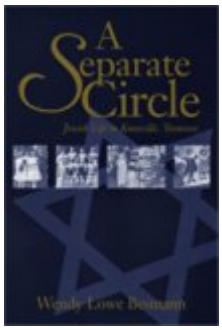
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wendy Lowe Besmann. *A Separate Circle: Jewish Life in Knoxville, Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. xiv + 206 $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57233-125-9.



Reviewed by Charles A. Israel

Published on H-Tennessee (September, 2003)

Jewish Life in a Protestant Town

It has become almost a mandatory trope to describe the American South as "the Bible Belt," and the phrase, of course, usually alludes only to Protestants (and mostly the Evangelical variety of them). Following a trail blazed by Samuel S. Hill Jr., the study of southern religious history blossomed in the last decades of the twentieth century, concentrating especially on religion in the Old South but with some later interest in the region's post-Civil War religion.

Motivated by the Civil Rights Movement, and especially the perception of southern white Protestantism's failures in the face of the great moral issues of the period, Hill penned ***Southern Churches in Crisis*** in an effort to catalog the theological and social roots of the region's churches. A pioneering work that combined analysis, synthesis, and even a little prophecy, Hill's book described the "Central Theme" of popular southern religion. Hill's effort spurred on a flurry of writing about southern religion; the unfortunate unintended consequence of the book was that most of this writing continued to talk only about the white Protestant mainline churches--especially the southern Baptist and Methodists. Even a volume of essays on ***The Varieties of Southern Religious Experience***, edited by Hill, strayed little from the earlier paths, although it did add essays on black Protestants and white Catholics.[1]

While Hill's exposition of the "Central Theme" of "the Southern Church" initiated a fruitful search for the role religion has played in southern history, it has too often been allowed to mask the great subsurface heterogeneity of the southern religious landscape. It would be misguided to blame Hill for the narrow focus of many of us who have followed him. While pointing to the distinctive "homogeneity" of regional religion, Hill readily pointed to the presence of other religious bodies in the region. There is now a growing volume of work that explores communities of faith that either challenge Hill's descriptions of "the [white] Southern Church" or do not fit into it at all. We now have many explorations of black, Catholic, and women's religious experiences, as well as accounts of Protestant bodies that stray from the deep paths cut by the southern mainline bodies.

What has been slow to emerge, however, have been accounts of the Jewish South. Perhaps excusable (or at least understandable) because of their small regional population--they comprise only about one percent of the current southern population as a whole, with much of that highly concentrated in a few urban areas--this oversight has nonetheless weakened southern history. First, looking at southern Jews tells us about a people previously overlooked, adding a new voice to the historical past. Second, and more importantly, it complicates the notion of the South as the "Bible Belt."

The study of southern Jewish history did grow along with the study of southern religion as a whole. Arthur M. Link and Rembert W. Patrick's *Writing Southern History* (1965) did not even have an index entry for Judaism (in any form--Jew, Jewish, etc.); a fact rendered less shocking considering the book's meager six entries for "religion" in the nearly five hundred pages.[2] Twenty years later in an historiographical account of "The Discovery of Southern Religious History" (1986), John B. Boles devoted one paragraph to southern Judaism and cited ten books and articles on the subject.[3] In the past couple of decades there have been institutional efforts to explore southern Jewish history, including the creation of a journal (*Southern Jewish History*) and the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience.

In 1973, Eli Evans's *The Provincials* opened the eyes of southerners--Jewish and Gentile alike--to the history of Jewish southerners. Combining personal memoir with historical sociology, Evans interweaves evocative accounts of his life growing up in 1950s Durham, North Carolina and historical sketches of Jewish life in the Protestant South.[4] In many ways, Wendy Lowe Besmann follows Evans's format in *A Separate Circle*, her account of Jewish life in and around Knoxville, Tennessee. Beginning with a vignette of burying her father-in-law in Knoxville's Jewish cemetery, Besmann uses individual examples as windows into a collective history. In addition to little-known persons from the graveyard, Besmann describes a number of more prominent "Famous Sons" including Knoxville retail giant Max Arnstein and *New York Times* publisher Adolph Ochs who got his start in journalism delivering copies of the Knoxville *Chronicle*.

