Albert Schweitzer. Meister der Selbstinszenierung. By Sebastian Moll. Pp. 250. Wiesbaden: Berlin University Press, 2014. €29.90. 978 3 86280 072 8

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Just as Albert Schweitzer tried to destroy what he took to be the wholly misconceived construction of Jesus by German theological liberals, so has Sebastian Moll, in this short and punchy volume, sought to set aside the image of Albert Schweitzer which emerges from his autobiographical works.

Moll is in some sense pushing at an open door. Schweitzer's autobiographical writings, consisting of three books and two essays, are all written with a strongly educative purpose in mind (a point Schweitzer is explicit about in his work of 1921, *Aus meiner Kindheit und Jugendzeit*), that is, there is a sense in which Schweitzer's self-presentation, whether he is writing about his childhood and youth or about his life as a scholar and doctor, is to some extent determined by a desire to extol the virtues of his thought. Schweitzer may have been a medical missionary, but he was also a remarkably zealous advocate of his own philosophical and religious ideas.

The question, then, to some extent, is whether Schweitzer's self-presentation in these works is so distorting that it calls for a wholesale revision of our understanding of his life, as Moll would seem to imply is the case (see especially p. 185), or whether, in fact, much of the edifice still stands in all its complexity and difficulty.

Moll concentrates on a number of aspects of Schweitzer's self-presentation: his childhood and youth; his engagement with the problem of the life of Jesus; the origins of his decision to go to Africa as a medical missionary and of his thoughts on reverence for life. The approach is methodical. We begin with an account of what Schweitzer says on these matters, we then move to sources which might appear to contradict this view before finally turning to a comparison of these.

Moll is able to indicate some discrepancies between Schweitzer's account of his childhood and youth and the highly abbreviated account of what Schweitzer said about these matters given by Oskar Pfister, the Lutheran pastor and psychoanalyst, with whom Schweitzer met in 1922. Originally Pfister had been granted permission by Schweitzer to publish a version of Schweitzer's life based on these discussions (Pfister's short text is printed by Moll in an appendix) but Schweitzer then decided to write the book himself. True, there are some discrepancies between what Schweitzer writes and what we find in Pfister's account (according to Moll Schweitzer gets the date of their meeting wrong as well as the amount of time that they spent together), and Schweitzer was clear that his intention in writing the book was paedagogic. But in the end only one discrepancy is highlighted by Moll, relating to a rather irrelevant detail of Schweitzer's qualities as a schoolboy, and the degree to which Schweitzer's admission of a paedagogic purpose led to distortion is difficult to tell. Clearly choices have been made and emphases given but beyond that not a great deal can be said.

More substantial, at least potentially, are the chapters that follow. In a lengthy section on Schweitzer's presentation of Jesus Moll asserts that Schweitzer began life as a theologian with a more conservative vision of the relationship between theology and the Church and that his original presentation of Jesus, published in 1901, gave voice to a Carlylesque picture of Jesus as a kind of elevating spiritual hero, implying a strong commitment to the historical Jesus. This, however, came

to be modified both in the first edition of the *Quest* and more especially in the second edition, where the centrality of the hero Jesus was questioned and a more negative picture given of the importance of the historical Jesus. As well as seeking to explain this change in Schweitzer's perspective by positing a kind of crisis in Schweitzer's life, Moll also questions the originality of Schweitzer's own presentation of Jesus. In all of this Schweitzer appears a more fragile thinker than he would have us believe, and one whose views were subject to change.

Moll's chapter on Schweitzer's decision to go to Africa notes well-known discrepancies between the latter's own accounts and evidence provided by letters between Schweitzer and Helene Bresslau, who was to marry Schweitzer in 1912. What Moll makes clear is that the decision was only arrived at after much complex reflection and indeed experimentation with other forms of ethical endeavour. The notion, then, of a single moment of decision, famously located by Schweitzer in 1896, which led almost seamlessly to Schweitzer's decision to train as a doctor in order to do work in Africa, is a myth.

