

Introduction

THIS BOOK PRESENTS ASPECTS of the lives of Henri Nick (1868–1954) and André Trocmé (1901–1971), two men of faith and courage, two towering figures of 20th-century French Protestantism. This is not a full-blown biography of these two pastors. My purpose is more limited: I will seek to show how seeds which were planted in the late nineteenth century among certain French Protestants led to amazing fruits decades later, in the midst of some of the darkest moments of the 20th century. In other words, this book attempts to trace a sort of genealogy, from the pioneers of the “Christianisme social” (the French equivalent of what anglophones call the “Social Gospel”) to some of its leaders in the 20th century.

One does not have to be Aristotelian to be convinced that “virtues” are formed and transmitted through social encounters and relations, through communities with their particular, complex histories. Virtues are fostered in part through practices and become a sort of “habit.” It is a banality to state that each of us is shaped by specific people and places, by practices and ideas we encounter.² The present study is a case study in how people can inspire and shape the lives of others. The reader will be introduced to people who, despite personal flaws (Christians are justified sinners), embody how Christianity promotes peace and active solidarity with the oppressed.

The name of André Trocmé is familiar to those who have heard about his successful effort, during World War II, along with fellow pastors and many parishioners, in rescuing hundreds—perhaps more than one thousand—of refugees, most of them Jewish, in the area surrounding

2. For a good reflection on these questions, from a pragmatist standpoint (influenced by William James and others), see Joas, *Genesis of Values*. As is well-known, the theme of virtue formation within a community around a narrative is central in Stanley Hauerwas’ theological ethics. It is not a coincidence that the story of Le Chambon has been studied in relation to Hauerwas’ works. See Wells, *Transforming Fate*, 134–40.

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Le Chambon-sur-Lignon (south of Lyon, France, in the department of Haute-Loire). Henri Nick, on the other hand, is not well known at all, even in France. I will seek to remedy that in the following pages. Henri Nick was one of the most influential figures among French Protestants in the first half of the 20th century. He impacted many theology students and future pastors. André Trocmé was one of them.

Together, Henri Nick and André Trocmé span a hundred years of world history and modern Christianity, from the late 19th century all the way to a not-so-distant past. By paying close attention to them, the historian and theologian is able to discern the ways in which two French Reformed pastors responded to two world wars, to totalitarianisms and antisemitism, to new movements in Christianity such as the Salvation Army and Pentecostalism. One can also discern how the pastoral ministry has evolved, and how that ministry can be a sign, however imperfect and feeble, of the ideals (or the realities) it seeks to proclaim, such as justice, reconciliation, and peace. The reader of these pages might thus be led to conclude—as I do—that in Henri Nick and André Trocmé, despite their personal limitations, we see two witnesses of the prophetic dimensions present at the heart of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

A NOTE ON THE SOURCES

This book relies in part on André Trocmé's memoirs, written in 1966–68 ("Mémoires. Notes autobiographiques"; hereafter abbreviated "Mémoires").³ This source is not the work of a historian and must be read with care. It has occasioned resentment from some people who are mentioned in it. Trocmé did not worry too much about the kind of reactions his text would provoke. It was written exclusively for his family.

The area of Le Chambon is still very much divided regarding André Trocmé's legacy: some have thought, and still think, that he dishonored their relatives in his "Mémoires." The present work attempts to be a work of history, and not of hagiography. It is a scholarly work, not a book written in the style of a novel.⁴ Trocmé's memoirs may not have been the work

3. André and Magda Trocmé's papers can be consulted at the Peace Collection, Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania). For a detailed description of these papers, visit: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/DG100-150/dg107Trocmé.htm>.

4. For a "novel-like" account, written with a focus on ethical issues, see the well-known book by Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*. Several much more reliable works have been published since 1979. See in particular the works by François Boulet, who

of a professional historian, but there is no doubt that it is a legitimate source for the historian, as long as one confirms—whenever possible—what Trocmé writes by using external sources. In the instances where it has been possible to do that, I have been struck by the relative accuracy of Trocmé’s memory. That he may not have given as much credit to certain key participants in the events he narrates (especially in the pages on the rescue effort during the Second World war) is quite possible. But one needs to be aware of what Trocmé intended to do when writing this text: “My goal is not to produce something a historian would produce, but to show that one may go through a war while practicing non-violence. ‘You distort the truth!’ the historian will clamor! In a certain sense, yes, but I can say that I am honest and that my distorting of the truth is involuntary and unavoidable.”⁵ Trocmé was sophisticated enough, as an intellectual, to be aware of the “work” of memory, which never simply presents the past as it happened.

Unlike Trocmé, Henri Nick did not write a detailed autobiography. That fact, along with a very thin historical record especially of his contribution to the rescue of Jews during the war, explains to a large extent the asymmetry in what follows with regard to Trocmé and Nick’s efforts to rescue refugees.

wrote a dissertation related to the topic (*Les montagnes françaises, 1940–1944: des montagnes-refuges aux montagnes-maquis*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1999, 2 vol.), Gérard Bollon, Pierre Bolle, Philippe Joutard, and Patrick Cabanel, listed in the bibliography. Many have seen the moving documentary on Le Chambon by Pierre Sauvage, *Weapons of the Spirit* (1989).

5. “Mon but n’est pas de faire œuvre d’historien, mais de démontrer que l’on peut traverser une guerre en pratiquant la non-violence. [. . .] ‘Vous déformez la réalité,’ clamera l’historien! Dans une certaine mesure, oui, mais je puis affirmer que je suis honnête et que ma déformation est involontaire et nécessaire.” A. Trocmé, “Mémoires,” 371.