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THEOLOGIANS REVISITED

Albert Schweitzer

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Albert Schweitzer, 1875–1965. Eine Biographie. By Nils Ole Oermann. Pp. 367 incl. 42 plates. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009. €25. 978 3 406 59127 3

On 10 December 2009 in Oslo City Hall, President Obama began his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 by recognising the controversy surrounding the decision to award him this honour so early in his presidency. 'Compared to some of the giants', he stated, 'who have received this prize – Schweitzer and King; Marshall and Mandela – my accomplishments are slight.' Obama's mention of Albert Schweitzer as one of four notable laureates (Schweitzer received the award in 1952, accepting it in person in 1954) is striking because since the heyday of Schweitzer's reputation, running approximately from the 1940s to his death in 1965, knowledge of his life and work has considerably diminished.[1] The book under review makes plain why Schweitzer remains a compelling character worthy of further study.

While there have been a number of publications on facets of Albert Schweitzer's life and thought in the last thirty years,[2] some time has passed since anyone has written a major biography of him (James Brabazon's work, first published in 1975, and with a second edition in 2000, is the last major

[1] This point is emphasised by Jan Ross, 'Das Recht ein Ketzer zu sein: der Unbestechliche Albert Schweitzer und die Theologie', in Wolfgang E. Müller (ed.), *Zwischen Denken und Mystik*, Bodenheim 1997, 9.

[2] See E. Grässer, *Albert Schweitzer als Theologe*, Tübingen 1979; H. Pleitner, *Das Ende der liberalen Hermeneutik am Beispiel Albert Schweitzers*, Tübingen 1989; C. Günzler, *Albert Schweitzer: Einführung in sein Denken*, Munich 2000; and A. Barsam, *Reverence for life: Albert Schweitzer's great contribution to ethical thought*, New York 2008. There are also two series devoted to Schweitzer: *Albert-Schweitzer-Studien* (Bern), and *Beiträge zur Albert Schweitzer Forschung* (Oberhausen).

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contribution in this area).[3] Against such a background, the appearance of Nils Oermann's book is to be welcomed, not least because it is able to take into account a plethora of unpublished material written by Schweitzer, and published over the past decade and a half,[4] including letters, lectures and unfinished academic tomes. Educated as a theologian, philosopher and as an historian of colonial Africa, Oermann is the best qualified individual to have written about the multi-dimensional Schweitzer.

Oermann's biography follows chronological lines. Schweitzer was born in Alsace in 1875, at the time a recently annexed part of the new German state, and a borderland, culturally, between France and Germany. At home Schweitzer's family spoke patois (Elsässisch) but wrote to each other in French, and generally presented themselves to the world as Francophile (at the time of the annexation Schweitzer's two uncles chose to adopt French nationality, both residing in Paris). Schweitzer was neverthless later to assert that he found writing in German easier than writing in French (almost all his extant works are in German). Schweitzer's background was strongly clerical (both his father and his maternal grand-father were Lutheran pastors, as was his uncle after whom he was named and who had died in 1871, before Albert's birth), and theologically liberal, a notable tradition within Alsace and one which in a distinctive way Schweitzer was to represent throughout his life. Oermann is good at picking out events from Albert's early life which show signs of later aspects of his personality, whether it be his desire to stand out from others, his dreaminess, manifested in a highly developed ethical sensitivity, or his controlled passion. Of course, *Aus meiner Kindheit und Jugendzeit*, the work written in 1924, and the endpoint of a number of interviews with Oskar Pfister, the well-known Freudian psycho-analyst and Lutheran pastor, has to be read with a little scepticism – it is, after all, the reflections of a mature and self-conscious man on an early life which he obviously sees as portending later facets of his character, and from which he wishes to draw some general observations.[5]

Oermann's discussion of Schweitzer's time as a student at the University of Strasbourg is illuminating. He is good on the general background, making plain the excellent standing at the time of the recently re-founded university. He describes Schweitzer's many activities, philosophical, theological, musical and, finally medical, at some length. Amongst a number of intriguing

[3] James Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer*, 2nd edn, Syracuse 2000. See also the short, but perceptive, biography by H. Seffahn, *Schweitzer*, Hamburg 1998.

[4] See *Albert Schweitzer: Werke aus dem Nachlass*, ed. R. Brüllmann, E. Grässer, B. Kaempf, U. Körtner, U. Luz and J. Zürcher, Munich 1995–2006, of which ten volumes have so far been published. Also significant is the publication of correspondence between Schweitzer and his wife, almost all from before they were married: *Albert Schweitzer–Helene Bresslau: die Jahre vor Lambarene: Briefe, 1902–1912*, Munich 1992.

[5] Groos observes that this work and Schweitzer's later biography of 1931 are 'Erbauungsbücher': *Albert Schweitzer: Grösse und Grenzen*, Göttingen 1974, 781.

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observations, he notes that Schweitzer was able to achieve what he did because his approach to study was not conventionally encyclopaedic but allied to very specific interests. Such a view is especially applicable to his New Testament work, all of which was bound up with the thesis that central to Jesus, Paul and later Christianity were ideas of eschatology, and to his medical thesis, which, as a result of his own conclusions about the historical Jesus, concerned itself with the psychiatric state of Jesus. And the same could also be said, Oermann maintains, of his approach to Kant (here questions of a specifically religio-philosophical character interested him), and to Bach, where issues relating to the relationship of music, theology and personality principally exercised Schweitzer's mind. Oermann argues that Schweitzer's way of working was not conventionally academic, at least by the standards of the day. So his doctoral thesis on Kant, written in a six-month period in 1899 while he was in Paris and doing a medley of other things at the same time, not the least of which was studying the organ, was based upon an engagement with the primary sources, but hardly referred to any secondary literature. Oermann suggests that Schweitzer's unconventional way of working, his unorthodox theological opinions and his frosty relations with the German theological establishment meant that an academic career in theology was not a viable option for the young *Privatdozent*. Against this background, it is unsurprising that when he asked the university authorities to treat his time in the Gabon as sabbatical leave, a precaution if he were forced to return early to Europe because of ill health, the authorities refused, probably, Oermann argues, on the recommendation of the theology professors. Schweitzer's decision to go to the Gabon, then, did not involve the relinquishing of a brilliant career in German academia, for no such career was a possibility; and Schweitzer experienced the beginning of his studies of medicine as a moment of freedom from his previous life.

