



Review Article: The Betrayal of the Humanities

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Few events in the twentieth century ought to cast as long a shadow as the Holocaust, or as it is referred to by Jews, the Shoah. Yet, as the editors of *The Betrayal of the Humanities* note in their introduction, the Shoah has not cast a shadow, but instead has lain in shadow for much of the twentieth century. Collusion, both conscious and unconscious, between the Allied powers and the defeated Germans has obscured it as an object of academic study and allowed an “air-brushing of the Holocaust out of the history of Nazi Germany.”¹ For

¹ Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich, Studies in Antisemitism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 13.

It is important for scholars to understand the history of their disciplines; yet, the influence of Nazi associated scholars on modern disciplines has been shockingly understudied. A new book, The Betrayal of the Humanities, provides an important work of historiography which digs into the role of the scholars and universities during the Third Reich and their lasting impact on the academy.

half a century, scholars accepted the fiction that a gang of pseudo-intellectuals and party hacks had forced the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust upon the German people. However, as two decades worth of scholars have directed their efforts towards chronicling the actions of Germans under the Nazi regime, a complicated and chilling picture has emerged of collaboration and dissimulation from the ground up.² In *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen have gathered a group of scholars in the humanities to interrogate the history of their own disciplines. In response, these scholars have produced an exemplary piece of historiography that smashes the myth of a university opposed to the rise of National Socialism. They do so, not by painting the experience of German scholars in broad and polemic terms, but through careful examination of the myriad ways in which scholars respond to the dictates of a totalitarian state. We meet in these pages collaborators and resisters, careerists and ideologues, many of whom slithered out of these skins and took on new personas in the postwar period. For scholars in general, this book should serve as a model for writing histories of disciplines. For pastors and scholars like myself, in the mainline American Protestant tradition, this book warrants special attention, a topic that I turn to after summarizing the book's contents.

SUMMARY

As noted in the introduction, Levinson and Ericksen have chosen to focus on the experience of professors of the humanities under the Third Reich. They do not intend to exonerate the sciences through this choice, but rather to highlight a paradox that should trouble those of us with an awareness of the influence of the German university on our own disciplines: "...how is it possible to reconcile Germany's prodigious cultural achievements with the equally prodigious atrocities perpetrated by Germans during the Nazi period?"³ This choice reflects the breakdown of the essays in the volume, most of which deal with individual fields of study.

² See, for example, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

³ Levinson and Ericksen, *The Betrayal of the Humanities*, 5.

The Betrayal of the Humanities begins with an introductory essay by Alan E. Steinweis that helps to define the question of what constituted the humanities in Germany at the turn of the century. As he points out, echoing Suzanne L. Marchand, “the humanistic disciplines in Germany before 1933 were characterized, by and large, by a devotion to a particular set of methodologies, not by the kinds of ‘non-elitist, inclusionary’ values that typify the humanities in today’s academy.”⁴ This definition explains the inclusion of areas of study such as Law and Archaeology that the American categorizes as professional or social-science disciplines. Moving on from Steinweis’s essay, the first part of the book investigates seven disciplines of the historical humanities: Oriental Studies, Lutheran theology, Old Testament studies, “Jewish” studies⁵ (a chapter that intimately involves Lutheran theology and New Testament studies), Egyptology, Assyriology, and Archaeology. The second part of the book encompasses the disciplines of Law, Music, and Philosophy. Finally, a third part of the book provides two chapters on university administration/hiring practice using the University of Göttingen as a case study, as well as a comparative study centered on Italian Fascism. The book ends with an essay by Alvin H. Rosenfeld that reflects on the question of whether the modern (American) university continues to have an anti-Jewish bias.

Before turning to the particular relevance of this volume for readers of *Word & World*, the authors of individual chapters deserve compliment for their attention to historical particularities. The chapters often focus on the careers of one or two individuals and make use of archival material including letters and administrative documents. The focus and specificity of the chapters and the willingness of the authors to avoid over-generalization render their conclusions convincing. In addition, the editors of the volume have done yeoman’s work in ensuring cohesion and flow between the individual chapters. The book reads as a unified study of the topic, not a scattered collection,

⁴ Alan E. Steinweis, “The History of the Humanities in the Third Reich,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 41.

⁵ This theological discipline, *Judaistik* (sometimes also referred to as *Judenforschung*), which studied ancient Judaism for Christian theological purposes, should not be confused with the modern discipline of Jewish studies. Levinson and Ericksen, *The Betrayal of the Humanities*, 25 fn. 40.

which is all the more impressive since this book began as papers at a conference.

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Within the American context, the Holocaust and Nazism have the unfortunate tendency to generate bad-faith arguments, raised both by combatants eager to equate their opponents to Hitler as well as defendants who resist any implication that their work may have roots in Nazi-aligned scholarship. In an effort to demonstrate my good faith towards fellow scholars and the readers of *Word & World*, I offer a brief statement of my position: I write as an active participant in the disciplines of New Testament studies and History of Christianity. I received my training in History of Religions in a secular setting at the University of Minnesota (where Dr. Bernard Levinson served as one of my teachers). I am a Lutheran, with a Master of Divinity, though I am not ordained clergy. I am a biracial millennial; my mother's family is Sino-Cambodian, my father's Norwegian and Mennonite. By political persuasion, I am a Nordic model social-democrat. I belabor this point to emphasize that the following commentary is a call from a practitioner of the humanities to more faithfully examine the history of our disciplines.

