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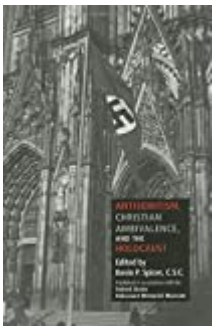

Kevin P. Spicer, ed. *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. xxi + 329 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34873-9.

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Understanding the Past for a More Positive Future

Reviewers do not like coping with essay collections: often the topics covered are too diverse, or the quality of the contributions varies too widely. Some essays are abbreviated versions of books the contributors have written, others are a foretaste of books yet to be undertaken. The present volume, edited by Kevin Spicer, shares all these of characteristics. It is held together, however, by the common question of how the European churches of the twentieth century reacted to the ideology of antisemitism and to the horrendous crimes of the Holocaust that resulted from it. The contributors, both historians and theologians, are ecumenical, including Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Most are younger scholars, and are united in a highly critical view of Christian theology and prejudice in the early twentieth century, particularly in its propagation and encouragement of antisemitism. They share the new perceptions about Judaism adumbrated since the Second Vatican Council, though some argue that earlier, pejorative antisemitic views persist. Spicer maintains that even today, antisemitism is present in Christian ranks because of the failure to understand and acknowledge Judaism on its own terms.

These essays are therefore designed to record the fateful role antisemitism played in the Christian churches of the past, especially in their responses to National Socialism, and also to warn against any relapse into similar attitudes in the future. The essays are grouped in four sections: Christian theology, clerical pastoral practices, Jewish-Christian dialogue, and popular perceptions that Jews and Christians have of each other. The authors of the first group of essays predictably condemn the theological antisemitism of earlier centuries with its emphasis on Jewish disobedience, deicide, and divine punishment, along with the accompanying claim that Christianity superseded Judaism, leaving only the hope of conversion as the remedy. But they equally take issue with the argument put forward by some twentieth-century theologians that a sharp dividing line should be drawn between Christian anti-Judaism, which was regrettable, and racial antisemitism, which was even more regrettable. In these authors' eyes, following the lead of Uriel Tal forty years ago, the two overlap and reinforce each other, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish the precise sources of prejudice and antipathy. No doubt remains that ideological intolerance provided a fertile seedbed for Nazi pro-

paganda. The real question, however, is to what extent National Socialist attacks on Jews were supported, or at least not opposed, for theological reasons. The answer to this question remains much more difficult to estimate. These authors may be criticized for assuming that theology or theologically based anti-Judaic resentment played a more substantial role than other factors.

Alternatively, where sentiment favorable to Jews was expressed, as in Denmark, the authors seek to show that it can be attributed to an anti-German or nationalist pride rather than to any sympathy with Jews. This position suggests that national and political factors rather than theology were determinant, both for and against the Jews. In any case, as Robert Krieg points out, none of the theological factors that at one time fueled prejudice against Jews and Judaism are accepted any longer by the Catholic Church or by mainstream Protestants.

The second group of essays questions whether certain churchmen demonstrated support for extreme right-wing political views and parties. Examples are quoted from Germany, Poland, and Romania, though no essay deals with either Italy or Iberia. The reason is simple. Liberal democracy had never caught on east of the Rhine. The disasters of the First World War discredited all liberal panaceas. The violence and bloodshed in the newly established Soviet Union destroyed belief in a socialist alternative. Security and safety could best be found in the historical rootedness of one's own community. Dictators could be regarded as father figures. Antisemitism was only part of a much wider anti-alienism, which sought to exclude all baneful influences from abroad. Right-wing parties appeared to support the churches against the dangers of godless communism. As Donald Dietrich notes, the abstract neo-scholastic theology taught in seminaries seemed incredibly inadequate for fostering resistance to totalitarian movements. And, as the experience of the Vatican under Pope Pius XII shows, the church lacked an institutional platform for identifying and resisting political extremism or the sort of racial policies leading to extermination.

The third group of essays describes the attempts at Christian-Jewish dialogue in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Matthew Hockenos analyzes the German Protestants who finally, after five years, came to realize the need for a full metanoia. Elias FÃ¼llenbach records the similar process of shock, renewal, and crisis in the Catholic Church that culminated in the path-breaking declaration of *Nostra Aetate* (1965). The final section describes Jewish reactions. Understandably there were and are still strong reservations about any encounter with Christians. Some Jewish scholars believe that distance has to be maintained, since Jewish monotheism can never be reconciled to any other creeds, all of which are idolatrous. But other scholars argue that given the churches' new stance, avenues of collaboration are now open to all those who seek to oppose any possible resurgence of the destructive antisemitism of the past.

To sum up, these essays are motivated by the irenical desire to improve Christian-Jewish relations. They are therefore written with a "presentist" agenda, with all the benefits of enlightened hindsight, an approach that runs the danger of distorting the historical balance of past events. On the other hand, they do serve to remind us that the Holocaust's legacy is not purely historical. The churches' past ambivalences towards Judaism need now to be replaced with a much greater sensitivity and awareness, which is largely happening thanks to contributions such as those provided by these authors. While the book offers little new historical research, it will be pedagogically useful for undergraduates and for those who believe that analyzing the churches' former and mistaken views of Jews and Judaism offers a means of achieving a more positive relationship in the future.