

# e-Extreme

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## ***Book Reviews***

**Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis*, New York and London: Routledge, 2006, xii + 212 pp., GBP 16.99, ISBN 0-41529025-2 (pbk); GBP 50.00, ISBN 0-41529024-4 (hbk).**

*Reviewed by Roger Griffin (Oxford Brookes University)*

Karla Poewe fills in yet another corner of the enormous jigsaw constituted by Nazism as an ideological and social phenomenon by exploring the contribution to its genesis of the 'cultic milieu, which generated a spate of New Religions in German speaking Europe at the turn of the century. This far-ranging investigation is given cohesion and development by focusing on Jakob Hauer's New German Faith Movement. By locating it within the European-wide 'revolt against' positivism and growing crisis of the Enlightenment project rather than in the exclusively German *völkisch* movement Poewe lets a gust of fresh air into the often stiflingly Germano-centric study of the rise of Nazism. Also, by refusing to treat it teleologically as a proto-Nazi phenomenon, Poewe underscores its linkages not just with the rise of racist anthropology, the Aryan myth, Ariosophy, *bündische* Youth, and the Conservative Revolution, but occultism, life-reform and back-to-nature, vitalism, and racial hygiene, elements of which were absorbed into aesthetic, communist, and liberal discourses as well. All these originated in the pan-European search for new spiritual bases for modern life in the fin-de-siècle which assumed particular intensity under Weimar whose collapse after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 triggered deep longings for a renewed spirituality and sense of national identity, both of which were addressed by the movement to establish a German Faith.

Apart from encouraging historians of Nazism to give greater weight to its proliferating links with the forces of modernity and modernism rather than treating it as the product of Germany's largely mythic *Sonderweg*, this book has several other distinct merits over much traditional scholarship. It underlines the importance of appreciating the role played in the rise of Nazism by the sense of cultural crisis and decadence that was pandemic in the West, particularly after 1918, and of tracing its kinship with wider aesthetic, social, and ideological phenomena that arose spontaneously outside the political sphere in the quest for cultural regeneration. It emphasizes the complex nature of anti-Semitism, which developed anthropological, pagan, and occultist rationales alongside traditional Christian ones. It throws into relief the *futural* thrust of what would now be called a 'New Ageist' obsession with uncovering primordial roots and natural sources of purity that would supposedly combat the decadence fostered by the Weimar Republic and form the

basis of a *new*, spiritually regenerated, and modern national community. It emphasizes the importance of the German 'revolt against decadence' in the emergence of a *biopolitical* vision of the state and society, and the extraordinary confluence of myth with academic knowledge and science to generate a plethora of *scientific* legitimations for the national reawakening sought by the Third Reich. It also uncovers significant strands of largely subterranean continuity between the sub-culture that prepared the ground for the Third Reich and the sustained critique of liberal democracy's secular, multi-cultural individualism by the contemporary German New Right, which sixty years after the death of Hitler still seeks neo-pagan, ethnocentric solutions to the problems of modernity in ways which produce a distinct sense of *déjà vu* after reading this book.

Yet in other respects this work fails to fulfil its considerable potential. Poewe misses the opportunity created by her own research to nail the fallacies that inform scholarly arguments that the Nazis' claim to represent 'positive Christianity' should be taken at face value, especially in respect of the German Christians who, as she shows so effectively, sought to create a cult of the mythic 'organic' nation purged both of Christ and of authentic Christian values, a deliberate perversion of Christianity even by the standards of the Church. The book betrays deep terminological confusions when it talks of the 'fashion' in the 1920s to reject 'modernism' by harking back to authentic elements in the pre-modern and pre-historical so as to adapt them to the 'post-modern' (p. 84). What Poewe seems to be trying to convey is the penetrating thesis that Nazism rejected actually existing *modernity* in the name of an *alternative* modernity. In doing so its ideologues developed a totalizing discourse which frequently (but not always) followed the archetypal revolutionary principle of invoking the past in order to regenerate the future, a fundamental principle of aesthetic, social, and political *modernism* systematically attacked by postmodernists for its utopian grand narratives which became so lethal when implemented as praxis. A more sophisticated use of the terminology of modernism would have made this book an even more powerful contribution to the appreciation of Nazism's essentially future-directed modernist bid to create an alternative modernity, and the need to rethink the category of 'anti-modern' and 'reaction' with which it continues to be identified in Pavlovian fashion by so many scholars, particularly on the left.

Finally, Poewe shows a poor grasp of essential pluralism involved in Nazism's drive to 'coordinate' all the belief systems and cultural movements that it did not deem as intrinsically hostile or decadent. Overestimating the relevance of her own case-study to the origins of Nazism 'as a whole', she unwittingly confirms stereotypes about its anti-modern, irrationalist ethos — which so incensed Hitler himself — and plays down the significance of its powerful technocratic, urbanizing, and scientific components which in practice triumphed over the ruralizing, occultist, back-to-nature element, even though these were retained as important elements in the regime's self-image and propaganda. Instead, the book would have been considerably improved had it treated its topic as one of many originally apolitical modernist movements for renewal incorporated into Nazism's variant of the 'hegemonic pluralism' operated in a considerably more *laissez-faire* spirit in Fascist Italy. It was a process that ultimately turned all the protagonists of the German Faith movements and their allies in the search for a renewed source of German spirituality willy-nilly into precursors, accomplices, and legitimators of genocide.

Despite its weakness, *New Religions and the Nazis* is a welcome addition to the new wave of scholarship that reveals key components in the peculiar constitution of Nazism's alternative modernity. It also has the unusual merit of encouraging political scientists to scrutinize the barely hidden political agenda lurking with the 'metapolitics' of the European New Right, and pay more attention to the racial persecution and ethnic cleansing that would result were they ever translated into policies and social praxis.

Found on the Internet at:

[http://www.tufts.edu/~dart01/extremismanddemocracy/newsletter/Books7\\_2.htm](http://www.tufts.edu/~dart01/extremismanddemocracy/newsletter/Books7_2.htm)

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