THE BETRAYAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

An examination of the list of disciplines covered in *The Betrayal of the Humanities* should pique the interest of readers in the mainline Protestant tradition and in the mainline Protestant academy. This goes doubly so for readers who belong to or interact with the Lutheran tradition. Disciplines central to the mainline Protestant tradition including the studies of both testaments and the theological

tradition of Protestantism have their roots in German scholarship and are implicated in the Nazi project by this volume. Though rejection of the historical roots of Protestant scholarship might seem an enticing option, I argue that such know-nothingism not only represents another betrayal of the historical humanities, but also leaves the rejecter susceptible to unconsciously recapitulating the scholarship that they seek to leave behind. Rather, I argue that attention to our histories is the only path forward. Thus, I offer reflections on two chapters of *The Betrayal of the Humanities* with reference to what they have taught me as I approach my role as Professor of New Testament at a mainline Protestant seminary. Following my chapter-specific reflections, I offer a pair of general reflections drawn from the volume, and then conclude by pointing out both lacunae and areas for further study.

Luther, Context, and the Role of the Pastor

In his chapter “Luther Scholars, Jews, and Judaism during the Third Reich: From the Hallowed Halls of Academia to the Sacred Spaces of German Protestantism,” Christopher J. Probst explores the influence of an academic (Georg Buchwald) and a pastor (Walter Holsten) in mobilizing Martin Luther’s antisemitic treatises on behalf of Nazi ideology.⁶ The faulty methods that the two men employed in their treatment of Luther are recognizable in many portrayals of Luther, especially as I have experienced from Lutheran pulpits today. These methods include treating Luther as a folk hero and focusing on small portions of Luther’s writing without contextualization. In the case of Buchwald and Holsten, their treatment of Luther as a German folk hero and their excessive focus on five pages of his treatise *The Jews and their Lies* had obviously repugnant effects.⁷ Though less repugnant perhaps, the treatment of Luther as a Protestant folk hero, freeing his followers from “works-righteousness,” gives a veneer of authority to anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish attitudes. This folk hero

⁶ Christopher J. Probst, “Luther Scholars, Jews, and Judaism during the Third Reich: From the Hallowed Halls of Academia to the Sacred Spaces of German Protestantism,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 118.

⁷ Probst, “Luther Scholars, Jews, and Judaism during the Third Reich,” 116, 145.

status is accompanied by ceaseless quotation of slogans like “saved by grace” and “*Sola Scriptura*” that flatten Luther as a biblical exegete and theologian. Just as Buchwald and Holsten ignored Luther’s context in order to paint him as sanctioning German prejudices, for many Lutheran pastors, Luther has simply become the enabler of a generic American concept of freedom. Flattening Luther does a disservice to him as a real historical person and a towering intellectual, and short circuits our possibilities for learning from and critiquing his thought.

Gerhard von Rad and Unintended Consequences

Moving from Luther to the study of the Old Testament, Bernard M. Levinson’s chapter “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle against the Nazification of the Old Testament” paints a sympathetic, yet critical assessment of the unintended consequences of one man’s intellectual resistance.⁸ Though most of my students have never heard of Gerhard von Rad, their recapitulation of the intellectual moves made by both him and his opponents speak to the dangers of historical know-nothingism that I pointed to in the introduction in this section. To speak first of von Rad’s opponents, Levinson highlights the irony that Nazi-sympathizing Christians first made the case for viewing the Old Testament as a Jewish book, an identification that they intended as a pejorative.⁹ Unfortunately, to this day, many students (and pastors) continue this pejorative chain of identification. They characterize the Old Testament as legalistic and obsessed with punishment; they brand anything in the New Testament that seems out of line with “Christian love” as a Jewish relic. And, in an ironic twist, concerns for justice, such as attacking patriarchy or the negative effects of the prosperity Gospel, sometimes lead students to recapitulate criticisms innovated by the Nazis.¹⁰ A second, more subtle intellectual move occurs in the work of von Rad himself. In his commentaries on Deuteronomy,

⁸ Bernard M. Levinson, “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle against the Nazification of the Old Testament,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 156.

⁹ Levinson, “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle,” 191–192.

¹⁰ See, for example, the diatribes of Dr. Reinhold Krause, who urged German Christians “liberation from the Old Testament with its Jewish morality of profit and its stories of cattle traders and pimps,” quoted in Levinson, “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle,” 164.

contrary to the Greek title of the book, “von Rad argued that Deuteronomy is not law but rather sermons by countryside Levites who preached a renewed message of redemption...in its purest form, Deuteronomy declares Yahweh’s constant, unconditional election of Israel to salvation.¹¹” As Levinson goes on to explain, this “discovery” that Deuteronomy preaches the Gospel arises neither from the text itself nor from Lutheran theology. Rather, it appears as an unconscious reaction by von Rad to Nazi attacks on the Old Testament.¹² This discomfort with law and the promulgation of an “all Gospel” Christianity continues unabated into the present day. Though the proponents of these readings are not, for the most part, conscious antisemites, by turning the writings of the Old Testament into proto-liberal Protestantism, they contribute to a “de-Jewing”¹³ of the text all the same.

