

## The Impact of Walter Bauer's

### *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*

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More than eighteen-hundred years ago Tertullian wrote his book *De praescriptione haereticorum*.<sup>1</sup> It was not a detailed refutation of the heresies. Rather, Tertullian argued that the heretics should not even be allowed into court. They had no right to exist because they were derivative. Orthodoxy existed first before the heresies emerged. Heretical teachers therefore did nothing but twist the existing orthodox beliefs into their abased falsehoods.

This assumption was generally accepted in antiquity. It played a significant role in the formation of the canon, especially in the arguments that established the canon lists of the fourth century: only such writings should be admitted as had been there from the very beginning (“apostolic”) and had been useful to the building of the church from the very beginning. Tertullian's *Praescriptio* also dominated later discussions well into the early twentieth century about heresies in the time of the beginnings of Christianity. It could be argued that Gottfried Arnold's *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* [*Impartial (Non-confessional) History of the Church and Heresy*], published in several volumes in the years 1699 and 1700 was an exception to this view. Arnold was one of the leading German pietists of the time.<sup>2</sup> In protest to the Lutheran Orthodoxy he was looking for people of true piety, as distinct from those of orthodox theology, and he found those examples of true Christian faith especially in the more marginal and often heterodox Christians. His work was very popular at the time and well into the 19th century, but it did not deal with the fundamental question of Tertullian's *Proscriptio*. The last major scholarly work on this topic before Walter Bauer's book was Adolf Hilgenfeld's *Ketzergeschichte*

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<sup>1</sup> For an English translation, see <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm>

<sup>2</sup> For general information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gottfried\\_Arnold](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gottfried_Arnold)

*des Urchristentums* of 1884 (reprinted in 1963), a very resourceful work full of valuable information, but also not fundamentally questioning the priority of orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1933, a year before Walter Bauer's book was published, the Nazi Party came into power in the government of Germany. A systematic cleansing of Jews, communists, socialists, and homosexuals in all institutions of Germany soon began. All Protestant pastors with Jewish ancestors serving in the churches under the Prussian church administration were removed from their parishes. In order to support these pastors and their families, pastor Martin Niemöller founded the so-called *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastors' support association).<sup>4</sup> As the situation especially in the Prussian-area churches quickly deteriorated and a movement began that recommended cooperation with the Nazi government (the *Deutsche Christen* = "German Christians" as they called themselves), Karl Barth, a Swiss citizen but then a professor at the University of Bonn, and some of his friends together with other church and civic leaders (among them the later German president Gustav Heinemann) in 1934 called a synod to Barmen in northwest Germany of all those who were willing and courageous enough to oppose the Nazi government. This synod issued the "Barmen Confession," which stated essentially that the Bible commanded all true believers to obey God more than the government and to stand up against tyranny as advocates of justice for all citizens.<sup>5</sup> This essentially split the German protestant Christianity into three groups: the "German" Christians, the adherents of the "Confessing Church," and those who tried to avoid the confrontation and saw Christian existence as a non-political refuge for individual piety.

All these and related theological issues of those days have to be considered when we want to talk about the impact of Walter Bauer's book that was published in the year 1934, the year of the synod of Barmen. Who was Walter Bauer? A middle-aged scholar (born 1877) and professor at the University of Göttingen.<sup>6</sup> One of his colleagues was Professor Emmanuel Hirsch, a man with a Jewish name, but an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazi government. Walter Bauer had already written a few significant books. In the year 1909, he published a large volume on the apocryphal life of Jesus. He had also written brief commentaries on the Gospel of John and on the Letters of Ignatius and Polycarp in the *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* series. But he was most famous for

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Hilgenfeld](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Hilgenfeld) [German]

<sup>4</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pfarrernotbund>

<sup>5</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barmen\\_declaration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barmen_declaration)

<sup>6</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Bauer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Bauer) [very one-sided, focusing on the "Orthodoxy/Heresy" book.]

his painstaking research revising the then leading Greek-German *Dictionary to the New Testament* by Erwin Preuschen, which later became Walter Bauer's *Dictionary to the New Testament*. It is, as we all know, now the standard dictionary for the entire English-speaking world in the brilliant revised English edition by Fred Danker, whose recent death we mourn this year.

