

Siemon-Netto, Uwe, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and other Modern Myths*, 2007, Second Edition. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Review by Karla Poewe, Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.

In a world ripe with propaganda it is refreshing to find a book dissecting a cliché that was used for just such purposes by people as far apart as Josef Goebbels and Alan Dershowitz, namely, that Luther was the “spiritual predecessor of Adolf Hitler” (p. 23). Siemon-Netto’s book traces the origin of the cliché that “linked Luther to Hitler” back to the liberal theologian Troeltsch who passed it on to the writer Thomas Mann who, in turn, shared it with the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* William L. Shirer (p.24). From there it was picked up by the Germanophobic propagandist Lord Vansittart as well as by archbishops and priests of the Church of England. It was also popular among America’s Union Theological Seminary faculty in the early thirties and is used by U.S. historians like Robert Michael and Lucy Dawidowicz, among many others, today (p. 23).

In fact, those who were primarily responsible for the Holocaust and generally for the brutality on the Eastern Front of World War II were men who had not only left Christianity but were intent on destroying the entire Judeo-Christian tradition because it was unGerman. To show the ludicrous nature of the cliché that blamed the Holocaust on the line of descent from the Protestant Luther, Siemon-Netto points out that many perpetrators were born into homes and countries (Austria and Poland, for example) that were formerly or nominally Roman Catholic. He raises this point only, however, to emphasize “the absurdity of the charge that one Christian denomination’s theology paved the way for genocide” (p. 66). Holocausts were also perpetrated by Turkish Muslims, Orthodox Russians, and Cambodian Buddhists, yet these religions are not linked with their crimes (p.66). At issue is rather the thing that Luther warned against with his “two realms” doctrine, namely, the danger that comes with blurring state and church or politics and religion. When blurring occurs secular “isms” are quick to follow. Politicized Christianity, like that of the *German Christians*, for example, was easily absorbed by the political religion of National Socialism (pp. 74-76). By contrast, Luther’s two realms doctrine “de-ideologizes politics” and “de-idolizes” the state (p.77).

Far from confirming a line from Luther to Hitler, Siemon-Netto shows the role that Lutheranism played in the resistance against the Hitler regime. The author is particularly strong in his analysis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Carl Goerdeler. Bonhoeffer understood “two realms” to refer to the fact that Lutherans live before God and with God in a world without God, that is, in a secular world. He could therefore easily co-operate with secular conspirators to kill Hitler. Bonhoeffer also accepted the teaching “that all who take up the sword will perish by the sword.” He knew it to refer to him and his circle. It is in this spirit too that he could say “I

pray for the defeat of my country, for I think this is the only possibility of paying for all the suffering that my country has caused in the world” (p. 101).

According to Siemon-Netto, Goerdeler, the mayor of Leipzig who was executed by the Nazis, was rooted in nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism (p. 111) but he internalized the “ethos and attitude” of Lutheranism (p. 112). As his daughter Marianne Meyer-Krahmer confirmed when Siemon-Netto interviewed her, Goerdeler warned all and sundry against the danger of Hitler. Her father valued and stood up for Leipzig’s Jewish heritage and citizens and saw as clearly as his other close Lutheran colleagues in the resistance that Hitler was determined to destroy three enemies: the Jews first, then the Christians, and finally capitalism (p. 106, 116). It is a sad chapter in human history that brave men like Goerdeler too were defeated by men who could not understand his subtle Lutheran distinctions and the necessity of thinking on two levels. Goerdeler’s sense, on the one hand, that a moral catastrophe had befallen Germany that would be a danger to the world and his political point, on the other, that National Socialism was largely the result of the injustice of Versailles was seen as deception by Vansittart (p. 145). In response, Vansittart soon used a race-based “militarism” cliché that fired the hate of the British for a war that could possibly have been averted in 1938 had Goerdeler’s plan of action been debated in British parliament (p. 120, 126, 130). Instead, revenge against and punishment of *the Germans* lasted until 1949 and beyond (p. 136, 142), and it came from the top: the Roosevelts (p. 134-139), Vansittart (p.126), Churchill (p.128), and the British Bomber Command (p.129).