In discussing his thought, Oermann is clear that in his work on Kant, as with so much of his work, Schweitzer puts to Kant the questions which interest him rather than reading Kant on his own terms. Oermann gives some space to Schweitzer's engagement with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. While Schweitzer's belief that the will-to-live, the most essential instinct of human beings in his opinion, naturally manifests itself in a reverence for life, is the opposite of what Nietzsche argued about the natural relationship between the will-to-live and the will-to power, both agreed

> that the nature of man and his will-to-live should not be suppressed, but through thought they should be developed … The aim of Schweitzer's ethic was in the end concerned with the realisation of the nature of man as an individual, and not as part of an amorphous mass, the realisation of the true being of man and its tempering through human reason which led him back to Kant (p.162).

Agreement on the need to relate morality and personality, but disagreement on what that might result in had the consequence that, indirectly at least,

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Nietzsche was someone Schweitzer had to contend with more than almost any other significant thinker.

Oermann also draws attention to Schweitzer's indebtedness to Goethe. The appeal of the latter lay in part in his embodiment of certain Enlightenment values, not least the coming together in one person of thought and deed (Goethe's statement that 'Am Anfang war die Tat' was a particular favourite of Schweitzer's), but also in Goethe's strong sense both of the importance of natural philosophy, and also of nature's mysterious character. This stood in sharp contrast to the world of German idealism, represented in particular by Kant, and served to give a significant orientation to Schweitzer's thought, even possibly providing him with the stimulus for the creation of the idea of 'reverence for life'.

In discussing Schweitzer's central idea of reverence for life, Oermann is clear that the former's conviction that from the consciousness of one's own status as a will-to-live emerges an identification with all other wills-to-live, and by extension, through reflection, a reverence for all life, is not, as Schweitzer would have it, a necessity of thought; and here he repeats a general judgement passed on Schweitzer's ethical thinking. As Oermann comments, 'Many people, perhaps the majority, attribute to their own life the highest value without arriving at the conclusion that other lives must be of the highest worth' (p. 170).

Oermann portrays Schweitzer as primarily seeing himself as a philosopher, even if one who was never taken seriously by professional philosophers. Schweitzer's theological convictions are, however, given some importance, especially as they relate to the figures of Jesus and Paul. Conventionally, Oermann presents Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for life not as 'religious talk in the Christological sense but rather a secular and universalisable equivalent of Jesus' ethic of love, which, independent of the historical circumstances of his time could be a universal example of ethical existence' (p. 170). Theological and philosophical talk go on independently of each other, even though Oermann at one point hints at the possibility at least that Schweitzer attempts to overcome his apparent failure to show that reverence for life is a necessity of thought by appealing to the will to love of God, exemplified in Christ, but universally available.

In Oermann's discussion of Schweitzer's interest in music, we are guided through the practical and more theoretical side of his endeavours. In relation to the latter, Oermann argues strongly for the view that Schweitzer's study of Bach, which should in no way be considered a secondary undertaking in relation to his other labours (its writing occupied a large part of the year 1903–4), was much less taken up with biographical and scholarly details but rather with the tone and spirit of Bach's work which made him a phenomenon transcending the very particular and circumscribed character of his historical setting. Bach is a religious figure, and his works should be studied from the perspective of spiritual and moral experience.

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Oermann is clear that a view of Schweitzer's life as proceeding along a well-constructed course, as Schweitzer implies, is questionable.[6] So it is not clear that Schweitzer never wavered from his decision, which he dates to 1896, to devote his first thirty years to scholarship and music, and the rest to some form of service to neighbour. A letter, dated 20 May 1905, and addressed to Helene Bresslau, who was to become his wife, implies that after 1896 he had thought that he might spend his life being a pastor and theological educator. Indeed his decision to become a medical missionary in the Gabon was reached more haphazardly. When he offered his services to the Paris Missionary Society in 1905, he did not intimate that he wished to go to Africa as a doctor, but rather as a missionary. The decision to go as a doctor was arrived at later in the same year. Similarly, his life might have taken a very different course in 1919, when in considerable debt, in bad odour with the French authorities in Strasbourg (it seems that Schweitzer was spied on by the French police and thought to be a crypto-German, though this point is not mentioned by Oermann) and searching for a purpose in his life, he appeared in his own words to be like a penny which had rolled under the table. His circumstances were only changed through the extension of an invitation to lecture in Sweden by Bishop Nathan Söderblom.

In his account of Schweitzer's life in Africa, Oermann does not linger over the setting into which Schweitzer and his wife entered. Comments are passed on the appalling nature of the climate, and on the complex political setting of Lambarene, situated as it was on the borders between between the Fang and the Galoa tribes. Otherwise Oermann distils in clear prose the essence of the history of Schweitzer's association with Lambarene, noting the various moves of the hospital to its present location, and the kind of work that Schweitzer carried out there, including the setting up of a hospital dedicated to the treatment of leprosy. Much of this is summary of Schweitzer's own words, transmitted in bulletins to donors and interested parties, and subsequently put together in a number of books. With regard to these, Oermann suggests that the success of these writings, which sold in considerable numbers from the time of their publication in the 1920s and beyond, helped to distract attention from Schweitzer's other intellectual and aesthetic achievements. Oermann argues that Schweitzer's attitude to colonialism changed as he began to become acquainted with its realities. Where previously he had expressed unreserved hostility to the phenomenon, later he became a critical, if reluctant, supporter, expressing the view that the colonial powers, because of their superior level of cultural development, had a duty to improve the lives of those whose lands they had occupied. It was precisely

[6] Oermann omits to mention either in his bibliography or in his footnotes the important contribution to this discussion of Schweitzer's own nephew, Gustave Woytt: 'Albert Schweitzer und die Pariser Mission', in R. Brüllmann (ed.), *Albert-Schweitzer-Studien*, Berne 1989, 114–221.

