty within the German churches; she discusses the thorough planning that went into recruiting academics, newspaper editors, novelists and lecturers, military officers, local politicians, and clergymen to the neo-pagan cause.

The supreme politician, Adolf Hitler, made deft use of the neo-pagan movement to advance the cause of National Socialism, while Hauer sought always to use Hitler and the Party to advance

himself. It was a tacit alliance between the nation's political leader and an ambitious religious leader: and if that pattern makes you uncomfortable, welcome to the club.

Hauer and Hitler played a game, which Hitler won. There was room for only one fuhrer in the Third Reich. Hitler sucked everything he could from Hauer, and then, in 1936, forced Hauer to resign from his administration of the German Faith Movement (p. 140). "By October of that year [1935], Hitler had lost all interest in making a place for the church in his state" (p. 139). Having served Hitler's purpose, Hauer was removed from power.

What Was It?

By "neo-pagan," Poewe does not mean a lot of silly people putting on silly costumes and dancing around a statue of Odin. This sort of thing is increasingly popular today, but Hauer and his ilk were much more subtle and "scientific" in their approach.

Hauer offered a radical celebration of the individual — but only in the context of the *Volk*, the individual's biologically determined race and culture. Through "experience," every individual could become, as it were, his own god — but only as balanced against "the necessity of death" for the individual as key for the eternal survival of the race.

For the adherent of German Faith, the state underwent a metamorphosis into the embodiment of an immortal *Volk* led by an inspired fuhrer. In the end, Hitler made sure that he was that fuhrer.

Neo-paganism offered a radical amorality, backed up by a "scientific" foundation of social Darwinism and a "spiritual" foundation of "Aryan" Hindu scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita* (a text intensely revelatory for both Hauer and for Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and the number-two man in the Reich). Supporting this was a mentality of siege (the German *Volk* against the world), conspiracy theory (perennial plots against Germany by "world Jewry," capitalists, freemasons, the Vatican, etc.), and war — a celebration of "struggle" (*kampf*) as something of value in and of itself.

How Did It Work?

Poewe differs from other scholars in her insistence that German Faith was rabidly anti-Christian: that Hauer and his minions were effective in their purposeful campaign to corrupt and cripple the church.

Hauer often spoke and wrote of the "clash" between "the Indo-Germanic faith world" and "the Near-Eastern Semitic," by which he meant both Judaism and Christianity (p. 11). "By blaming anti-Semitism on Christianity," Poewe says, "scholars have badly misled their readers" — neo-pagans hated Christianity because, for them, it was "Jewish" (p. 14). She supports this with dozens of quotes throughout the book.

The neo-pagans enabled the Third Reich by subverting the church and by offering Germans — bowed under by economic malaise, defeat in World War I, and fear and resentment toward the Allied Powers — a seductive alternative to Christianity.

Hauer brewed a mix of moral relativism, anti-Semitism (blaming the Jews for Germany's problems), racialism and militarism as a real-world solution to those problems, and an attitude of "hardness" that would equip the *Volk* to take brutal measures to defeat its enemies.

The Role of Liberal Christianity

It is not possible, Poewe says, to find a hard numerical measurement for the neo-pagan groups' membership (p. 97). Hauer claimed his German Faith had at least 200,000 members (p. 97), and Nazi authorities estimated that 2.5 million Germans belonged to the whole neo-pagan movement (p. 180). There is no way, Poewe says, to estimate how many Germans were influenced by neo-pagan rallies, books, flyers, lectures, and sermons delivered by neo-pagan fellow-travelers from the pulpits of Germany's churches.

Perhaps the author's most controversial claim is that *liberal Christianity* led the Germans straight to National Socialism, along the highway of neo-paganism: "their path to National Socialism went through the door of liberal theology" (p. 25), and "[t]here is no break between Hauer's defense of liberalism and National Socialism. The former flowed quite naturally into the latter" (p.50).

Why should that be? Because liberal theology cuts Christians loose from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the apostolic tradition. Because liberal theology rejects the authority of the Bible, leaving Christianity without a core, without a definition of itself.

While no longer believing in God's unchangeable world, liberal clergy and laity remain in the church, weakening it. "To German theologians, who regarded themselves as having overhauled Christianity, this [Karl Barth's 1919 suggestion that the church 'move its focus away from Christians to Christ'] was worse than heresy. Modern German theology was founded not on the Bible but on the human being ... Christ had been secularized ... for the sake of National Socialism" (p. 50). And, "This phenomenon of being official Christians while in fact despising Christianity and practicing non-Christian faiths has done the German church untold harm" (p. 28).

Conclusion

Poewe's book is dense and difficult, not a word wasted. Its importance lies in its suitability as a lens through which we may view, with great uneasiness, conditions in Europe today.

Hitler and Co. didn't survive World War II, but Hauer and many other neo-pagan leaders and thinkers did. Under new names, using new terminology, their organizations and publishing houses have remained active to this day.

In light of recent events, such as the nationwide Muslim riots in France, we observe that there are many elements of the European scene today that, if combined in just the right way, could produce an explosion.

- Loss of commitment to Christianity, especially in Western Europe
- Europe's stagnant, overtaxed, overregulated economy
- The vast influx of Muslim immigrants, their resistance to assimilation, and mutual hostility between them and native Europeans
- Hordes of young Muslim men partially detached from Islam, alienated from their host countries, unemployed, angry — a weapon waiting to be picked up and used
- The plummeting birth rates of Western European nations, which opens them to the threat of Muslim takeover or even virtual extinction, and may someday result in European panic

What might be the catalyst? A major terrorist strike on France or Germany; Muslim riots that spill over national boundaries and turn widely lethal; the rise of a “Muslim fuhrer” who rallies Muslims all over Europe; or the rise of a European fuhrer to arouse an anti-Muslim pogrom — with so many combustible elements on hand, the spark might come from anywhere.

Hauer's heirs are on the scene, doing their bit to undermine what's left of European Christianity, fanning the embers of ultra-nationalism, teaching, preaching, publishing, and waiting for their time to come again.

The concluding sentence of Poewe's book is the most sobering of all:

“While the constitutions of western liberal democracies preserve the freedom of new religions, I am not sure whether new religions, including New Age and neo-paganism, preserve western liberal democracies. In Weimar [Germany] they did not.”

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