But Luther was vindicated. Luther’s “two realms” doctrine as it was applied in the German Democratic Republic, which German humor says was neither German, nor Democratic, nor a Republic, was one of the most powerful tools to defeat the Stalin made dictatorship peacefully. The two realms doctrine simply enabled the Christian “to be guided by natural reason while operating in the secular realm without losing his citizenship in the spiritual realm” (p.173). More than vindicating Luther, it shows how Germany’s resistance of the Nazi regime, the core of it based on Lutheranism, might have toppled Hitler’s government given time and external moral support. That did not happen, and so Siemon-Netto, a son of the city of Leipzig, tells how the “anti-Nazi Confessing Church, having learned from the past, carried on as a brotherhood within the *Landeskirche*” after the Second World War, supplying the church with “the theological ammunition in its dealing with the Communist state” (p161). Its theologians compared Christianity and Marxism-Leninism and concluded, “Marxism-Leninism is an anti-Christian doctrine of salvation” (p.161). With precisely this knowledge, the churches opened their doors to the secular world, Christians listened to their secular compatriots, and together they started candlelight marches that attracted overwhelming numbers of people.

Perhaps because Siemon-Netto is both a journalist and a theologian, he has produced a unique book that shows theology affect politics and indeed bring

down a state without, as Lutherans are so careful to emphasize, mixing religion and politics into an unwholesome brew. Montgomery's book (1970) was an earlier attempt to defend Martin Luther. But when he briefly visited East Germany it was still frozen in totalitarianism. Montgomery, therefore, cleared the political rubbish from Luther's core beliefs about salvation and the two realms dogma and like Siemon-Netto also shows how a person whose heart is imbued with the Gospel uses his reason in the secular world to keep human beings from destroying themselves (Montgomery 1970: 138).

Another book that complements Siemon-Netto's effort to make explicit the meaning of the two kingdoms in a world gone awry is that of Rasmussen (2005) about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Rasmussen shows the development of Bonhoeffer's theology in relationship to the resistance against Hitler's national socialist system. To Bonhoeffer, the two realms became also the inevitable condition of having to live at two levels: appearing to be with the government while actively working to bring it down. Bonhoeffer's thinking about living with God and before God but in a secular world where he had to work with communists and military men to assassinate a tyrant, was no longer as sharply dichotomous as Siemon-Netto's insistence on the absolute distinction between the two realms. But even Siemon-Netto's concern not to brew politics and religion together received a peculiar twist in the situation of the demise of East German communism. The people who were selected to be the negotiators for unification were precisely "servants of the spiritual realm," so that pastors became government ministers, members of parliament at all levels, county executives, and mayors. They stepped into the worldly realm because it lacked personalities that were untarnished by the previous government and yet capable of maintaining the secular order during a time of transition (Siemon-Netto 2007: 155).

But why did the resisters of Hitler's Germany end up as mere martyrs? Rasmussen sees the inevitability of their failure in their ethically based rejection to use methods similar to those of the Nazis. But as Siemon-Netto makes abundantly clear, they failed because the Allies who, from the beginning of war, had invested all in Germany's total defeat and unconditional surrender were simply unwilling to contemplate anything else. By contrast, the GDR had the outside support it needed. More importantly, the support came unexpectedly from Gorbachev of the Soviet Union just as it came expectedly from Kohl of the Federal Republic. What is more, the three leaders who first negotiated the Unification Treaty, namely, Kohl, Gorbachev, and Lothar de Mazière (who headed the new East German Government in 1990) were Christian. De Mazière was born into a devout Protestant family descended from genteel Huguenot exiles from France. Gorbachev, who met Pope John Paul II in 1989, has confessed openly that he is Christian.

For anyone who wants to understand the relevance of Luther's two realms belief in recent history, *The Fabricated Luther* deserves a place on your shelf. Indeed, I know of no other book that combines so naturally and effectively theology and

Realpolitik, without politicizing the former or sacralizing the latter. Finally, the book has the virtue of being easy to read.

#### Bibliography

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