

Joyce Avrech Berkman, ed. *Contemplating Edith Stein*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. xiii + 354 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02189-4.



Reviewed by John S. Conway (Department of History, University of British Columbia)

Published on H-German (November, 2006)

Appreciation of a Philosophical Nun

The unnecessary and regrettable controversy surrounding the 1942 murder in Auschwitz of the German nun Edith Stein, also known as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, and her subsequent canonization by Pope John Paul II, has diverted attention away from the actual personality and achievements of this remarkable woman during her short lifetime. The objective of the collected essays in this volume, edited by Joyce Berkman, is to provide a fuller account of Stein's life and writings, both before and after she joined the Carmelite order in 1933. The contributors, the majority of whom are female scholars, come from Italy, Germany, Canada and the United States. All the essays are in English and where appropriate, they have been skillfully translated.

The book is divided into three sections. The first describes Stein's personality, experience, self-awareness and self-representation as she moved through the various chapters of her life, while the second pays tribute to her pioneering position as a modern Catholic feminist. In the third section the authors outline the essence of her philosophical contributions and discuss her originality in the rather opaque and inaccessible field of phenomenol-

ogy. The editor and her chief partners describe themselves as fervent feminists and they seek to move away from the overly hagiographical treatment Stein has recently received. Consequently emphasis falls on her secular writings and career. Each essay is accompanied by relevant scholarly notes.

As Berkman notes, we know little about Stein's interior life. Attempts to compile a linear, pious biography as appropriate for a Catholic saint ignore the well-known ambivalence and particularities in her career. As a Jew, a woman and a highly talented intellectual, she was a triple outsider. She experienced various identity transitions, sought to integrate herself in different but essentially antithetical communities and suffered painful rejections from many sides. Trying to depict her life in unbiased but sympathetic terms has not been easy for scholars.

Though raised in an observant Jewish Orthodox family, Stein early on felt alienated, as a woman intellectual, from the paternalistic, male-dominated hierarchies of contemporary Judaism. Instead she embraced the high culture of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*. Her

university education at the universities in Breslau and G ttingen led her to believe in a lofty rationalism, humanism and moral idealism. Such optimism faced severe challenges through the events of the 1914-18 war, and equally through her failure to secure academic recognition as a philosopher. In 1921 she converted to Catholicism, having discovered an affinity to the life of Saint Teresa of Avila. Berkman does not really explain why, but Stein remained loyal to phenomenology and sought to combine it with her Catholic convictions. In the 1920s she taught at a Catholic girls' school and became a popular lecturer on women and their education. But her hopes of becoming either a professor of philosophy or a professed Carmelite nun both eluded her.

With the rise of the National Socialists to power, the path to a university career was blocked for Stein. But in August 1933 she was accepted into the Cologne Carmel, though this step virtually cut her off from her immediate family in Breslau, who could only regard this flight as a betrayal. Her convent writings found no publisher because of Nazi opposition. She herself managed to flee to a Dutch nunnery in late 1938, but was caught there by the German occupation. In 1942 the Gestapo ordered the arrest of all Catholic Jews, and Stein and her sister Rosa were transported to Auschwitz and murdered there on April 4 of the same year.

The Vatican's desire to include Stein among those selected for canonization aroused understandable resentment in the Jewish community, even though John Paul II was careful to claim that she died both as a Catholic daughter of Israel and as a martyr of the Church. This dispute did little to throw light on her lasting achievements or characteristics. Dana Greene in her essay suggests that a secular approach is more rewarding for such interpretations. She rejects the approach of Stein's hagiographers, who see her life through a lens of redemptive suffering, as a meaningful example to the faithful. Greene believes Stein's career should be studied developmentally rather than teleologically, and included in the wider context of early-twentieth-century German history. It is her lifelong search for meaning that should attract biographers, showing how she overcame the contradictions and tensions caused by her varied and rival relationships. The most notable image of Stein, embodying just these factors, is the sight of her dressed in the black habit of a Carmelite nun, with the yellow Star of David sewn on her sleeve.

In 1987 John Paul II beatified Stein in front of seventy thousand Germans in Cologne. In 1942, when a freight

train carried her to her death in a gas chamber, no one helped or cried out to stop the horror. This divergence is the core of the dispute over her legacy. But, as Patricia Hampl points out, this controversy has little to do with Stein herself, or her own personal and spiritual pilgrimage. She never explained the reasons for her conversion to Catholicism or her acceptance of a destiny of the contemplative life in a closed convent. Speculations must remain unresolved. The evidence shows that she found fulfillment in her chosen profession and that her choice did not imply a rejection of her Jewish heritage. On the other hand, her mind was too acute to adopt any kind of sentimental or simplistic syncretism of her Jewish and Christian identities. So it would be too hasty to suggest that her decision was a reaction to the barriers that in the 1920s still prevented young self-confident German girls or Jews from achieving their personal goals. At the same time, however, her discovery of faith in the life of Teresa of Avila undoubtedly followed from the painful and ambivalent crises that she experienced during and after the First World War.

Stein's conversion to Catholicism and Carmelite renunciation of the world presented obvious problems to those contributors who sought to pay tribute to her as a modern German feminist. Her life as role model is so out of tune with present-day feminist opinion that it is small wonder that this aspect of her career has been downplayed. But, even in her very traditional understanding of women's essential character, her attempts to empower women deserve acknowledgment, especially as a protest against the male-dominated totalitarian regime imposed after 1933.

Similarly, her views on women's education are singularly out of fashion today, particularly her stress on the necessity of teachers acting as moral models, transmitting to their pupils an openness and sense of trust, which should then be reciprocated. Few today would share her view that teaching is a "sacred calling" and that its practitioners should seek to foster the student's harmonious growth and character. In essence she derived her ideas on the importance of educating the moral personality of each individual from the liberal idealism of the Humboldt brothers in the early nineteenth century. But again, she was fated to see such ideas ruthlessly quashed in the new Nazi Germany.

The third section of the book discusses Stein's contributions to the philosophical debates of her time. Her studies in this field were almost entirely derived from the ideas of her *Doktorvater* Edmund Husserl. Even though

she was soon to part company with Husserl, largely because he could not regard her as an equal and placed obstacles in the way of her obtaining an academic position, nevertheless her range of thought remained strongly Husserlian in scope. But the passage of time has not been kind to his speculative theories on the philosophical grounding of psychology or the human sciences. The chapters discussing Stein's philosophy are therefore more of an exercise in pathology. Their authors fail to prove that her thought has any present-day relevance.

In *Contemplating Edith Stein*, the editors deliberately chose not to examine her religious writings, presumably

to avoid any suspicion of abetting hagiography. But this decision produces a somewhat one-sided picture; Sarah Borden does contribute, however, a useful survey of literature in English on Stein that includes her spiritual writings and lists the books covering her canonization and her importance for Jewish-Christian relations. She also provides a detailed and serviceable bibliography.

Overall, the aim of this work is to depict Stein neither as a saint nor as an emblem of ideological controversy, but rather as an individual whose struggle to insist on her own humanity was to be so tragically cut short by the Nazi terroristic regime.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: John S. Conway. Review of Berkman, Joyce Avrech, ed., *Contemplating Edith Stein*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12537>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.