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their failure to do this to any significant degree that led Schweitzer to oppose the rise of African nationalism, and the concomitant moves towards African independence. Secondly, and following on from this point, Oermann notes a paradox in Schweitzer's attitude to Africa and the colonial powers. How, he asks, could Schweitzer hold to the negative view that he began to develop early in his life towards western civilisation, especially in his unpublished work, *Wir Epigonen*, and his subsequent, and less rebarbatively stated, *Kultur und Ethik*, and still think that such a damaged civilisation could transform the African colonies? And how, in spite of being in Africa when he was writing *Wir Epigonen*, could he attribute no significant role to that continent in the revival of culture more generally? Oermann's answer, that Schweitzer was too preoccupied with the Enlightenment, and hence his occidental heritage and its capacity to transform, is a convincing suggestion. Oermann also goes on to discuss the criticisms levelled at Schweitzer's attitude and behaviour towards Africans. Oermann contests the thesis that Schweitzer's view of Africans was purely instrumental, noting in particular the close bonds of friendship that he formed with some of his Gabonese workers; and he emphasises that, exceptionally, Schweitzer never endorsed the beating of Africans. Schweitzer's attitudes, Oermann argues, fell between the two extremes of strong criticism of colonial activity on the one hand, and a strongly patriarchal attitude on the other. Oermann is clear, however, that, though he lived in Africa for the majority of the latter part of his life, Schweitzer never really became African, a point neatly illustrated by the flower that Schweitzer asked to be placed on his grave, a date palm, which could not grow in Lambarene. As Schweitzer himself commented: 'I will lie with it; it is a stranger in this land as I am also.'

Oermann discusses the rise of the cult of Schweitzer. This reached its peak in the period following World War Two, and Oermann analyses the phenomenon as it arose in the US and Europe. The status of Schweitzer was greatest in post-war Germany, with numbers of schools and institutions named after him, with his reputation highest amongst the young. For Germans, desperately in search of a unifying moral hero after the tragedy of the war, Schweitzer, who had written principally in German, and who appeared the best product of German *Bildung*, seemed precisely that person, even though, since 1920, owing to the change in the national status of Alsace, Schweitzer was a French citizen.[7]

A major contribution of Oermann's biography lies in the way in which he seeks to present Schweitzer as a canny, political operative. Schweitzer describes in his *Aus meiner Kindheit und Jugendzeit* how he used to read the newspapers avidly when he was a teenager and was enthusiastically

[7] This point was made by the president of West Germany, Theodor Heuss, on the occasion of the presentation of the 'Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels' in 1951.

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interested in the politics of the day. A sense of this emerges in an exchange between Schweitzer and Helene Bresslau over the so-called Moroccan crisis between Germany and France in 1910, with Schweitzer full of informed criticism of German foreign policy. It is also clear that for Schweitzer to travel to the Gabon as a German citizen, and this in the face of stiff opposition from a number of the more nationalist members of the Paris Missionary Society Board, he had had to use contacts that he had with senior French politicians. Later in his life, when his reputation had grown, he sought in a variety of ways, particularly in relation to the issue of nuclear armament and testing, to influence political opinion, not least through writing a welter of letters to heads of states and others.

The nuclear issue, because it concerned to an unparalleled extent matters of life and death, could not be avoided especially as Schweitzer was pressed by a number of highly influential figures, including Albert Einstein and Linus Pauling, to join the international protest movement. But in general Schweitzer remained silent on political issues, not least because he thought that involvement in potential controversy would distract attention from his ethical message. On occasion Schweitzer's failure to speak out appears regrettable. So, for instance, though deeply affected by the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism, and though called upon by a number of people, including Max Born, to speak out against the regime, and having a Jewish wife, admittedly converted to Christianity, he remained publicly silent.[8] Similarly, Schweitzer failed to issue a condemnatory statement when the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961. In fact Schweitzer's relationship with East Germany was generally good, a point Oermann illustrates, for the first time, and with meticulous detail, showing in the process how Schweitzer displayed a strange level of ineptitude in dealing with the leadership of the DDR, who, for clearly political reasons which Schweitzer chose to ignore, actively sought his support, presenting him with gifts for his hospital and depicting him on stamps.

Oermann raises important questions about Schweitzer's personality. He is clear that he was a passionate man capable of momentous acts of self-control. His decision in 1899 to give up smoking, even though he loved the habit, is a minor example of the latter; and one senses that throughout his life Schweitzer sought to restrain himself in the face of the frustration he often felt with the world around him. A partial manifestation of this restraint lay in Schweitzer's strong conviction that criticism should not be responded to, whether this concerned critical reviews of his books, or his activities in Lambarene, which became harsh towards the end of his life. Such silence could be construed as arrogant. Interestingly, Oermann suggests that

[8] Schweitzer's decision to write the preface to Rolf Hochhuth's *Stellvertreter* of 1963, in which Pius XII's actions in the war are criticised, a fact unmentioned by Oermann, possibly betokens a certain sense of guilt.

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Schweitzer could be personally vain, an observation supported by depictions of himself in photographs, taken in his student days and beyond, where he is finely dressed in bow tie and well-tailored suit, and looks heavily posed; and by the fact of his willingness to be the subject of paintings and sculptures throughout his life.

In his conclusion, Oermann addresses the question of Schweitzer's lasting significance. Noting that for Schweitzer the most important thing was the dissemination of his idea of reverence for life, he writes: 'With reverence for life, he (Schweitzer) wanted to inspire people to change their thinking and to reflect in ethical vein more assiduously upon their behaviour. To have given a face to this inspiration and a place to this enthusiasm, is precisely what makes Albert Schweitzer one of the great personalities of the twentieth century' (p. 312). Schweitzer's greatness is, then, mainly bound up with the fact that he sought to give concrete expression to the ideals by which he lived.

Oermann has written an outstanding biography. He has read widely in the primary and secondary literature, and makes intelligent use of Schweitzer's published 'Nachlass', as well as some unpublished, material, to draw out a richer and more arresting portrait of Schweitzer than has hitherto been the case. In raising some points of interpretation and emphasis this review will concentrate on matters pertinent to this JOURNAL.