For Walter Bauer, who must have been primarily occupied with his dictionary work, the publication of this work on Orthodoxy and Heresy might have been like a respite and return to his primary profession as a historian. And what about its impact? The book had no impact whatsoever. Nobody listened! Everyone in Germany in Christian churches and in theological faculties was occupied with the *Kirchenkampf*, the fight of the Confessing Church against the German Christians, and the question of the persecution of the Jews. Then came the preparation for the great war, and very soon the bombing attacks on the German cities and the hardships experienced by everyone in the deprivations of the years of World War II and its aftermath.

But a few things had been and were happening meanwhile that were threatening the dominance of Tertullian's *Praescriptio* and prepared for the later reception of Walter Bauer's book. Shortly after World War I the translations of the Mandaean texts were published. Rudolf Bultmann discovered in these texts examples of a possibly pre-Christian Gnosticism; they later assisted him to reconstruct Gnostic sources as the basis of the revelation speeches in the Gospel of John. The primary impetus of these Mandaean texts, however, was a new departure for the study of possible Gnostic influences on early Christian writings. Gnosticism was thus seen for the first time as a possible "heresy" already in the first century rather than as a second-century aberration from early Christianity.

This became visible first in some dissertations written under the supervision of Rudolf Bultmann<sup>7</sup> in the late twenties and early thirties of the last century. Remarkable were, for example, Ernst Käsemann's<sup>8</sup> work on the Epistle to the Hebrews *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*, and Heinrich Schlier's<sup>9</sup> investigation the "Gnostic" opponents of Ignatius of Antioch. Outstanding among these dissertations, however, and very influential was Hans Jonas's<sup>10</sup> *Der Begriff der Gnosis* ("The Concept of Gnosis") -- actually a philosophical dissertation, but mostly inspired by Rudolf

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<sup>7</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf\\_Bultmann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Bultmann)

<sup>8</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst\\_K%C3%A4semann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst_K%C3%A4semann)

<sup>9</sup> See [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich\\_Schlier](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Schlier) [German] and its oddly translated [by machine?] Testament = "will" English entry at [http://wikipedia.qwika.com/de2en/Heinrich\\_Schlier](http://wikipedia.qwika.com/de2en/Heinrich_Schlier)

<sup>10</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_Jonas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Jonas)

Bultmann. The latter work was followed by Hans Jonas's major work *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* ("Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity"). In spite of the fact that Hans Jonas was Jewish and had meanwhile emigrated to Israel, Rudolf Bultmann managed to publish volume 1 of this work in 1935 with the publisher Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht in Göttingen, one year after the publication of Walter Bauer's book.

I myself<sup>11</sup> began my studies at Marburg University in the fall of 1945, just after I was released from an American POW camp. One year later I was encouraged to apply for admission to Rudolf Bultmann's seminar. In order to pass the oral examination that was required to be admitted to this seminar I was advised to read some dozen monographs that were considered by Bultmann to be classics in New Testament studies. Thus I spent the three-month summer vacation studying these "classics." Together with such works as Wilhelm Bousset's<sup>12</sup> *Kyrios Christos* and William Wrede's famous work on the Messianic Secret in the Gospels, there were also Hans Jonas's book and Walter Bauer's work on Orthodoxy and Heresy. It was indeed the interest of Rudolf Bultmann in the early appearance of Gnosticism that kept the interest alive in the circle of his students. That is most clearly present in the several publications of my fellow student Walter Schmithals,<sup>13</sup> who was able to find Gnostic heretics as the opponents of about every letter of Paul (except Philemon). I myself was drawn to some degree into the same trend, when I wrote the article on Heretics in Early Christianity for the third edition of the German encyclopedia *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (published in 1959).

That was half a century ago. At that time I was granted just four columns for this work, with just eight lines for the bibliography. In the year 1985, Hans-Dieter Betz<sup>14</sup> of the University of Chicago published his article on "Häresie I: Im Neuen Testament" in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, for which he was given 5 full pages with more than one entire page of bibliography. What had happened in the 26 years since my publication and the appearance of Betz's article?

