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Carolyn Sanzenbacher. *Tracking the Jews: Ecumenical Protestants, Conversion, and the Holocaust*. Manchester University Press, 2024. Xvi + 340 pages, GBP 25, ISBN 978-1 5261- 6129-1

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The title of this book is unfortunate; it suggests discovering and hunting Jews during the Holocaust. Its actual subject is the birth and development of ecumenical projects to convert the Jews from 1925 to 1948. Its scope, in other words, is broader than the subtitle suggests. The "tracking" in the title refers to the task of constructing a demographic and sociological profile of world Jewry as the first step in launching evangelization projects. It is revealing that ecumenical Protestants believed that data regarding the demography and sociology of Jews needed to be uncovered and assembled. The work had already been done—but under Jewish sponsorship—primarily in German, English, and Yiddish, including the publication of the *Zeitschrift für die Demographie und Statistik der Juden* (1904–1931).

Sanzenbacher's book operates on two levels. It is, on the one hand, a history of the efforts of ecumenical Protestants in Western Europe and the United States to create organizations dedicated to the evangelization of the Jews before, during, and after the Nazi regime. Like many institutional histories, it suffers from a surfeit of details about conferences, convocations, consultations, meetings, and the like. Only the most dedicated students of the creation of Protestant ecumenical organizations, like the World Council of Churches and its predecessors, will profit from this level of detail.

More interesting to non-specialists is Sanzenbacher's account of the theological premises that underlay this activity. The conversion of the Jews was a centuries old aspiration of Christianity. The theological basis of this ambition was Christian supercessionism, the belief that God's designation of the Jews as the chosen of God passed to Christians (the new Jews) following the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Conversionists added another dimension to this fundamental belief: that it was the fundamental obligation of every Christian to evangelize the Jews, whose very persistence and success in cultural and economic life challenged the truth of Christianity. The nineteenth century had been an age of robust missionizing, especially in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States. As Sanzenbacher shows, much time and effort went into creating an institutional framework for sponsoring such activity in the first half of the twentieth century. We do not know, however, whether this activity bore fruit, since Sanzenbacher says nothing about missionary work and its successes and failures in Jewish communities at the time. Her account is strong on the creation of international institutions to promote

evangelization and on the religious beliefs that energized this work but silent about actual missionary operations in different lands and about encounters between flesh-and-blood missionaries and Jews.

While supercessionist beliefs continued to shape the outlook of evangelization, as they had in the previous century, new challenges to missionary work arose in this period. In the West, Jews were no longer an impoverished, unemancipated population on the margins of society. Their achievements in the arts and the sciences and in commerce and trade undermined the belief that they were objects of God's wrath. In addition, the secularization of Jewish life was an obstacle to their evangelization, for its aim was to change the religious beliefs of practicing Jews. How could missionizing achieve its aim when many of its targets had forsaken traditional Jewish beliefs and often had transcended religion altogether? At the same time, the intensification of the Jewish Question everywhere from the last decades of the nineteenth century, as well as Nazism and the Holocaust, presented a host of new challenges.

Missionary work in the nineteenth century, such as that of the pioneer London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, bore little fruit. But the Protestant leaders who championed evangelization in the twentieth century seemed to have little awareness of this or preferred to ignore its implications for their own work. So the history of the failures of earlier Christian missions and their poor results in no way curbed their missionary enthusiasm. (Sanzenbacher does not pursue this matter.) To be sure, several hundred thousand Jews converted in the modern period—but not because they responded positively to the conversionist message. They converted to escape the stigma of Jewishness, to advance their social standing and occupational status, to gain admission to elite social circles, and to enable them to take a Christian spouse. For the most part, Christian missions succeeded only with the impoverished, the distraught, and the mentally and physically ill.

The most impressive sections of Sanzenbacher's study are those that reveal the extent to which contemporary anti-Jewish tropes were incorporated into conversionist rhetoric. Like most antisemites of the period, the clergymen who spearheaded Protestant efforts believed that Jews had too much influence in commerce, politics, and the arts, and that their behavior was often criminal and provocative. They also cited Jewish racial pride, as manifested above all in Zionism, as a new challenge to missionary work. Thus, Jewish integration into state and society threatened Christendom. As a seasoned ecumenicist at the University of Berlin told a conference in Atlantic City in 1931, while Germans were struggling against postwar poverty, Jews "were parading in luxury and licentiousness, filling the most expensive theatres and hotels, riding in fine autos, and seeming to riot like vampires in the blood of their host people" without any awareness of the impact of their provocative behavior (50). The anti-Jewish feelings that Jewish behavior created explained, in the view of these prominent ecumenical Protestants, why the Jewish Question burned so brightly and even explained why Nazism took root in Germany.

The persistence of antisemitic tropes in missionary thinking even during the Nazi period is shocking. One German ecumenicist equated Judaism with Nazism: both were "narrow-minded nationalism exalted to a political religion" while an English ecumenicist

editorialized in 1937 that the Jewish "idea of an integral race with its own exclusive culture" was "the prototype of Nazism." (120). (This kind of thinking, of course, has not disappeared. In the contemporary world, radical critics of the State of Israel traffic in similar accusations.) Sanzenbacher's treatment of these vile views is sober and thorough. Her painstaking research leaves no doubt that such thinking was widespread and not exceptional. The only churchman whose reputation emerges from her account intact is the Anglican James Parkes, an early historian of the development of Christian thinking about Judaism and an unwavering critic of Christian missions to the Jews throughout this period.

The story that Sanzenbacher tells is not an inspiring one. It becomes even more dispiriting toward the end of her book when she explains that the murder of six million Jews had little influence on the rhetoric of missionizing. During the war, the chief concern of conversionist leaders was planning for the revitalization of their project after the war. This included discussion of "dividing Jewish mission fields equitably" (167)—that is, allocating post-war Jewish communities in a way that did not infringe on the claims of existing missions. They also revisited an earlier concern that they could not proceed with their work until they understood the changed sociology and demography of the Jews who remained alive. And they vigorously opposed the creation of interfaith organizations, like the British Council of Christians and Jews, whose object was to promote harmony between adherents of the two faiths. Their opposition speaks volumes about the fundamental intolerance of their project. As Sanzenbacher concludes, her work continues the task of understanding "the ways and degrees to which negative views of Jews were embedded in the fabric of Western culture" (290).