One of Oermann's most intriguing claims is that Schweitzer could not have had a career in academia, such were the eccentricity of his views, the manner in which he went about expressing them, the scant regard he showed for the Academy, his tendency to aggravate professorial opinion and his lack of supporters.[9] While this is hypothetical, it raises a number of important issues. First, there is little doubt that Schweitzer was not interested in conforming to the conventional canons of academic study as they had developed in Germany in the nineteenth century. His work on the New Testament, for instance, is not closely textual or philological, and shows little interest in adopting the agreed methodologies of the subject. Secondly, Schweitzer is never interested in the discrete problem when it appears to have no relevance to wider and more significant questions. In this respect it is notable that he never published an academic article in one of the major theological or philosophical journals, a point Oermann never makes. His books, in broad terms, seek to answer big questions whether these pertain to the historical process by which Christianity moved from the eschatologically-oriented Jesus through Paul, who adapts early Christian eschatological thinking, to the Hellenised Ignatius, Justin and others, or whether they relate to the central issues of philosophical ethics. Thirdly, Schweitzer perceived his works as having a significance well beyond the narrow confines of the

[9] See W. Picht *The life and thought of Albert Schweitzer*, New York 1960, 47: 'Schweitzer's is not in fact a professorial nature, and, therefore, looking back, we cannot say that Lambarene cost him a university career.'

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disciplines of which they were a part. He had a developed sense of the relationship of the Academy to the world beyond it, of the capacity for study to touch upon issues of wider import. Knowledge for its own sake was problematic.[10] This becomes clear when one reads the concluding sections of his *Die Leben-Jesu-Forschung* or *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, but especially when one examines his philosophical work where his desire to make things accessible beyond the Academy, what he referred to as the capacity 'elementar zu denken', to think in an elementary or basic way, was given clearest expression. For him philosophy was at its most effective when, taking up a Kantian distinction, it presented itself as a 'Weltbegriff' rather than a 'Schulbegriff', and became accessible to the average person ('jedermann' as he was to put it). Some of these sentiments were easily traceable to impulses within the liberal-theological tradition from which he hailed, but Schweitzer was committed to them to an exceptional degree. If, like Schweitzer, one felt that the explanation for the malaise in which society found itself lay ultimately in the failure of philosophy effectively to address the central question of ethics, then philosophy could never be the preserve of the academic cloister. When one adds into the mix that Schweitzer's disposition was ill-suited to the sedentary life of an academic, that such a job of work hardly catered to his developing conviction that he needed to lead a different type of life,[11] then it becomes plain that Schweitzer was not temperamentally inclined to an academic career; and there is little doubt that from around 1903, as Oermann indicates, he had decided that such a career was not for him.

But this is not the same as saying that he could not have had such a career, that in some sense his opinions, approach and apparently bad relations with the academic authorities would have prevented him from becoming a professor. In this context at least three points should be noted: first, though reviews of his work in Germany had been highly critical, most of Schweitzer's critics, even the most severe, had noted the brilliance of the manner in which Schweitzer had argued his case, and felt moved for that reason to write at some length about his claims. Such recognition of ability may have helped him in pursuit of a career. Secondly, there is a sense in which in some of what Schweitzer said he was beginning to catch a certain mood in the theological atmosphere of the time. So, for instance, his gradual move away from history as the locus in which to locate the central truths of the Christian faith, and his embrace of a Jesus who moves beyond history, was to become modish in

[10] In a sermon dated 2 July 1911, Schweitzer observes that lectures have become 'reine Mitteilung von Wissenschaft', and no longer committed to the communication of 'menschliche Ideale': *Strassburger Predigten*, Munich 2001, 1133.

[11] In a letter dated 26 November 1903 Schweitzer notes that people seem only to be concerned that he be more diligent about attending to his academic career, to which he simply responds: 'Ich will leben': *Albert Schweitzer–Helene Bresslau*, 51.

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different ways to theologians like Bultmann and Barth,[12] a point which the former acknowledged in a review of the second edition of Schweitzer's *Leben-Jesus-Forschung* which appeared in *Die christliche Welt*. (xxviii[1914], 643–4). When one adds to this observation the compelling nature of Schweitzer's ambitious reconstruction of Christian origins, and his clear capacity, demonstrated later in life, as Oermann shows, to play the political game, then one may have a cogent response to his argument. Whether such a position would have been in New Testament studies, or something more expansive, is an interesting question. Later in life Schweitzer was to be offered positions in theology in a number of universities, one of which, from the University of Leipzig and offered to Schweitzer in 1930, was in the New Testament.

In discussing the evolution of Schweitzer's thought, Oermann rightly emphasises the influence of Nietzsche. His interaction with the Nietzsche was one marked both by praise and by censure – praise for Nietzsche's deep-seated criticism of mass society and its capacity thoughtlessly to absorb received wisdom, praise for his affirmation of life, and for his conviction that any ethical vision, however conceived, had to reflect a proper understanding of individual human self-fulfilment; and this led him on occasion to give expression to his own ethical vision in vocabulary with a Nietzschean resonance.[13] Censure, however, for Nietzsche's view that self-fulfilment was best expressed in a will-to-power rather than a reverence for life. Writing in 1963, and reflecting on the origins of his idea of 'reverence for life', Schweitzer argued strongly for the view that, in forging his case, his principal opponent was Nietzsche,[14] a point which, paradoxically, indicated Schweitzer's proximity to the latter. Interestingly, in his later, unpublished philosophical works, Schweitzer was to be harsher in his criticism of Nietzsche, here perhaps influenced by the setting (the 1930s and '40s), though never allowing this to dispel his regard for the philospher, and his sense of disgust at misuse of Nietzsche's thought.

[12] In his letter, dated 7 Mar. 1929, recommending Schweitzer for honorary membership of the Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Adolf von Harnack wrote that 'Durch diese Untersuchungen und Darstellungen [his New Testament books] hat er nicht nur einen Schulstrich unter die bisherige Forschung mit Kraft und richtig gezogen, *sondern auch, wie allgemein anerkannt ist, den entscheidenden Fingerzeig für zukünftige Forschung gegeben*' (my italics): Albert Schweitzer, *Theologischer und philosophischer Briefwechsel, 1900–1965*, ed. W. Zager with E. Grässer, Munich 2006, 293. Admittedly, these words were written some time after the beginning of Schweitzer's academic career, and when he had become a much better known character.

[13] Note words found in a sermon dated 3 December 1905 here talking about what it is to follow Christ: 'Es ist ein Wollen, eine Kraft, ein Stolz, durch das wir grösser und stärker und freudiger werden': *Strassburger Predigten*, 656.

