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Flato - Book Profile: Christianity in Jewish Terms - JCRT 3.3

Book Profile: *Christianity in Jewish Terms*

a review of *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael A. Signer. Westview Press, 2000. 464pp. \$18.00. ISBN: 0813365724

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The intoxicated rhetoric of pluralism and tolerance created a monument that cast a dark shadow from which we are now only starting to emerge. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* is guileless in its attempt to foster that emergence by its serious consideration of theological concepts, both Jewish and Christian.

3. The bulk of the project considers ten concepts: God, Scripture, Israel, Sin, Commandment, Worship, Suffering, Embodiment, Redemption and Anthropology. Each chapter opens with an exposition, written by a Jewish scholar followed by responses from both Jewish and Christian scholars.
4. Throughout the piece three themes are intricately woven throughout the tapestry: incarnation, language, and scripture. For brevity's sake, four representative essays will be considered.
5. Many of the essays attempt to confront the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. An interesting essay, Peter Ochs's "The God of Jews and Christians," wrestles with language of the divine and the incarnation. He goes so far as to recommend a fourfold plan for how we as Jews are to approach Christian doctrine in the 'third epoch.' Ultimately, Ochs submits a model of inner dialogue between Jewish traditionalists and skeptics in relation with Christian skeptics and traditionalists. For Ochs and David Tracy, who defends Trinitarian theology in his own contribution, such dialogue helps elucidate what it signifies to name God.
6. Elliot Wolfson's contribution, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," adroitly discerns the philosophical dimensions of incarnation from classical Jewish sources and sets the stage for an interesting discussion. The imaginal body of God is brought about through the experience of God in prayer and study. Wolfson explores a strand of rabbinic motifs that understand Torah as the incarnation of the image of God. Here, there is a meeting of anthropomorphism with a symbolism of the letter: "the body that is configured in the imagination of one who studies Torah is the name, the hypostasis composed of the graphemes through which the world was created and is perpetually sustained, one may conclude that textual interpretation is itself a form of constructing the anthropomorphic figure of the divine" (p248).
7. In the end, priority is given to the range of the mind's capabilities as a trans-rational encounter with cultural/religious exteriority. Interpreting the concept of *kaveneh* as proper intention (in prayer and study), Wolfson submits that the iconic visualization of the divine is physically incarnate in the words of prayer. This perspective, which places priority on imagination over the theoretical, challenges the traditional manner in which Jewish thinkers have approached corporeality, idolatry and Christology.

8. Hindy Najman's contribution "The Writings and Reception of Philo of Alexandria," examines the question of the entangled history of Christian and Jewish textual interpretation by utilizing Philo as a unique case. Najman explores the ramifications of Philo's synthesis of universality and particularity, both in terms of reconciling Mosaic Law in a Hellenistic context and its subsequent appropriation by Christian church fathers (Clement and Origen). This appropriation of Philo's biblical hermeneutics continued throughout the early church, which used them to "lay the groundwork for Christianity's universalistic interpretation of Scripture" (p103). In terms of Jewish intellectual development, Najman argues that the kind of philosophical interpretation used by Philo can be found in most notably, Maimonides and Gaon. Due to his allegorical method Philo was in general negatively perceived as a 'universalist'. Yet, he was not wholly ignored by the rabbinic tradition. There is, suggests Najman, an "extensive corpus of shared interpretive traditions that one can find in Philo and later rabbinic texts" (p104).
9. In his contribution, "Searching the Scriptures: Jews, Christians and the Book", Michael Signer closes by noting two principles of interpretation that cohere with both Jews and Christians. The first premise, related to the letter (of the text), is the exploration of the "literal sense of Scripture" (p98). The second premise posits we read Scripture for "the moral sense that presents models of ethical behavior." In other words what Philo's writings yield for us is representative of the complexities of the relationship between Jews and Christians. Can Israel have universal significance without subordinating the particularity of the Jewish people? How do Christians and Jews approach such a problem? Can Philo be a prism through which serious dialogue can emerge? Signer's two suggestions are well taken, but this just seems to continue on with 'business as usual' under the guise of hospitality where strangers exchange condolences. The fine line between *peshat* (plain meaning) and *derash* (derived meaning) corresponds to the fine line between appropriation and expropriation.
10. In the epilogue, Peter Ochs paraphrases Michael Wyschogrod, "True dialogue is dialogue that respects difference and is animated by it" (p370). It is a book like *Christianity in Jewish Terms* that begins to allow us to sift through the remnants of an entangled history in order to open up a clearing for honest dialogue and understanding between Jews and Christians. Ideally, the editors seek a recollection and reclamation of Judaism, an ethic of obligation that is derived from the prophetic heritage shared by both Christian and Jew. While such work is no doubt important, I share the trepidation expressed by others – that the language regarding reconciliation sounds too rhetorical to the skeptic's ears and too idealistic to the cynic's ears. Broad in scope, *Christianity in Jewish Terms* is an act of presentation and reception. The task is formidable, it requires an imaginative renewal of the ability to think, listen and create.

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