

BOOK REVIEW

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Paul E. Nahme. *Hermann Cohen and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Enchantment of the Public Sphere*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019. 340 pages.

The great neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) was one of the most important religious thinkers of German Jewry, yet few even know his name today outside of academic philosophy and Jewish studies. Speaking personally, he was completely absent in my undergraduate coursework in modern Jewish philosophy in the early 2000s, and his writings appeared rather sparsely in my doctoral studies, usually as a sort of shadow to highlight the legacies of Buber, Scholem, and Rosenzweig, or to capture the liberal antithesis to Zionism. The marginalization of Cohen’s Jewish writings began already in his own lifetime. His Enlightenment sensibilities clashed with a younger generation’s neo-romanticism, existentialism, and Zionism. Moreover, his impassioned meditations on German-Jewish symbiosis—expressed most boldly in his “*Deutschtum und Judentum*” essays during World War I—struck many readers as tragically naïve, if not outright offensive, following the Shoah. But there has been a resurgence of Cohen among scholars of modern Jewish thought in recent years. This Cohenian “moment” (dare I say) is

evident in works by Robert Erlewine, Dana Hollander, Daniel Weiss, George Kohler, and Eveline Goodman-Thau, among others. Tellingly, the Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought just released a volume on Cohen, making him one of only three figures in the series thus far to merit an entire volume. (The other two are Spinoza and Mendelssohn.) What is happening here?

Paul Nahme's *Hermann Cohen and the Crisis of Liberalism*, released exactly a century after Cohen's *Religion of Reason*, is a most illuminating testament to why the world may be—or should be—ready to return to that much maligned neo-Kantian. While the book brims with rigorous historical analysis, Nahme also presents a “constructive vision” for our own time out of the sources of Cohen (31). Contemporary eruptions of ethno-nationalism and anti-intellectualism are, Nahme suggests, reminiscent of Wilhelmine Germany, and those who've previously scoffed at Cohen's interventions ought to listen carefully today. Cohen discerned in modernity the dynamics of what Nahme terms a “dialectic of enchantment,” wherein calls for secularist, humanist neutrality in the public sphere prove to disenchant society and, in fact, desiccate the enchanted spiritual roots of liberalism itself, thereby arousing far more invidious attempts at enchantment. Drawing, of course, on Weber's famous lecture about the modern disenchantment of the world, Nahme warns that the resultant desert provokes a “lure of re-enchantment,” where citizens turn to illiberal elements such as blood, soil, and *völkisch* morality in order to fill the void. Nahme demonstrates Cohen's attunement to this precarious dialectic, documenting his efforts to reenchant liberalism itself as a project in service of “a national identity built on an idea rather than a tribe” (9). And yet, Nahme makes clear that Cohen was hardly naïve or optimistic about liberalism; he was, in fact, an exceptionally vigilant and incisive critic. Cohen trembled at fin-de-siècle turns toward inner “experience” and *Volkstum* because he foresaw danger there, and yet he feared that purportedly sober messages of secularism would only aggravate the provocations of disenchantment. If Cohen's reflections on a German-Jewish symbiosis were idealistic, then it was only in a philosophical sense—derived not from the material conditions of

what *is*, here and now, but from what *ought to be* and *could be*. According to Nahme, Cohen envisioned an enchanted liberalism that succumbs to neither Rawlsian political liberalism nor Schmittian political theology. And the stakes could hardly be higher—in his time or in ours.

In his study of Cohen, Nahme addresses some severe critiques of liberalism that remain resonant today. First, he engages with the argument that, while liberalism is purportedly neutral and secular, it derives in fact from a (white, male, European) Protestant discourse that inevitably privileges those who created it and alienates everyone else. To uncover this history, so the critique goes, is to undermine the very foundations of liberalism. However, Nahme investigates Cohen's contention that remembering those Protestant origins actually salvages the crucial core of liberalism. Inasmuch as the Reformation itself waged a "protest" to disentangle philosophy and science from the institutions and dogmas of the Church, it is understandable that the resultant liberalism would cast itself as independent of any spiritual doctrines or transcendent ideas: "Perhaps liberalism was, therefore, destined to be an amnesiac condition" (88). And yet, Nahme shows, Cohen insisted that such forgetting only deepens the crisis of liberal disenchantment. Moreover, recovering this genealogy does not expose liberalism as inherently Christian. On the contrary, Protestantism effectively "minoritized" Christianity—that is, rendered its particularity visible, despite its hegemonic status in Europe. Indeed, "liberalism's Protestant contours provide some respite from majoritarian essentialism" (311). In this respect, then, Protestantism transcends Christianity, despite its emergence therefrom. Whether or not the Protestant Christian majority takes this fact seriously is another question altogether—but here, Nahme suggests, is where the minority vantage point, such as that of a German Jew, proves most valuable.

