

## Consensus

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Volume 18

Issue 1 *Issues in Church Life*

Article 18

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5-1-1992

# The Emmanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: A Study in the Political Ramifications of Theology

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### Recommended Citation

Muller, Richard A. (1992) "The Emmanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: A Study in the Political Ramifications of Theology," *Consensus*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol18/iss1/18>

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## The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: A Study in the Political Ramifications of Theology

A. James Reimer

Toronto Studies in Theology, Volume 42

Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989

xv + 384 pp. U.S. \$79.95 hardcover

It is relatively common knowledge that Paul Tillich, writing in 1934–35 from his exile in New York, confronted his former colleague, Emanuel Hirsch, with a powerful salvo against Hirsch's theological and political views on church, state, and the question of Jewish Christians in the national German church. The crystal clarity of late twentieth-century hindsight now links Hirsch irreparably with the rise of the "German Christians", National Socialism and Adolf Hitler—and Tillich's "open letters" stand with the *Barmen Declaration*, also of 1934, as beacon lights of theological reflection against the warped political faith of that time. Tillich is revered as one of the great theologians of the century; while Hirsch, particularly in English-speaking circles, has passed into obscurity, remembered as the misguided and tragic author of the vast and still-authoritative *Geschichte der neuen evangelischen Theologie*, five large volumes covering the history of Protestant thought from the close of the era of orthodoxy to the end of the nineteenth century. Reimer's excellent study of the two theologians goes far beyond the brief debate of 1934–35 and, through a careful and detailed reading of published sources and personal remains, reconstructs what was in fact a sixty-three year, close, personal, and intellectual relationship between Tillich and Hirsch. Reimer sets the relationship into the context of the theological and political developments of the time and offers a finely-drawn intellectual portrait, most remarkable for its balanced reading of Hirsch's thought.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Reimer's work is its demythologization of the Tillich-Hirsch relationship and its careful delineation of Hirsch's own theological position. Tillich hoped for a fusion of religion and culture in which a myth of national origins had a positive role, and he did not immediately reject fascism as demonic. Hirsch, on the other hand, recognized the possibility of evil in fascism. Both theologians understood their political involvement existentially in terms of the necessity of taking risks. Yet Tillich, given his understanding of myth and the importance of breaking myths in order for them to function properly, refused to support National Socialism—while Hirsch assumed, with tragic result, the responsibility of remaining with the movement in order to help guide it. Nor was Hirsch, as is often thought, a derivative thinker who merely borrowed (or plagiarized) some of Tillich's political ideas: Reimer shows Hirsch as an independent thinker who shared an intellectual heritage with Tillich and who had his own distinctive understanding of some of the shared concepts, like that of "the boundary", which Hirsch saw as rooted in Fichte. Hirsch's

concept of a historical boundary or limit on human activity and a divine boundary or limit on all moments of history pressed him toward a theology deeply influenced by his historical experience and profoundly in search of the moment in which his commitment to the history of his religion and his nation would result in a new and renewed understanding of the national order or law (*nomos*). Hirsch, moreover, did not deify or absolutize National Socialism—but the contrast with Tillich does indicate that Hirsch failed to develop the capacity either to criticize the movement or to find a ground for opposition in the midst of the ambiguities of political life.

Reimer's essay offers both a significant and detailed analysis of the historical path of the Tillich-Hirsch relationship from early friendship, to debate, and rupture, and an expertly crafted discussion of the political theology of both thinkers as it developed in the time between the two World Wars. It is a welcome contribution both to the literature on Tillich and to the much needed contemporary analysis of the theologies of the first half of the twentieth century, their roots, their historical context, and their somewhat ambiguous (rather than clearly good or clearly evil) contribution to the politics of the age.

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### **Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity**

Charles Taylor

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989

521 pp. plus notes and index

Philosophers, to paraphrase Dickens, are the best of historians and philosophers are the worst of historians. They are the "worst" because the search for the grand generalization and the theoretical basis often ignores hard data that undoes the generalization or disproves the theory. They are the "best" because sometimes their conclusions, even when based on flawed analysis of detail, tell us more about ourselves than hundreds of journal articles which are "correct" in every particular.

Charles Taylor, a native Montrealer formerly at Oxford and now professor of philosophy at McGill University, is aware of the problems and possibilities of a philosopher doing history. He knows the dangers of a simplistic idealism, and he also knows the dangers of an equally simplistic materialism. The goal he has chosen for *Sources of the Self* is not to offer the complete story of why and how the modern identity developed, but to discover what the appeal of the developing modern identity was to those