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New Religions and the Nazis

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New Religions and the Nazis is an attempt by a leading anthropologist to analyze the construction of the sacred within Nazi ideology. Poewe was inspired to inquire into the relationship between politically religious aspects of Nazi ideology and Germanic religions after analyzing the interwar archives of the Berlin Mission Society. Central to her analysis is the story of the founder of the German Faith Movement, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, a narrative that draws in discussions of those associated with his activities, debates over ideas with key figures of similar movements, such as the *Gotterkenntnis* movement of Mathilde and Erich Ludendorff, the resonance of these ideas within the Nazi hierarchy, and the impact of Hauer and others on postwar fascism. By analyzing the influence of this movement on Nazi Germany and beyond, Poewe's aim is to dispel the myth that "German pagan faiths, expressed in countless new religions, by diverse leaders and adherents both inside and outside of the official church, were too small in number to make an impact on National Socialism" (1). According to Poewe, these movements sought as their goal the creation of "genuinely German (Nordic) faithbased political community, a community of one *Volk* that would privilege . . . the almost lost Germanic and Nordic culture and ancestry" (2).

Poewe's narrative begins by identifying how Hauer, alongside many others, developed nationalized pagan religions, largely as a response to the profound impact of the First World War and the repeated crises of the Weimar era. Within such a milieu, it was not only prominent Nazi figures that emphasized the positive qualities of *kampf* (struggle) as a force to be embraced in order to cope with a profound sense of national *anomie*. Rather, a widespread "cultic culture" developed that provided a fecund mood for establishing new realms of faith that sought to solve the national crisis. For Hauer, and many like him, a swathe of intellectual resources—from German idealism conceived of as a religion to Indian philosophy, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*—were used during the 1920s to construct an anti-Semitic worldview founded on a Manichean *kampf* between what was seen as a virile and healthy Indo-Germanic *Volk* and a decadent Jewish-Christian civilization. Despite revealing to private acquaintances his deep-rooted Nazi sympathies, Hauer mostly hid his religious philosophy of Nazi approval during the 1920s and presented his thinking publicly in terms of a metapolitical discourse on organic nationalism. Primarily, this was

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in order to retain intellectual credibility with, among others, the Zionist philosopher Martin Buber. However, after the Nazis came to power, Hauer engaged with the policy of *Gleichaltung* by bringing together a variety of Germanic and Nordic religions under the umbrella organization ADGB, or German Faith Movement. Essentially, this was an attempt to create a new national religion that chimed with point twenty-four of the National Socialist program, which allowed religious freedom as long as these did not threaten the existence or "offend the moral feelings of the German race." However, ultimately Nazis failed to develop an alternate church to those of either the Protestant or Catholic denominations. After the movement became increasingly radicalized under the indirect influence of Reinhard Heydrich, Hauer resigned as its head in 1936 and returned to more esoteric concerns of appealing to radical right intellectuals rather than to Nazi street fighters.

Overall, Poewe's analysis is of a very high standard. She offers clear exegeses of the positions of key ideologues and demonstrates the impact of the German Faith Movement on the wider regime well. Especially interesting are her claims that among members of Heinrich Himmler's *Schutzstaffel* (SS), an estimated 86 percent of the officers of the Death's Head Unit, 78.9 percent of the Armed SS Units, and 66 percent of the General SS Units subscribed to the belief systems of the Germanic religions (119). Nevertheless, she does not overstate the case of the importance of the movement and does acknowledge its weaknesses in penetrating German society. Overall, we are left with an image of how fellowtravelling ideologues worked with a great deal of autonomy towards developing

arguments promoting a racially purified Germany, thereby helping to dispel simplistic myths of “top down” dominance within the dynamics of the Nazi state. Poewe also offers a perceptive glimpse into the spiritual and existential journey that, to greater or lesser extents, characterized many Nazi perceptions of the deeper significance of National Socialism and its promises for Germany.

Poewe is also interested in the current impact of these ideas. Her final chapter analyzes postwar trends among far-right movements, exploring the impact of Hauer and others on recent debates on Germanic and European religions. Poewe highlights the way these movements have followed Hauer’s retreat into refined, though very radical, metapolitical discourses alongside a strategy of right-wing Gramscism that specifically targets intellectual debate as the preferred method of dissemination. These discourses still claim to offer access to “authentic” pagan realms of Germanic or European faiths and are often framed as cosmic battles against traditional Christianity and its “Jewish” heritage. Like exponents of the German Faith Movement, postwar theorists such as Alain de Benoist and Pierre Krebs still claim their philosophy offers access to genuine

spiritual enlightenment, while simplified versions of their philosophies inspire the radicalism and racist violence of a host of fringe groups.

Lacking from Poewe’s discussions, however, was any detailed engagement with the work of theorists of political religions such as Emilio Gentile or Roger Griffin. Both have presented theoretical models that correspond strongly with Poewe’s concern with exploring the fuzzy nexus of religion and politics, and their inclusion could have added further depth to her analysis. This criticism aside, *New Religions and the Nazis* should be read closely by anyone who is interested in how political practices can become radicalized by connecting with the sacred. Poewe offers excellent analysis of the delusional worlds that can be created by this process, as well as demonstrating how they can legitimize horrific acts of the worst order.