[14] See A. Schweitzer to W. Bremi, 8 Aug. 1963: 'Schon als Student habe ich meinen Weg darin gesehen, im Gegensatz zu Nietzsche eine ethische Kulturgesinnung zu schaffen': *Briefwechsel*, 124.

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Oermann might have expanded upon other influences upon Schweitzer. Although he mentions Georg Simmel, whose lectures Schweitzer attended when he was in Berlin in 1899,[15] Oermann does not show in what ways Simmel might have influenced Schweitzer, by highlighting the latter's ideas about self-transcendence, but also his polemical condemnation of the life of the individual in the city, published in 1903 as *The metropolis of modern life*.

Also of importance, though not an individual of recognised distinction, was Schweitzer's philosophy teacher Theobald Ziegler. Ziegler, who had begun his career as a school teacher, but been promoted to a chair in philosophy in the newly-formed University of Strasbourg in 1888, wrote voluminously on a number of subjects, including ethics, Nietzsche, contemporary tendencies in philosophy, David Friedrich Strauss and Goethe, and much of his writing was for a more general audience. Both the subject matter, even if not necessarily its presentation, and the clear belief, expressed in typically liberal terms of making one's thoughts accessible to a wider audience, resonate in Schweitzer's *oeuvres*, and it is not surprising that Schweitzer was asked to give the speech on the occasion of Ziegler's retirement, the text of which, unfortunately, appears to have been lost.

Oermann could also have made more of the role of Schopenhauer in Schweitzer's evolving thought. The latter is mentioned but not at sufficient length. This appears an oversight,[16] not least because it is likely that Schopenhauer influenced Schweitzer both in his vision of the world as a place of wills-to-live, in conflict with each other, in his strong sense of the interconnectedness of all being, the monistic side of Schweitzer's thinking, and possibly also in his strong interest in Indian religions, a subject hardly discussed by Oermann. Moreover, and taking these observations further, it could be argued that while Kant provided Schweitzer with the basic presupposition that all ethical thought had to proceed from a principle which stood to reason, Schopenhauer, in tension with this, showed the need to root ethics in the empirical, in the world as it was[17] (in this context Oermann's comments on Schweitzer's use of Goethe are relevant). Of course, as with Nietzsche, Schweitzer ended up hostile to Schopenhauer's final vision, principally on account of what he took to be its central conviction, that appropriate reaction to the world lay at best in a type of passive sympathy, and resignation, at worst in life denial. But Schweitzer has taken on board many of Schopenhauer's assumptions and sought to transform them through

[15] Schweitzer's stay in Berlin in 1899 to which Oermann refers was probably a very significant time for him. Sadly, the letters that he wrote about his time there were burned by one of his sisters.

[16] On this see Günzler, *Einführung*, and Barsam, *Reverence*, 6–10.

[17] See Günzler, *Einführing*, 59–60.

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an optimistic ethical vision, in which some of the vocabulary of Schopenhauer is adopted while its meaning is transformed.[18]

Kant, Nietzsche and, to a lesser extent, Schopenhauer, were philosophers who in various ways interested intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond, and in this, at least superficially, Schweitzer appeared to reflect his times. Oermann makes this point, but could have attended to questions of intellectual, social and political context in the earlier part of Schweitzer's life more than he does, not least because these questions become more interesting once we recall that from 1913 onwards Schweitzer spent much of his time away in Africa. Of particular interest here is Schweitzer's concern with *Kultur*, that elusive German concept which, especially after the First World War, but also before, had, for a variety of reasons, become very important.[19] While Schweitzer's *Kultur*-critical work partially reflected a well-honed critique of the industrial society of Germany which had grown up in the Wilhelmine period (in this context note in particular his attack upon the effects of mass society, democracy and so forth which were much more strongly expressed in the unpublished *Wir Epigonen* than in the first part of *Kultur und Ethik*),[20] it is altogether less reflective of the intellectual climate of the time when it begins to engage in its account of how to correct society's ill. So, for instance, Schweitzer's strong insistence on the importance of reason in the formation of a new society, his related critical, yet fundamentally positive, advocacy of Enlightenment values, and his exclusively ethical understanding of the term 'Kultur', eschewing any sense of its aesthetic value, as well as his belief in the possibilities of progress, all appeared fundamentally out of kilter with the prevailing assumptions of many thinkers in Weimar Germany. For these, Enlightenment values, perceived as rationality, had led to the mechanised madness which was the First World War, and few put any hope in the power of reason (often they positively attacked it), or believed in progress. The popularity of Oswald Spengler's *The decline of the west*, mentioned by Oermann, with its view of the inevitability of cultural decline, seemed best to reflect the times; and numerous thinkers, Thomas Mann, Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin and Spengler himself sought to attack the Enlightenment heritage.[21] Schweitzer was aware of this, and began his Gifford lectures of 1935 by referring to the unpopularity of reason

[18] Note in particular the contrasting uses of the word 'resignation'. For Schweitzer, resignation is the ethical act in which 'one affirms one's moral and spiritual self in spite of those elements that conflict with it', while for Schopenhauer, it is precisely an emancipation from the world and all its misery which leads to submission to fate, that is, the inevitability of suffering: Barsam, *Reverence*, 19–20.

[19] See Günzler, *Einführung*, 27f.

[20] Oermann makes this point effectively when discussing Schweitzer's *Wir Epigonen*.

[21] See H. Kiesel, 'Aufklärung und neuer Irrationalismus in der Weimarer Republik', in J. Schmidt (ed.), *Aufklärung und Gegenaufklärung in der europäischen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Darmstadt 1989, 497–521, and Günzler, *Einführung*, 28–9.

