

POEWE, KARLA. *New Religions and the Nazis*. New York: Routledge, 2006. xii+218 pp. \$26.95 (cloth).

Karla Poewe, professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Calgary, has tackled with *New Religions and the Nazis* a problem of immense significance.

The history of non-Christian religions in Germany during the interwar period has unfortunately found little interest among religious studies scholars as well as among secular historians. Even worse, the interpretation of religious movements apart from Christianity becoming influential in the first half of the twentieth century relies to a great extent on contemporary works written in favor of Christian apologetics. Therefore, Poewe's study is a welcome contribution to the field, especially since its author has familiarized herself with the relevant primary sources during several research stays in Germany. This is particularly important in the case of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, the "Führer" of the German Faith Movement, which had been the main pagan organization in Nazi Germany. Hauer, a former missionary to India, taught history of religions and indology at the University of Tübingen before he left the church and embarked on the founding of a new religion. Because Hauer was one of Germany's foremost pagans, Poewe rightly places him in the foreground of her investigation.

Following older motives of church criticism of pagan idolatry, Poewe attributes the emergence of paganism to an exaggerated and politically deluded liberalism. "It was Hauer's and other Nazis' radical liberalism that led them to National Socialism," she states (20). In applying this argument to the political field, Poewe arrives at the conclusion that National Socialism and Christianity had nothing in common. On the contrary, pagan heathendom ought to be understood as the Third Reich's genuine ideological substructure. Therefore it could be little wonder that the Nazis wanted to rid Germany of Christianity (172). Although Poewe avoids speaking explicitly about her aims, the course of her argument clearly shows that she intends to defend Christianity against the accusation of having had links with National Socialism. Poewe's assumption of an absolute antagonism between these two archenemies leads her to a number of serious faults and misapprehensions. Her explanation that the "Köngener Bund," a small Protestant group of Bible-reading juveniles headed by Hauer in the 1920s, has to be comprehended as a forerunner organization of the German Faith Movement demonstrates the failing of such an approach. Although it is factually accurate to relate the Köngener Bund to the German Youth Movement and to the many *Bünde* cropping up in Weimar Germany, it is totally misleading to blame this tiny and insignificant Bible circle for having engendered the Third Reich's most important pagan organization. In particular, chapter 3, "Hauer and the *Bünde*" (35-49), illustrates the failings caused by a teleological interpretation "towards National Socialism," as a subchapter reads (43-46).

Many studies of the historiography of the church struggle describe the religious altercations of the National Socialist period in terms of an ideological warfare. In this perspective the Christian churches fought a heroic struggle for survival against a totalitarian regime that disseminated paganism as an anti-Christian counterideology. *New Religions and the Nazis* follows that interpretative scheme. Consequently, it disregards the great many organizational, administrative, and other relations between state and church in existence. Far more than 90 percent of the German populace remained in the church throughout the time of the Third Reich. The overwhelming majority of Germans felt anything but a spiritual need to join one of the pagan associations. Hence Poewe is forced to exaggerate the number of pagan believers considerably (97-98). It is a widespread fault in the history of religions to adopt the inflated figures provided by minority groups as well as by their adversaries. In reality, those

factions constituting the German Faith Movement did not exceed more than several tens of thousands. Compared to the German Christians Movement, with more than five hundred thousand members (Germany had roughly 60 million church members altogether), organized paganism must have appeared relatively small in size. To avoid deliberating on the Christian character of the German society, Poewe tries to overemphasize and generalize pagan outsider positions. The consequence of such a view becomes evident from a remark made in the introduction. In it Poewe declares that German Christians, correctly understood, "were not Christians but pagans" (8). Then, indeed, paganism must transmute into a universal threat.

Poewe's essentialist understanding of Christianity generates a picture of paganism as the antithesis of Christianity in almost every regard. Disagreeing with the mainstream of scholarly works on anti-Semitic prejudices, Poewe fervently neglects any Christian influence on National Socialist Jew hatred (7-8, 14-15, 142). Quite the reverse, she holds paganism accountable for the anti-Semitism of the Nazis and finally responsible for the Holocaust. The recent trend to put the churches on the side of the victims is getting fresh support from Poewe's examination. But by regarding Christians and Jews as equal targets of Nazi persecution, she plays down Nazi anti-Semitism, which then becomes a secondary phenomenon subsequent to the harassment of Christianity. A sentence like "National Socialists knew that being against Christianity was the most authentic and deepest form of anti-Semitism" (7) creates more confusion than the author probably realizes. Writing the history of religions as history of religious ideas materializes in the case of *New Religions and the Nazis* as a means of reproducing religious value judgments on a higher level of abstraction. This methodological inadequacy reduces the value of Poewe's study significantly. Nevertheless, it contains a lot of information very likely unknown to many readers. It offers the opportunity to consider the important question of how paganism developed an influence in the German society and to what depth its impact went. There can be no doubt that some Nazi leaders had a zealous inclination toward an anti-Christian pagan worldview that is especially visible in the SS's pagan tendencies. Poewe's book provides a strong argument for scholars of religions to address the complex relationship between paganism, Christianity, and National Socialism.

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