

Davies, Alan and Marilyn F. Nefsky. *How Silent Were the Churches? Canadian Protestantism and the Jewish Plight during the Nazi Era*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997; 179 pages

In the ground-breaking work, *None Is Too Many*, published in 1982, Irving Abella and Harold Troper wrote: “As long as the churches remained silent — which they did — the government could dismiss the [Canadian National Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution (CNCR)] members as well meaning but impractical idealists to be patronized but not taken seriously.” The authors, Alan Davies, professor of Religion at the University of Toronto, and Marilyn Nefsky, associate professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Lethbridge, examine the veracity of this contention, with respect to the Protestant Churches, during the period of the Third Reich. Their research is thorough, their presentation concise and informative, and their analysis and conclusions are provocative.

The authors closely examined church journals, documents, and sermons (where available). They admit that there is a problem with these sources, because they may not reveal what the rank and file actually believed. Also, these documents cannot shed light on what was being said at the parish level. The authors profess to provide “neither an apologia nor a condemnation” in their analysis. They rightly point out that there were a wide variety of Protestant denominations and, in most of them, there were a variety of viewpoints regarding the appropriate response to the federal government’s refusal to admit Jewish refugees. They devote chapters first to the United Church, then the Church of England in Canada, followed by the Presbyterian Church. The Baptists and the Evangelicals are lumped into one chapter, as are the Lutherans, Mennonites and Quakers in another. This order represents the denominations with the most adherents (the United Church had over 2 million members in 1941) to the ones with the fewest (the Quakers had about 1 thousand members).

The United Church, despite some fascist sympathizers amongst its clergy, endorsed the CNCR's lobbying for "selected refugees, not only Jewish". Claris Silcox, the secretary of the Christian Service Council of Canada, was the most active cleric in the country in denouncing the anti-Jewish actions in Germany. But, as the authors admit, he was on the periphery of the Church, and had little impact as a preacher or lobbyist. Nevertheless, they conclude that the Church was "silent, but not that silent". The Church of England, while decrying Nazism, had little enthusiasm about denouncing the perils facing European Jews. W.W. Judd, the head of the Council of Social Service and the Church's representative on the CNCR, was even more ineffectual than was Silcox. The Presbyterians were appalled at the persecution of Christians in Germany, but aside from Morris Zeidman, a convert from Judaism who founded the Scott Mission in Toronto, the Church had little interest in the plight of Jews. The Baptists, broadly divided into modernist and fundamentalist camps, were fervent anti-fascists and anti-pacifists. Watson Kirkconnell, a gifted pastor and academic, was in the forefront of the Church's antipathy to Nazism. Unfortunately, he also was a voice in the wilderness. His followers abstained from action; they felt that, in time, Christ would intervene.

The Lutheran Church was not unified, being divided on national lines. Its followers did agree on one basic tenet — the writings and sermons of Martin Luther were the Truth. Although the Churches condemned antisemitism, there was no mention of the Holocaust in the press. The Mennonites were also divided, but, on the question of European Jewry, the Holocaust went unacknowledged. Germans, they opined, were the true victims, and conversion was the solution to the "Jewish problem". One of its publications, *Der Bote*, reprinted speeches by Goebbels and parts of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The Quaker Church was the only Protestant denomination in Canada to take action on behalf of the refugees. Despite the bureaucratic obstacles placed by F.C. Blair, Mackenzie King's

director of immigration (both Blair and King were observant Presbyterians), the Quakers managed to evacuate a small number of refugee children from Vichy France, and shipped food and supplies to others trapped there.

The authors conclude that traditional antisemitism was partly responsible for the Churches' response, but that internal contradictions were more germane. They point out three paradoxes: that evangelicals could also be advocates for a more humane refugee policy; that having nativist attitudes did not preclude voicing altruistic intentions; and that outrage over Christian persecution did not necessarily lead to outrage over Jewish persecution. Consequently, they maintain that silence was relative—that while there was no united front by the Churches to pressure King and the cabinet, unity would have been inconsequential without the support of the general populace.

There is much to be said in favour of this study. It opens another window on Canadian society in the 1930s and 1940s. The complexity of the Protestant denominations, both in their response to the Jewish plight and in their internal decision-making, is noteworthy. The importance of Silcox, Kirkconnell, Judd and Zeidman, as spokesmen for the oppressed of Europe, is brought to attention. But, given the evidence, the authors are too lenient regarding the inaction of the Churches. While a united front may not have moved the government to action, there was no will, no sense of urgency, to even contemplate such an action. Even Silcox, Kirkconnell and Judd harboured racist views toward non Anglo-Saxons, as revealed in a recent study by Carmela Patrias and Ruth Frager. The odour of Christian triumphalism was rarely masked—the Jews were supposed to suffer because they were cursed. And that was enough reason for the Churches to refrain from their mandate to treat their fellow man as they would treat themselves. The question was not one of silence, but one of inaction.

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