The final chapter, on the origins of reverence for life, questions both Schweitzer's almost revelatory presentation of how he arrived at the idea while on a boat in the Ogowe river in 1915 as well as its originality. Schweitzer was not the first to think about the place of animals in an ethical philosophical schema and the notion of reverence for life had already been articulated by the publicist, Maghus von Schwantje. Moreover, Schweitzer owed much of his thinking to so-called Lebensphilosophie, as articulated by, among others, Georg Simmel, who, like Schweitzer, also gave prominence to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

Detailed assessment of these arguments in a short review is not possible and so a few comments will have to suffice. First, Moll pays too little attention to the work of other scholars, some of whom have covered similar points to him (Oermann, and Arnold, for instance, on Schweitzer's decision to go to Africa; and Pleitner on the changing emphases in Schweitzer's discussion of the historical Jesus, and not least the difference between the first and second edition of the *Quest*, thought by Moll to be barely discussed by scholars; and Günzler on the background to 'reverence for life') and so can give the impression of greater originality than is in fact the case. True, he presses these points further in wishing to give a picture of Schweitzer's self-presentation as strongly misleading but a sense that his discussion picks up on previous discussion would have been helpful. Secondly, some of Moll's contentions are disputable. For instance, I would contend that there is less of a shift in Schweitzer's position on the historical Jesus between the publication of *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis* in 1901 and the second edition of *Leben-Jesus-Forschung* in 1913; that both show a complex attitude to the historical Jesus but that the means by which they seek to overcome the distance between the Jesus of history and a Jesus meaningful to modern Christians is different; and other examples could be given. Thirdly, while Moll correctly draws attention to the fact that Schweitzer's thought emerges from a particular setting and betrays particular influences, I wonder whether he has completely undercut Schweitzer's claims to originality to the extent that Schweitzer appears misleading. Closer investigation of Schweitzer's ideas both on Jesus and reverence for life will demonstrate distinctive aspects, even if these can be overplayed by Schweitzer (it would be wrong, for instance, to say that Magnus Schwantje's ideas about reverence for

life are Schweitzer's). In a sense Moll is too taken up with the sometimes exaggerated nature of Schweitzer's language in this regard and too little concerned with the contents of what Schweitzer in fact writes. Fourthly, and finally, as Moll himself indicates in his discussion of autobiography as a genre, there is a necessarily summary and subjective aspect to such a form of writing. Schweitzer's presentation of his decision to go to Africa may contain discrepancies but these perhaps emerge from Schweitzer's contextually-based reflections on what was a complex process. At different times, different facets of the process will come to the fore. Indeed, discovering the truth about these matters, something which Moll claims to be able to do (see his rather old-fashioned language Rankean language on p. 37 about presenting things as they actually happened), is very difficult, raising questions about his absolute division between what Schweitzer himself says about various matters and what is 'historisches'.

This is a volume, then, that would have gained from being longer and engaging more with the available secondary literature (and indeed some of the primary literature, too. Note should be taken of the failure to refer to Schweitzer's *Wir Epigonen*, the text of a work that he had begun to write in Africa at the time of his internment. This was never published but formed the basis for his *Verfall und Wideraufbau der Kultur* of 1923. Here there are a number of discussions of reverence for life, overlooked by Moll, who claims that Schweitzer's first discussion of the subject after 1912 appears in an early post-war sermon). While it contains much that is stimulating, many of the judgements are at least questionable. I share with Moll a scepticism about the way in which Schweitzer has presented himself, not least his penchant to see his most significant thoughts as emerging from moments of revelation; and I also think that there are times where Schweitzer is perhaps too assertive about the originality of his claims; and as a consequence I do not doubt that there is a certain complex artificiality to his self-presentation (though in this respect he is not exceptional). But such conclusions have not led me to think that Schweitzer's self-presentation is more myth than fact, and that, even if true, this would undermine the meaning of his life to the extent that Moll claims (see his concluding chapter [esp. pp. 186–7], which assumes that Schweitzer's reputation is almost exclusively built upon his self-presentation). The assessment of Schweitzer's life and thought is a complex task, and some of that complexity (as well as much else, some of which has not been covered in this review) has been illuminated by Moll. But precisely for this reason the latter's conclusions can appear too precise and objectivist.

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Secularism and religion in nineteenth-century Germany. The rise of the fourth confession. By Todd H. Weir. Pp. xv + 304. New York: Cambridge University Press 2014. £60. 978 1 107 04156 1

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Weir's study of the origins of secularism sheds light on the first cracks in the edifice of what was once widely, yet erroneously, believed to have been a Christian state.