

Review of “The Left Hand of God” by Adolf Holl

The unusual subtitle of this book attracted me – “A Biography of the Holy Spirit”. This is a fascinating book, full of amazing information and unusual stories, and I would encourage everyone to read it. But it is not “A Biography of the Holy Spirit”. Rather, it is a collection of spiritual experiences – some of them Christian, many not – without a clear analysis of which are attributable to the Holy Spirit, and which are not. Let me explain.

I am not a German scholar, so I can only assume that (in spite of his own anxieties) John Cullen’s translation is faithful to Holl’s style – but it is exciting! For example, writing about Pentecost:

“Amen. After nine o’clock in the morning of Pentecost Sunday, the permanent connection is live, the Spirit machine has begun its work with a firestorm, it’s anno Domini if the details are correct.” (p.19).

Then, with a tangible sense of sadness that things are not still so dramatic:

“The period of time covered by the story of Jesus and the Twelve, however often it may be repeated, rarely extends beyond two years. Then comes the sobering up, the calming down, the routine, the rules – in short, the Church. Over its main door hovers the dove, like a dangerous memory” (p.47).

I have rarely come across a book that draws together such a wide spectrum of examples, from Katrei (the strange daughter of Meister Eckhart) and the anorexic contemplative nuns, to Chopin (“an incarnation of the Holy Spirit”, p.312) and James Joyce. And Holl has (at least in translation) a quirky and attractive turn of phrase. For example, commenting on Jesus’ quotation from Hosea “Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice”, Holl says of Jesus “[His] coldness towards the temple factory is so palpable you can feel it” (p.146). Or Origen’s secret: “He was as little interested in history as he was in women” (p.164)

But then we get a different flavour coming through. For example, when Holl discusses Hans Jonas’ study of the early history of the Christian era, from the viewpoint of a German Jew writing in 1934:

“[Jonas’] detailed examination of the subject led to the conclusion that the Jewish Savior and his apostle were at best the first and second fiddles in an orchestra that made music with many instruments, playing notes whose composer remained anonymous” (p.94).

(Shades of the Athens that Paul speaks of in Acts 17?) I looked in vain for Holl’s analysis, his establishment of some criteria for discerning what was “the Holy Spirit” and what was not.

And writing of the prophet Muhammad being given the words of the Koran, Holl puts the Koran on the same level as the Bible in terms of divine inspiration:

“No recitation of the Prophet concerning the Spirit that had descended upon him has been handed down ...” (p.143).

“Everything that the Holy Spirit had spoken into the ears of his messengers had been established for all time in the texts of the Torah, the Gospels and the Koran” (p.161).

It is at the end of this chapter that we get a clue to where Holl is coming from:

“... Disappointment over the warring truths of Jews, Christians, and Muslims found expression in the Parable of the Rings that Lessing was later to use in his play *Nathan the Wise*: the right ring cannot be proved. In Paris, the liberal arts students

with no respect for the seriousness of religion poked fun at the fairy tales of their theology professors. The modern age had begun.

“It is an age that has had its fair share of prophets and prophetesses, but these latecomers have lacked the power to set a world religion in motion. After Muhammad, the Holy Spirit apparently lost his enthusiasm for such undertakings” (p.144).

Holl is German, and obviously well informed about his philosophical forebears. In his writing about Hegel’s book *The Phenomenology of Spirit* he reveals something of his syncretistic viewpoint:

“In this treatise, the death of God was already a presupposition, but that made no difference to the ‘Spirit’ of the book’s title. That Spirit had merely been required to renounce the attribute of holiness. From this time on, the Holy Spirit – at least in educated circles in Germany – was called the ‘World-Spirit’ (*Weltgeist*) or the ‘Absolute Spirit’ (*Absoluter Geist*).” (p.216) [What a pity this was not made clear in the book’s subtitle!]

It seems to me that Holl is trying to be something that sits uneasily on the shoulders of his philosophical heritage – a post-modern German Christian. He is trying to cast off the mantle (maybe even the language) of his forebears; but in doing so he has thrown out most of the baby with the bathwater, by giving equal credence to everything that uses spiritual language.

At least he draws a boundary somewhere. Describing the writings of Johannes Weissenberg, founder and leader of the German *Evangelisch-Johannische Kirche*, which supported the rise of Nazism, Holl quotes (p.352) the 1929 headline of the church’s magazine: “Isolating the Powers of Darkness through the Might of the Holy Spirit in National Socialism”. This goes too far: Holl comments: “Hitler’s *Heil* proved to be a salute to the impostures of the Antichrist, enacted amidst the laughter of hell” (p.353).

One way of defining Christianity is “truth-based experience”. Without the truth, any experience is of equal and passing value. Without the experience, any truth remains arid. The New Testament describes Jesus as “the Truth” (John 14:6), and the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” (John 16:13), whose task is to point people to Jesus (16:15), and be the indwelling and empowering of Jesus in their lives (Acts 1:8).

Later on, in a situation where Christians needed to discern which spiritual claims were really from God, John writes:

“This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3).

Obviously this is written by an insider, with a vested interest in promoting that viewpoint. Holl may take a different view of Scripture, but he does not explain himself, nor sets out his criteria for distinguishing truth from untruth.

Another major gap, in my view, is his failure to discuss in any depth the rise of the charismatic movement amongst the mainline denominations in the second half of the 20th Century. He is fascinated by tongue-speaking amongst Pentecostals in South America (p.32ff), but like many outside the renewal tradition, fails to realise that in the charismatic movement nowadays, tongue-speaking in public is much lower down the list of manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The renewal movement is not just defined by its distinctives (baptism in the Holy Spirit, tongues etc), but by its willingness to take the Holy Spirit seriously in seeking God for every aspect of life and work: worship, prayer, teaching, social justice etc.

It is remarkable that in a book so full of life, there is so little of the author. What does Holl actually believe? Who indeed is he? All we discover (at least from the paperback edition) is that he is a Roman Catholic, and has a doctorate. I wish he had allowed us to peep behind the defensive veil of his verbal agility, to learn what motivates him. Then we might have a clearer idea of why he wrote the book. Maybe his intention is deliberately to hide himself in his writing, so that only those who seek with all their attention will find. I am not sure what you will find when you read this book, but your enjoyment will be stimulated and your discernment challenged. It's certainly worth the effort.

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