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at the time.[22] It is unsurprising that in such a climate he encountered difficulties in finding a publisher for his *Kultur und Ethik*. Similarly, Schweitzer's own theological views, though reflecting elements of the *Zeitgeist*, began to look somewhat alien to the prevailing Barthian spirit as this began to develop into the 1920s, a point of which Schweitzer again appears to be aware in the preface to his *Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, and elsewhere.[23]

The broad optimism of Schweitzer's philosophical position, which stood out against the prevailing cultural atmosphere of the time, emerged out of conflicting tendencies in his thought. On the one hand, Schweitzer was clear that the primary philosophical task was the establishment of a 'Weltanschauung', a world view which would enable any individual to give particular moral orientation to his life. On the other hand, Schweitzer was clear that the world as it was did not sit easily with a single explanation, such was the odd mixture within it of wonder and cruelty. His quest for a 'Weltanschauung' appeared to founder upon the rocks of nature's facts. Schweitzer's turn to the inner person ('Lebensanschauung'), not only emerged out of intellectual necessity, but also a strongly held conviction that the will-to-live as it manifested itself in humans was inclined, when it came to reflect upon itself and its relation to other wills-to-live, to a reverence for life, manifested as a form of natural self-denial. Here then again conflict and disharmony loom large as Schweitzer gives voice to the view that there is a disparity between the way we experience the will-to-live outside of ourselves, and the way we experience it within ourselves, which finds a parallel in Jewish and Christian ideas of dualism. That resolution is arrived at by what Schweitzer termed an 'ethical mysticism', a sense that ethical action conducted in the world overcomes our inability to understand the world and allows us to unite with what he would sometimes term a universal will-to-live and other times, God,[24] seemed to some an unjustified expedient,[25]

[22] See Schweitzer to Eduard Spranger, 12 June 1962, where Schweitzer makes the same point: *Briefwechsel*, 718.

[23] See especially the comments in his preface at p. ix where he notes that his methods remain old-fashioned in that he is setting forth Paul's ideas in their historical context, here clearly alluding to Barth's *Römerbrief*. Note also places where Schweitzer asserts that Barth's theology reflected the *Zeitgeist*: 'Karl Barth ist der moderne Theologe, weil er am meisten im Geiste unserer Zeit lebt und mehr als irgend ein anderer jene Verachtung für das Denken hat, die charackteristisch für unsere Zeit': appendix to his Hibbert Lecture of October 1934, in *Albert Schweitzer: Kultur und Ethik in den Weltreligionen*, Munich 2001, 416. Schweitzer comments elsewhere on the dissonance of Barth's theology.

[24] Thus he comments that 'The experience of God within myself differs from the knowledge concerning him which I derive from the world. In the world he appears to me as the mysterious, marvellous, creative force; within me he reveals himself as ethical will': *Christianity and the religions of the world*, New York 1923, 76.

[25] See O. Kraus, *Albert Schweitzer: his work and philosophy*, London 1944.

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and Schweitzer did not desist from attempting to resolve the conflict by trying to create a world view from his life view, but never with any success.[26]

Similar conflict is evident in Schweitzer's discussion of reverence for life as a principle to be applied to daily life. In this context he refuses to permit any kind of graded view of the value of individual manifestations of life, and so the possibility for reasoned ethical decisions. In this context it is important to note that reverence for life was an attitude of mind, according to Schweitzer, and not a set of principles. Yes, he accepted that out of necessity humans were forced to act in a way that was contrary to reverence for life, that is, to kill, but such actions should never be conceived of as ethical. In such a matter Schweitzer 'is keeping present to our minds the recognition that if we relax the tension between ethics and necessity, which we are meant to feel every time we are forced to destroy life, we blunt ourselves'.[27]

Schweitzer's philosophical thought, then, is riven with tensions, from which emerges what one scholar has called an ethic of conflicts. A commitment to a type of natural philosophy ends up with the view that man is somehow distinct from nature, but that his redemption emerges precisely from his capacity to act upon nature. Difference, intriguingly, does not lead to disengagement from the world but precisely to engagement in spite of the apparent difficulty of straightforwardly being able to grasp the world's purpose. It is not difficult to see how such a conflicted, yet ultimately optimistic vision, of things came to influence Paul Tillich who never, at least in print, acknowledged his debt to Schweitzer.[28]

Oermann holds philosophy to be Schweitzer's primary intellectual concern. Theology, by contrast, or put another way, Schweitzer's identity as a theologian, appears secondary, though Oermann is clear about the importance for Schweitzer of the figure of Jesus, arguing, as many have done before, that Schweitzer's account of reverence for life was the philosophical expression of his understanding of Jesus' idea of love. In this discussion, however, he fails to bring out as much as he could have, the complex role that theology played in Schweitzer's life.

Schweitzer's identity as a theologian has been contested. At one end of the spectrum a variety of authors, from different perspectives, have held him to be almost atheistic, with an affiliation to Christianity which appears as nothing more than an inherited aspect of his character, to which he at best gives a deferential nod as one would to something in which one no longer believes, but which one cannot quite give up.[29] A number of writers,

[26] Note in particular the two volumes of *Nachlass*: *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*, Munich 2000.

[27] H. Clark, *The ethical mysticism of Albert Schweitzer*, Boston 1962, 103–4.

[28] On this see Barsam, *Reverence*, 120–30.

[29] The clearest exposition of this view is Groos, *Albert Schweitzer*, 492–3.

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however, have wanted, in a variety of ways, to uncover a deeply held, but rarely expressed, theological core to his thought, especially as this relates to his Christology.[30]

It is true that Schweitzer does not appear conventionally theological, and on many occasions he expressed his own difficulties with theology as a discipline.[31] Related to this was his own strong conviction, inherited from the Enlightenment, that philosophy and religion were inextricably bound together. Both sought in different ways to engage with the central questions of ethics,[32] and Schweitzer perceived religions as a potential cornucopia of insights into central ethical questions, which in part explains why he devoted so much study, not only to the discussion of Christianity, but also to other religions, particularly those of India and China, discussions which Oermann tends broadly to overlook, and in which Schweitzer favours Christianity.[33] Also significant is the fact that Schweitzer was not, for instance, interested in producing a systematic theology, and tended in the main to express himself somewhat agnostic on the central Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement and the resurrection, an agnosticism which some perceive as a straightforward scepticism. In this context we should note that Erich Grässer's book, *Albert Schweitzer als Theologe*, is almost exclusively given over to an investigation of Schweitzer's work as an interpreter of the New Testament, for which in many ways he is best known, rather than to an attempt systematically to work out what Schweitzer's theology might have looked like, theology understood as a body of doctrines in need of interpretation.

