H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Eugene Korn, eds.** *Jewish Theology and World Religions.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012. xiv + 344 pp. $64.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-906764-09-8.

**Reviewed by** Steven L. Jacobs (University of Alabama)

**Published on** H-Judaic (February, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman

## The Question of the Non-Judaic Other

The people who inhabited post-Enlightenment Europe after the initial granting of citizenship to Jews (France first and other countries following) could not have imagined a scenario that would have occasioned a text such as this one: a new world where Jews, emerging from their ghettos, would *positively* confront other religious communities theologically (i.e., how now to make "theological sense" of others' religious traditions). To be sure, there is a long literary history of engagement with Christianity, largely negative, and an equal engagement with Islam, somewhat more ambivalent, but both Hinduism and Buddhism must be added to the mix.

In 2005, at the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, twenty-five Judaic scholars came together under the conference rubric "Towards a Contemporary Jewish Theology of World Religions," reflecting on "Jewish relations with non-Jews, Judaism's norms regarding other religions, and the nature of Jewish uniqueness and identity" (p. vii). The work of fourteen participants is included here; unfortunately, we do not know who else was in attendance, the titles of their presentations, the criteria for inclusion, and why they were not included. That being said, however, these skillfully edited essays are rich food for reflection and future work. As coeditor and coconvener Eugene Korn writes in his preface: "Christianity and Christians no longer pose threats to Judaism and the Jews people that they once did, while some interpretations of Islam and many Muslims today see Judaism, Jews, and Israel as enemies. Jews travel frequently to Asia where they encounter Hindus and Buddhists and their religious systems.... There are two points of departure, two strategic orientations, from which the essays in this volume proceed. The first is doctrine, philosophy, halakhah, and kabbalah.... The second is not normative or theoretical, but personal and empirical.... Ultimately, any successful Jewish theology of world religions must strike a dialectical balance, since authentic Jewish theology takes into account both the normative doctrinal thought of our texts and thinkers as well as the continuing living experiences of the Jewish people" (pp. vii-ix).

The collection of essays is divided into three sections: "Philosophical Perspectives on Jewish Pluralism" (Alan Brill and Rori Picker-Neiss, Avi Sagi, Raphael Jospe, and Joelene S. Kellner and Menachem Kellner); "Judaism and the Other" (Stanislaw Krajewski, Meir Sendor, and Ruth Langer); and "Judaism and World Religions" (Korn, David Novak, Paul B. Fenton, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, and Jerome [Yehuda] Gellman). Each essay is worthy of far more expansive commentary than this all-too-brief review occasions. Thus, we will restrict our observations to what this reviewer regards as the essential thrusts of each contribution before making some concluding comments.

Goshen-Gottstein posits four concerns to frame the issues in the volume's introduction. First, the contributors ask whether a religion or spiritual path outside Judaism can be considered legitimate and valid. Next, they point to definitions of "idolatry" (i.e., the notion of what constitutes *avodah zarah*). Third, the essays examine Revelation and Truth. And finally, they discuss concerns for Jewish continuity and identity. Goshen-Gottstein acknowledges pointedly that "the underlying assumption of all Jewish reflection on other religions is that they are competitive, and therefore constitute a threat to Judaism in terms of loyalty, membership, and affiliation. An 'us

versus them' mentality is deeply ingrained in Jewish approaches to other religions" (p. 7). How to engage without demeaning and/or diminishing one's own religious tradition or that of one's neighbors (and the operative word here is "neighbors") then becomes the question.

Brill and Picker-Neiss posit four models worth examining by looking at the work of inclusivist Judah Halevi (1075-1141); universalist Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942); present-day pluralist Michael Kogan (*Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* [2008]); and exclusivist Zevi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982).[1] In so doing, they suggest that foundational to all Jewish/rabbinic thinking are the concepts of "chosenness" and "uniqueness." Philosophically rigorous, Sagi suggests that "religious exclusivism is a hard position to defend philosophically and that a pluralistic thesis that advocates the inner value of different religions is logically preferable" (p. 61). Unfortunately and correctly, however, halakhically (from the perspective of Jewish law), this notion is far easier to construct externally to the Jewish people rather than internally regarding the various streams of modern Jewish life (Orthodox-Mitnagdic, Orthodox-Hasidic, Reform/Liberal/Progressive, Conservative/Positive-Historical, Reconstructionist, Humanist). Jospe begins with Alexander Altman's (1906-87) 1957 lecture "Tolerance and the Jewish Tradition" published by the Council of Christians and Jews, and notes that "the challenge of toleration and pluralism, both external and internal, remains acute" more than fifty-five years later, but, unlike Sagi, he draws his support from non-halakhic midrashic and other rabbinic literatures, and takes issue with the position of Menachem Kellner who, in turn together with his wife Joelene, responds to Jospe in "respectful disagreement" (p. 89). (Here, in microcosm, these three essays together model proper dialogical conversation in accord with the highest ideals of the Jewish intellectual enterprise.) For the Kellners, however, the central question is that of "truth," and, using their own metaphor, "Judaism is not one of the three flavours of Western monotheistic ice cream; it is a different snack altogether" (p. 126). Thus, for the two of them, it is the very truth embodied in the Torah that renders the positions of both Christianity and Islam highly problematic and questionable.