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmut\\_Koester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmut_Koester) [which requests further information]. For more detail, see the German wiki [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmut\\_Koester](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmut_Koester), and his own web page at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/people/faculty/helmut-koester>

<sup>12</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm\\_Bousset](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Bousset)

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed survey in English of Schmithals's work, see <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/780/1591>; more briefly in German [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Schmithals](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Schmithals)

<sup>14</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_Dieter\\_Betz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Dieter_Betz)

In the sixties of the last century, James Robinson<sup>15</sup> and myself, together with some other friends suggested to Fortress Press that they publish an English translation of Walter Bauer's book of 1934. When the German publisher was asked for the English rights, the response was that this book was an unusual failure in the German market: since the publication of the book in 1934 they still had copies of it in storage, which they had not been able to sell. But our inquiry inspired a reconsideration of the value of this work also in Germany, and what was finally translated into English and published in 1971 was actually a new edition of Walter Bauer's work with an appendix by Georg Strecker<sup>16</sup> (1964).

The enormous impact of Walter Bauer's work, especially in the USA, was, of course, closely related to the interest in the newly discovered Library of Nag Hammadi. During the sixties James Robinson and I had become increasingly interested in the potential illumination that might come from the interpretation of these new texts. Was it possible that the newly discovered *Gospel of Thomas* rested on a written collection of sayings of Jesus that could be dated in the first century? This resulted in the publication of our *Trajectories through Early Christianity* in 1971, the same year, in which Walter Bauer's work appeared in English translation. In an interesting way, Walter Bauer's work thus became a work that was primarily an inspiration for a new departure in American New Testament scholarship. On the other hand, there has been only a modest impact of the book in Germany, specifically West Germany, where the interest in the Nag Hammadi Library also was only marginal -- much different from the circle of scholars around Hans-Martin Schenke<sup>17</sup> at the Humboldt University in East Berlin. As a footnote I could add that the German version of our *Trajectories* took 30 years for the publisher to sell a rather modest press run, while a student of Hans-Martin Schenke in East Berlin told me that they had only one single copy in their Library, and they copied parts of the book by hand (copy machines were not permitted under the communist government). Thus it was largely the interest of American New Testament scholarship in the Nag Hammadi texts -- almost lacking in West Germany -- that

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<sup>15</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_M.\\_Robinson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_M._Robinson)

<sup>16</sup> For a very brief introduction in German, see [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg\\_Strecker](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Strecker)

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately there seems to be no wiki article devoted to Schenke in German or English; but see <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nag-Hammadi-Schriften> for recognition of some of his work.

helped elevate Walter Bauer's book into a position, from which it could guide the effort of re-inventing the early history of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Selection of some relevant works by Helmut Koester:

- "Häretiker im Urchristentum" in RGG\3 3 (1959): 17-21
- "Häretiker im Urchristentum als Theologisches Problem," in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80 Geburtstag*, ed. E. Dinkler (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964)
- "The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," *HarvTR* 58 (1965) 279-318.
- "GNOMAI DIAFOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," *HarvTR* 58 (1965): 279- 318. Reprinted as Chapter 4 in *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Fortress 1971).
- "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," *HarvTR* 61 (1968): 203-247.
- "Gnostic Writings as Witnesses for the Development of the Sayings Tradition," *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton, 1 (Brill 1980) 238-261.
- *Ancient Christian Gospels* (SCM 1990);
- *Introduction to the NT 1: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (de Gruyter 1995);
- *Introduction to the NT 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (de Gruyter 2000);
- *The Cities of Paul: Images and Interpretations From the Harvard Archaeology Project* (CD-ROM, Fortress 2004);
- *From Jesus to the Gospels: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Fortress 2007)
- *Paul and His World: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Fortress 2007)

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<sup>18</sup> For a more general discussion of the reception of Bauer's Orthodoxy and Heresy prior to about 1970, see the appendix by Georg Strecker (1964), revised and supplemented by Robert Kraft, which is also available online at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak//publics/new/BAUERAP2.htm>