But these arguments need some qualification. First, Schweitzer took seriously his identity as a Protestant, and it is difficult to read his published sermons, for instance, without gaining a strong sense of this.[34] Schweitzer's commitment to the Church is seen in his lifelong output of sermons, which contain much that is central to his thought. Secondly, Schweitzer identified himself as a liberal Protestant, a point Oermann makes, and did so more explicitly as time went on; and it is clear that he fits into that tradition, not

[30] See especially Clark, *Ethical mysticism*, and, picking up on many of his observations, Barsam, *Reverence*.

[31] See Schweitzer to Werner Jaeger, 28 May 1946: 'Mir ist die reine Theologie etwas Unbegreifliches gewesen': *Briefwechsel*, 403.

[32] 'Religion und Philosophie sind also nur zwei verschiedene Arten des mit Weltanschauungen beschäftigten Denkens. Die tiefe religiöse Weltanschauung lässt sich auf einen philosophischen Ausdruck bringen, und die tiefe Philosophie nimmt religiösen Charakter an': Schweitzer, *Weltreligionen*, 20.

[33] See idem, *Christianity*, esp. p. 83, where Christianity is described as 'the most profound religion'.

[34] See Schweitzer sermon, 10 Nov. 1901, and his description of Protestantism as 'das Licht der Welt': *Strassburger Predigten*, 340. Many similar sentiments can be found.

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least when one understands its breadth.[35] He was certainly critical of aspects of that tradition, as evidenced in his attack upon the liberal lives of Jesus, and upon the conviction that the historical Jesus would provide Christianity with a legitimate tool with which to reconstitute modern theology, and in his polemic against what he understood as some liberals' creation of a Christian ethic which seemed too easily to endorse the societal *status quo* (Schweitzer's Jesus and his ethical disposition are distinguished precisely by their 'Fremdheit', their difference from the world and its values).[36] But in his critical attitude to the Christian tradition,[37] his conviction that reason and religion were as handmaidens, in many of his hermeneutical assumptions,[38] in his commitment to 'Wahrhaftigkeit' or truthfulness, whatever the consequences, and in his strong emphasis upon ethics as the core ideal of Christianity, he reflected that tradition. From the 1940s onwards he was called upon frequently to address the conferences of various liberal-theological organisations,[39] and he became a rallying point for some liberal theologians, especially in Switzerland, as they sought to curb the ever-increasing influence of Barth whose theology Schweitzer termed a 'Verdrehungskunst'.[40] Thirdly, we should note the fact that Schweitzer continued to engage in work with a strongly Christian emphasis late into his life. In this context one could highlight his decision to complete *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, in 1930, and to do so with a strongly sermonic final chapter; and the fact that towards the end of his life he was working on a new book on the kingdom of God, published posthumously with the title *Reich Gottes und Christentum*.[41] This is significant because Schweitzer might at that point have returned to his philosophical work, which he had ceased to engage with in 1945, but which he was being urged by some to recommence. That he chose instead to turn to the exposition of a central Christian concept, eschatology, is striking, though not surprising, for eschatology because of its dualistic character, its mix of pessimism and optimism, and its capacity to inspire an ethically-oriented hope, could be taken as the theological expression of Schweitzer's main philosophical concerns. Fourthly, the intense emotional attachment that Schweitzer had for the figure of Jesus must be taken

[35] A. Rössler, 'Albert Schweitzer und das freie Christentum', in W. E. Müller (ed.), *Zwischen Denken und Mystik: Albert Schweitzers Theologie heute*, Bodenheim 1990, 241f.

[36] See especially A. Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus*, London 2000.

[37] Schweitzer did not straightforwardly disparage Christian tradition, regarding it as preserving through the ages elements of religious truth which became apparent when critical thought was applied to it. For this see his *Ansprache auf der Tagung der Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft*, 1929–32, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. R. Grabs, Munich–Berlin–Zurich, 1974, v. 377.

[38] See Pleitner, *Hermeneutik*.

[39] These are highlighted by Rössler, 'Albert Schweitzer', 235f.

[40] The relationships with Martin Werner and Fritz Buri are important in this regard.

[41] A. Schweitzer, *Reich Gottes und Christentum*, Munich 1995.

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seriously.[42] The language used is sometimes pietistic in tone, and implies something more palpable than the idea of Jesus as moral example. True, Schweitzer denies to Jesus any sense of faultlessness, seeks to play down the issue of Christ's divinity and urges the adoption of something he calls 'Jesusmystik' rather than 'Jesuskultus'.[43] But precisely in his talk of the former, in his mention of Jesus' spirit, or our need to join our will to Jesus', he seems to assume some ongoing relationship which implies a Christology, however inchoately and unsystematically expressed.[44]

We have already had reason to note that Schweitzer regarded theology and philosophy as inextricably connected; and that there is a tendency in scholarship, reflected partially in Oermann's work, to see 'reverence for life' as the secular expression of Schweitzer's own understanding of Jesus' ethic, a view partly encouraged by the way in which Schweitzer occasionally expressed himself on the subject. But is this view of Schweitzer's philosophical and theological enterprise as running in parallel really convincing? Is it not possible that the philosophical endeavour conceals a deeper theological core? First, it is difficult to see how Schweitzer can engage in the ethical mysticism he places at the core of his thinking unless he posits belief in God, however unclear or de-personalised such a belief might be. Schopenhauer would certainly have recognised this fact. Secondly, Schweitzer's attempt to deduce universal reverence for life from the view that at our core we are wills-to-live only functions if we assume some intervening will, namely that of Christ, here conceived as will-to-love.[45] Here theology accounts for philosophical inadequacy. Schweitzer never explicitly states such a thing (in his cultural-philosophical works he remains convinced that what he has to say is a necessity of thought), and it is difficult to explicate the type of Christology Schweitzer is advocating. But that it is potentially there and accounts for some of the intriguing emphases in *The mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, is clear and merits further discussion.[46] None of this is to claim that

[42] Numerous passages from sermons, letters, exegetical and philosophical works and public lectures could be cited. A number of these are quoted in J. Carleton Paget, 'The religious authority of Albert Schweitzer's Jesus', in M. Bockmuehl and A. J. Torrance (eds.), *Scripture's doctrine and theology's Bible*, Grand Rapids 2008, 78–9. [43] See Schweitzer, *Quest*, 486.