Krajewski argues that "Jews are to be priests for the rest of humanity," and raises the intriguing question whether or not accepting such an understanding would enable Jews and Judaism to be more open to other religious traditions (p. 140). Somewhat unfortunately, he fails to make his case, perhaps because such a mythologizing view tends to elevate the Jews and Judaism above other religious traditions, privileging the former and failing to further any notion of dialogue among equals. Sendor pointedly looks at the question of violence in interfaith work and examines the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), all the while reminding us that it has been the Jews who have been the *primary* victims of religious violence throughout the history of the monotheisms. Jewish liturgical scholar Langer, in contrast, looks at how non-Jews appear in the context of prayer and worship–indirectly, semi-directly, and directly, and, as the *Aleinu* would have it, "On that [future] day, [the] God [of Israel] will be One and His Name will be One" (or, as she writes, "at the end of days all the nations will realize the error of their ways and come to worship God" [p. 171]). Significantly, after the Holocaust/Shoah, she concludes, "a world which perpetuates oppositional understandings of the Other is one in which tragedies will continue to occur" (p. 186).

Korn in "Rethinking Christianity," identifies two sets of questions that modern Jewry, regardless of expression, has yet to fully confront: "What do Jewish thought or theologically oriented Jews make of their Christian neighbors [again this word "neighbors"] and colleagues, particularly the pious among them who no longer seek to undermine Judaism or the Jewish people? Can Jews see the image of God in the face of a believing Christian? And can Jewish theology understand contemporary Christianity as a positive religious and spiritual phenomenon? Are there halakhic and religious grounds for appreciating contemporary Christianity and its current teachings? " (p. 190). And secondly: "Are there grounds for a new *theological* relationship in which Jews understand Christians as participating in a common covenant with them? And can this new theological relationship function as a the foundation for Jews and Christians for forging an active partnership in building a future based on a common religious mission? " (p. 209). Collectively, these six questions are worthy of a fully independent volume by these same scholars and others as well (e.g., Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, who wrote *For the Sake of Heaven: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* [2004]).

Novak, whose own seminal work on both the Noahide laws (*The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law* [2004]) and Jewish-Christian relations (*Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* [1992]), returns us to the work of Maimonides (1135-1204) and his attitude not only to Christians and Muslims

but pagans as well. Fenton, in subtitling his contribution "Islam in Jewish Thought and Faith," refers to Muslims as "The Banished Brother," and likewise addresses a somewhat lesser-known *responsum* wherein he regards Islam, given his own close experience as a "derivative monotheism," critiquing Muslim intolerance as well (p. 240). Goshen-Gottstein, perhaps for the first time for many readers, examines the relationship between Jews and Hindus, the latter perceived as a polytheistic tradition, while tolerant of a relatively ancient Jewish community, regardless of the understanding of Brahma as the ultimate singular deity, and perhaps the classical case of *avodah zar*ah. Yet he takes care to point out that "recognition of India and its religious tradition as a repository of wisdom is the most persistent view of India in Jewish literature, and it is about as old as rabbinic Judaism itself" (p. 275). Finally, Gellman addresses, equally fascinatingly, the case of Buddhism as a truly non-theistic expression of "religion." Gellman finds the great insight of Buddhism–that of decentering the self and refocusing outward (in his case on God)–as particularly meaningful to him as a halakhic Jew.

Finally, in his concluding reflections, Goshen-Gottstein summarizes well the issue before today's Jews and modern expressions of Judaism. "To talk of 'world religions' leads us to taking a position regarding the legitimacy and possible recognition of other religions. To talk about the Other invites us into the domain of relationships, and leads us to reflect on how we might conceive or rather relate to other religions other than through the classical discussions centering on recognizing other religions" (p. 319).

It is this kind of creative thinking–regardless of past historical experiences and the foundational texts of the Jewish religious tradition (Torah, Talmud, Midrash, Responsa, Kabbalah)–that might very well prove a substantive breakthrough in both the present and the future for *all* religious communities in contact with each other. For just as the past is no guarantor of the present nor predictor of the future, it remains a place to start, a vote but not a veto as some would have it. Goshen-Gottstein and Korn are to be commended for assembling the scholars initially in a conference and joining them together in this volume. One hopes that this project is only the beginning of several volumes addressing the multitude of questions, observations, and insights raised herein.

Note

[1]. In this context, see Brill's own important contributions: *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

**Citation**: Steven L. Jacobs. Review of Goshen-Gottstein, Alon; Korn, Eugene, eds., *Jewish Theology and World Religions.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37776

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.