LOOKING PAST: THE FAILED DENAZIFICATION OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Beyond its contributions to the study of individual disciplines, *The Betrayal of the Humanities* offers an opportunity for general reflection on the forces that have shaped theological studies in the United States. One force that continues to exert malignant influence on main-line Protestantism is the failed denazification and reintegration of the German academy after the war.¹⁴ The two chapters on the University of Göttingen by Robert P. Ericksen and Anikó Szabó present a case study in the dissimulation practiced by German professors and their continued hostility to their colleagues who suffered at the hands of the Nazi regime. The prestige attached to many of their names in the middle of twentieth century only serves to magnify the reprehensibility of their actions. While men like Werner Elert and Paul Althaus may resonate only in the study of Lutheran theology, others like Karl Georg Kuhn and Gerhard Kittel continue to exert influence on the

¹¹ Levinson, “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle,” 157.

¹² Levinson, “Gerhard von Rad’s Struggle,” 190.

¹³ This term, introduced in Levinson’s essay is a calque of the German term *Entjudung*.

¹⁴ Denazification was the process by which the Allied Powers ostensibly removed former Nazis from position of influence. In practice, after the scapegoating of one or two professors, many former Nazis resumed their roles.

wider fields of Qumran and New Testament studies.¹⁵ This is not to advocate for summary rejection of their work. Rather, it is a call to end the know-nothing approach taken to these scholars. If we wish to rehabilitate them, we must do so with their pasts in mind. Gerhard Kittel provides the prototype for this work. Though the “*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is surprisingly free overall from political or anti-Jewish tendencies,” as Anders Gerdmar points out, it was also written with the overt purpose of legitimizing National Socialism in the eyes of international scholars.¹⁶ Any citation of this dictionary must proceed with caution in light of this background, especially because of its tendency to dichotomize Greek and Jewish sources.

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The work of denazifying theological studies extends beyond the histories of individual scholars and into the untracked wilderness of the ideas that they spawned. For instance, the influence of postmodernism seeps into many corners of theological studies and some hail it as a liberating force. This despite the fact that postmodernism has not disentangled itself from Martin Heidegger, the same Heidegger, who as rector of Freiburg University, delivered a speech in praise of Hitler with the *Sturmabteilung* parading swastikas in front of his podium.¹⁷ Again, just as with Kittel, those of us who engage with postmodernist

¹⁵ The case of Kittel is especially egregious in that he was one of the few professors who was unrepentant of his antisemitism. Anders Gerdmar, “Jewish Studies in the Service of Nazi Ideology: Tübingen’s Faculty of Theology as a Center for Antisemitic Research,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 218–219.

¹⁶ Anders Gerdmar, “Jewish Studies in the Service of Nazi Ideology,” 227 fn. 116.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Faye, “Political Philosophy: Hannah Arendt and Aurel Kolnai as Interpreters of the Nazi Totalitarian State,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 424.

thought must reexamine the roots of its development with this picture at the front of our minds.

LOOKING FORWARD: LACUNAE AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

All collections are limited by space and the availability of scholars to write for them. As such, I point towards some lacunae in *The Betrayal of the Humanities* not as a criticism, but as part of my hopes for the future of this important intellectual project. While the authors of multiple chapters allude to the following four disciplines, *The Betrayal of the Humanities* would have benefitted from individual treatments of classics, philology, history of religions, or folklore. Like their theological counterparts, the modern study of these disciplines has roots in the German academy and each would benefit from a close examination of its practitioners under National Socialism. Though it, in some ways, extends beyond the scope of the volume, the chapter on Italian Fascism by Franklin Hugh Adler raises another lacuna in English speaking study of National Socialism, namely comparative work on other cases of ideological capture of the university.¹⁸ As Steinweis notes, the German volume *Wissenschaft im Einsatz* attempts comparative contextualization, but “comparative approaches of this sort remain surprisingly rare in the field.”¹⁹ I hope that *The Betrayal of the Humanities* inspires further work as the lack of comparative material hinders our understandings of current attempts at ideological capture, especially within the American academy. The equation of law and morality that Aurel Kolnai flagged as a hallmark of the totalitarian state continues to threaten free inquiry and the humanities.²⁰ Following the example of the scholars who produced *The Betrayal of the Humanities*, let us learn from the past and stand firm against those who would coerce us into new betrayals. ⊕

¹⁸ Franklin Hugh Adler, “Italian Fascism: Decentering Standard Assumptions about Antisemitism and Totalitarianism,” in *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University During the Third Reich*, edited by Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, Studies in Antisemitism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 522–524.

¹⁹ Steinweis, “The History of the Humanities in the Third Reich,” 53.

²⁰ Faye, “Political Philosophy,” 432.

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