For Nahme, Cohen was a distinctly Protestant Jew. This does not somehow undermine the authenticity of Cohen's Jewishness (whatever that would mean), but rather underscores how Cohen grounded Judaism in a liberal epistemology. Far from simply dissolving or camouflaging Judaism in a Christian society, Cohen's "Judeo-Protestant" vision sought to embolden Judaism as a distinct tradition in the public sphere, alongside

Christianity, that might contribute to the discourse and development of society at large. If denying the Protestant roots of liberalism fosters a neutralizing *secularism* that forces all religions into a privatized sphere, then acknowledging the Protestant background enables a shift toward *secularity*, wherein different religious communities can engage actively and publicly through their traditions in a maximally democratized and idealized process. In this light, Nahme contends, Cohen approaches Judaism as “a minor expression of Protestant, modern, public religion” (290). This *secularity* imagines an alternative to the insidious secularization-cum-Protestantization of traditions diagnosed by Talal Asad and others.

To be sure, Cohen’s vision of liberalism still demands something of all citizens, including openly religious citizens: they must deal hermeneutically with those elements in their traditions—and selves and communities, for that matter—that threaten the sociopolitical and epistemological conditions initiated by the Reformation, which safeguard civil rights within liberal society. In fact, this constraint points toward a second critique of liberalism that Nahme’s book addresses, namely, that liberal “neutrality” is ultimately spineless and amoral, entertaining an unlimited cacophony of perspectives, no matter how absurd or pernicious, as if uncritical toleration itself were the only supreme value. In our own era, especially, this critique is bound up with a concern that liberalism has devolved into unregulated, free-market capitalism, since there is no moral ideal that might inform economic or social policies with all citizens in mind. For Nahme, such a situation epitomizes disenchanted liberalism, and it threatens to (re)awaken antiliberal, racialized and tribalized modes of morality. But Cohen’s thought poses an alternative, Nahme claims. Indeed, Cohen’s vision of liberalism is one that demands a belief in spirits—that is, a collective affirmation of the transcendence of *ideas*, accessible through reasoning in its most democratized forms. Articulating an idealist revision of Kantian morality, Cohen rejected the notion that a liberal separation of church and state must necessarily imply a separation of law and morality. Rather, through processes of idealization, one contemplates negotiations between ideals and realities in

history—what has been in the past, and how we might in present circumstances pursue greater approximations of the transcendent norm. In the public, secular realm of politics, citizens can determine how best to approximate the ideal in current conditions. From this perspective, Nahme affirms, “Law becomes the ethical *spirit* of the state” and, quoting Cohen, “the state becomes the world of spirits” (235, emphasis in original). For Cohen, this amounts to a re-enchantment of liberal legislation, which may be so rooted in public, democratized reason that one can even dream of “consensus.”

Again, religious communities play crucial roles in this process, albeit within particular hermeneutical boundaries that must be accepted: “idealization provides a religious community with the epistemological means to argue for public goods by reasoning from out of the sources of its religion,” and this public exegesis must involve the “epistemic self-reflexivity” and “justified reasoning and conceptual transparency about norms” (255). These were the hermeneutical metrics for which early Protestants fought, and it follows that they should be extended to all traditions in liberal society. For Nahme, Cohen’s own minor Protestantism was a Jewish modeling of this process. He documents powerfully, for example, how Cohen both elucidated and exemplified this liberal religious orientation in his commentary on the *ger*, the “stranger” who dwells among the Israelite majority. For Cohen, it is precisely the *ger*’s adoption of ethical Noahide laws, as opposed to any national or confessional identity, that secures her rights and citizenship: “Hence, the Noahide can adopt contrarian beliefs, which have no effect on one’s legal status. But the Noahide ought not to undermine the spirit of truthfulness and faithfulness in the project of creating a dynamic justice within culture. Such a perversion of ethical culture is the idolatry from which the Noahide must abstain” (291). This is the covenant of a liberal society that has not forfeited its commitment to enchanted ideas. To be sure, for Cohen, this moral boundary has everything to do with the God-idea of monotheism, but he regards the transgression thereof as ultimately, in Nahme’s words, “a crime against humanity” (291).

Nahme's account of the dialectic of enchantment in this study of Cohen is both convincing and powerful. His investigation of Cohen's insistence that what is needed is a public idealization of liberalism itself—an ongoing excavation of its spiritual genealogy, in service of an asymptotic path to redemption—should stimulate fruitful conversations among contemporary critics of liberalism and secularism, not to mention scholars of religion. Some readers may still doubt whether Cohen's faith in ideas and public reason is sufficiently realistic. And, given the alternative sources of enchantment that Cohen feared and Nahme names, those doubtful readers may be left with despair. I admit that I found myself with such despair at times while reading this book. But I also wonder if there are, perhaps, additional possibilities for enchantment that do not lead inevitably to the collapse of civil rights. Indeed, I hope that Nahme was too quick to accept Cohen's intimation that the "yearning for meaning, experience, and value" in fin-de-siècle Germany was simply part and parcel of "the nationalist *völkisch* movement" (160). The historical correlation between those in the case of Germanic culture was undeniable, but does this necessarily imply causality? Are we to just invert previous conventions and say that Cohen was right and Buber was wrong, or might there be a more complex way to evaluate thirsts for immanence and romantic politics? I wonder what would happen, for example, if Nahme extended the same nuance in this book to pantheism and monism as he did to liberalism and rationalism. In any case, he has gifted us with a brilliant and haunting resuscitation of Cohen that speaks to our present crisis. It is now officially irresponsible to ignore Cohen.