[44] See Schweitzer sermon, 28 June 1908, where he gives eloquent voice to the complexities of his views about Jesus, and especially the words, 'Das Unbegreifliche seiner Persönlichkeit wächst für den, der sich in ihn versenkt': *Strassburger Predigten*, 930.

[45] On this point see Clarke, *Ethical mysticism*, 104.

[46] Note Schweitzer's praise for Paul for being the first Christian to connect the person of Christ to redemption: *The mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, New York 1955, 335. Note also the words 'It (human thinking) must, no doubt, face all the enigmas of existence which present themselves to thought and harass it, but in the last resort it must leave the incomprehensible uncomprehended, and take the path of seeking to be certified of God as the "Will of Love", and finding in it both inner peace and springs of action … In Jesus Christ, God is manifested as Will of Love. In union with Christ, union with God is realized in the only form attainable by

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Schweitzer was conventionally theological, but theology plays a greater role in his thought than Oermann implies.

Oermann, though measured and thoughtful about the African dimension of Schweitzer's life, fails to address the question of the importance of Africa in the development of Schweitzer's thought. It is possible to argue that it played no role for there is a strong case to be made that Schweitzer's thought did not essentially develop after 1913, a point which Oermann does not discuss. The thought is worth pursuing even if there is evidence for Schweitzer interacting with some thinkers who prospered after the First World War (in a sense Schweitzer's extended presence in Africa in the period following 1913 could be seen to have had the effect of preventing the development of his thought).[47] But it could be argued that, alone in Africa, and away from Europe, Schweitzer was able to think with greater daring and boldness, in particular during his first stay, from 1913 to 1917, and that his own sense both of the interconnectedness of man and nature and their difference, of the inadequacy of an anthropocentric approach to the universe, and of his deeply held view of the cruel and wondrous character of nature, in essence its mystery, thoughts which must have been intensified by his time in Africa, served to sharpen and give shape to his evolving thought about reverence for life.[48] Schweitzer was aware of this, it would seem, and on a number of occasions, in elliptical form, gave voice to how much he owed to Africa.

So what then is important about Schweitzer, what are the achievements to which Barack Obama alluded? It is difficult to locate them simply in his foundation of Lambarene, for there were many other Europeans in Africa who devoted their lives to humanitarian work. To locate his importance in his thought would also be insufficient – as a philosopher, his work remained

us' (p. 379), Note the slippage between God as manifested as will of love and Jesus as will of love.

[47] It is important to note that Schweitzer made thirteen trips to Africa (one of the many contributions of Oermann's work is a 'Zeittafel' of Schweitzer's life where the number of trips and their length are clearly laid out), and between 1913 and his death in 1965 spent about fifteen years in Europe. From 1913 onwards he also corresponded with a number of significant intellectuals and theologians, as is clear from his *Briefwechsel* which, moreover, is far from being comprehensive. A sense of Schweitzer's ongoing interaction with European thinkers is also seen in his own *Nachlass*, especially *Weltanschauung*. Schweitzer also ordered books from publishers like Mohr of Tübingen, and asked friends to send him books. But while there can be little doubt that he was in contact with European thought in the period following 1913, the question arises as to the extent to which, given his hugely busy schedule, and the many calls upon his time even when he was in Europe, he could interact seriously with such thought. I doubt as fully as he would have liked. So, for instance, though there is a copy of Barth's *Church dogmatics* at Schweitzer's home in Günsbach, I doubt he ever had time to read it; for much of his information about Barth, he probably relied upon friends like Martin Werner.

[48] See Schweitzer to von Harnack, 4 May 1925, *Briefwechsel*, 278.

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incomplete,[49] as he himself admitted, and is too problematic to find its place in the front rank of the eminent in this field, although impulses from Schweitzer's thought, in particular those relating to the environment, are being taken up and developed by a number of writers. As a theologian, though a brilliantly suggestive biblical scholar, the eccentricities of his doctrinal opinions and the unsystematic way in which they were expressed, make it difficult to see him as titan in that field either. Does his significance, then, lie in the multi-faceted character of his personality, the coming together in a single person of a varied body of talents, intellectual, aesthetic and humanitarian? Possibly, and certainly this may account for why he continues to fascinate some people. But what, aside from the admiration which such a combination of achievements elicits, is the sum of all these parts, the lasting residue which might be distilled from them?[50] In answer to this question Oermann places great weight on Schweitzer's moral example, on the coming together in one person of thought and action, and the effect that Schweitzer's example and his idea of 'reverence for life' had upon a wide public, admittedly at a time when a sullied Europe was in pursuit of a moral hero. This is an important point, taken up by many of those who have written about Schweitzer, and one which may explain the fact that once Schweitzer died, his reputation, and knowledge of him began to decline. But does the death of Schweitzer precisely call such a view of his significance into question because it is based upon the fact of his ongoing life; and on the circumstances in which his reputation became great? Or can this figure from the past, who so much exemplified the assumptions of another age both intellectually and in other ways, become a potent symbol again today? Possibly as an example of moral enthusiasm, expressed in terms of a concern for all creation, which emerges from an odd mix of empiricism and idealism, certitude and agnosticism, despair and hope. Barth's admission in his final lecture at the University of Basle in 1962, that in spite of the problematic nature of his theology, Schweitzer had chosen the better part in deciding to act in the way he did, is evidence of the potency of that moral enthusiasm, which did not simply emerge from Schweitzer's will but was the endpoint of a complex intellectual journey of a man who in some ways was the twentieth century's most arresting public intellectual. Oermann must be thanked for writing a book which enables us more clearly and in a more informed way to continue to reflect upon Schweitzer's legacy.

[49] In a letter to Theodore Heuss of 22 Feb. 1959, Schweitzer writes of his work in these areas as remaining 'unvollendet', and elsewhere refers to his philosophical work as a 'Chaos': ibid. 360.

[50] See Picht, *Schweitzer*, 190: 'The way to this heart of Schweitzer's activity passes through a heroic landscape dotted as though with erratic boulders … Some of them have never been completed, other have been left to crumble, because the centre of this landscape, the jungle hospital at Lambarene, took up progressively more of his strength and energy.'

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