

BOOK REVIEW

Stayer, James M. *Martin Luther: German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. xvi + 178 pp. Hdbk. CA\$55.00.

In today's climate of political correctness, where even the mention of particular matters is taboo, it takes a courageous scholar to examine a topic such as Luther research by German nationalists in the 1920s, lest one be labeled as somehow sympathetic to the emerging National Socialist phenomenon. James Stayer provides analysis of a high-brow parallel to populist activities in Germany in the first decade and a half after the First World War. Political events, ranging from the Bavarian civil war through the fighting in the streets of cities like Altona between fascist and communist gangs, were paralleled within the churches by the more grassroots "German Christians." The most successful of these, measured in terms of church-political power, was the *Kirchenbewegung Deutsche Christen*, which won ecclesiastical elections first in Thuringia and later in Mecklenburg. Such success suggests deep roots to the German Christian movement.

Stayer's tome is, to use Paul Tillich's words (cited in a footnote), an extended discussion of "the religious problematic connected with the political situation in Germany after the First World War." While three distinct competitive schools of thought may be isolated, Stayer argues that they share a foundational rejection of the old liberal consensus and of cultural Protestantism, as well as an attempt to utilize salient elements of Luther's thought to assist the process of German national "salvation." Focusing on the work of seven theologians (Karl Holl, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, Emanuel

Hirsch, and Erich Vogelsang), Stayer provides the reader with a careful discussion of the deeply politicized nature of German theology, which, he argues, predated “the Great War.” The early citation of Emanuel Hirsch’s contention that the era’s theological developments owed more to the political opposition of “black, white, and red” (Imperial colours) to “black, red, and gold” (Weimar Republic colours) than to prior theological allegiances sets the tone for the book.

While historiography may be inescapably agenda-driven, Stayer makes the work of most of his seven scholars appear particularly so. Although Stayer avoids a reductionism which would posit that the bulk of the Weimar era Luther research is merely political and social eisegesis, he does highlight a rejection by all seven writers of open-throttle Anglo-American capitalism in favour of a theology of community, which proved amenable to National Socialism. So Stayer comes perhaps uncomfortably close to suggesting that his subjects’ scholarly interpretations were primarily reactions to the then current situation in Germany.

Historiographically, Stayer’s work is essentially a series of biobibliographies. The strength of this approach is thorough analysis of each scholar’s life-work, but, perhaps, at the cost of leaving them a bit detached from the street foment of their times (a problem redressed somewhat by the Epilogue). One should note the relative balance of the chapters’ lengths. Shorn of the Introduction, Conclusion and Epilogue, the book devotes roughly one hundred pages to discussing the seven scholars. Karl Holl receives the lion’s share of attention, thirty pages in all, and that mostly consigned to an extended review of Holl’s 1921 book *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*. On the one hand, this provides powerful access to Holl’s “Luther,” but on the other hand, it towers over coverage of the two Erlangen theologians (Elert and Althaus), the discussion of whose scholarly contribution is relegated to a mere seventeen pages, together barely more than half of the ink dedicated to Holl. To his credit, Stayer rejects the essentially *ad hominem* condemnation of the *works* of writers such as Hirsch and Gogarten. He aims to restore some of the worthy lustre and on-going usefulness of their work.

If one could have only one book on the German Christian movement, to be honest, this book would not be it. However, if one considers three major components of the German Church struggle (religious politics, popular religion and constructive theology), then this book's treatment of Luther studies in the Weimar era merits it an honoured place on the theological historian's or historical theologian's bookshelf.

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