In eight short chapters, Bemann's *Separate Circle* provides a wealth of information about Knoxville's Jewish community. She details Knoxville Judaism's murky origins with a few isolated individuals in the antebellum period. She describes the growth of the both the Reform (Temple Beth El) and later, following an increased immigration from Eastern Europe, the Orthodox (Congregation Heska Amuna) bodies in the town and surrounding countryside. In perhaps the strongest portion of her account, Besmann suggests how much Jewish life in Knoxville has changed in the past three decades.

Beginning Chapter Four ("A Family Affair") by addressing her readers directly, Besmann quips that she had originally planned to create a unified family tree of Knoxville, highlighting the interconnected nature of most of the families throughout much of their history in the town. Some came to town because of already-established family connections in a form of chain migration, others quickly joined their branches, intermarrying with the small number of fellow Jews in the overwhelmingly Protestant region. Compared with their closely-related religious forbearers, Knoxville's Jewish community has changed dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. As of 1999, when Besmann was finishing the book, the average Jewish Knoxvillian had been born elsewhere and worked in a professional occupation. This trend is not unique to Knoxville, although it has been accentuated there because of growth of the University of Tennessee and the nearby location of the Oak Ridge laboratories, both of which employed the disproportionately

higher number of Jewish academics and physicians.

The changing composition of Knoxville's Jewish population and the evolving relationship between the town's Reform and Conservative Congregation make this an interesting book for many audiences. Unfortunately, however, many readers will be disappointed by the missed opportunities, confusing organization, and lack of scholarly rigor that too frequently mar ***A Separate Circle***. Besmann offers tantalizing short local examples of national issues such as black-Jewish relations, the rise and fall of American anti-Semitism, and increased rates of intermarriage, but then moves quickly to other topics. The stereotyped Jewish merchant was one of the bogeymen of the Populist movement strong in Tennessee at the end of the nineteenth century; Besmann provides little more than cryptic accounts of Temple members who joined Knoxville's elite country club in the 1910s but by the Great Depression were denied membership. In her final pages Besmann cites the increased national trend of Jewish-Gentile intermarriage but does not explain if this is also the case in Knoxville. Instead she provides anecdotes of a few local "Jews by choice" but no sense of their number or prominence. Organizationally, Besmann's efforts to move between personal reminiscence, historical vignette, and scholarly analysis are often quite clumsy, leaving readers unclear of when in history they are at any particular point. While her conversational tone will likely appeal to readers put off by scholarly pretension, the frequent appearance of phrases such as "I'm told" (p. 22) and "it was said" (p. 33) offer little solace to historians desiring to verify her assertions.

Wendy Lowe Besmann should be congratulated for compiling these interesting facts and personal accounts of Knoxville Judaism. While many scholars have sought stories from places with more obvious Jewish presence--one thinks of the large congregations and long histories in cities like Charleston, Galveston, Memphis, and New Orleans--Besmann has described the dynamics of a comparatively smaller town like Knoxville where the small size of the Jewish community both forced Jews to turn inwards for support and at the same time try to build bridges to their Gentile neighbors. Her book should find a wide readership among Knoxvillians interested in the city's history and especially among the city's old-guard Jews and relatively new immigrants curious about the changing face of their community. Southern religious historians likewise might be interested in the local examples of regional trends.

Notes:

[1]. Samuel S. Hill Jr., ***Southern Churches in Crisis*** (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966).

[2]. Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick, eds., ***Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).

[3]. John B. Boles, "The Discovery of Southern Religious History," in ***Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*** ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp. 544-45.

[4]. Eli N. Evans, ***The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*** (1973; rpt. New York: Free Press, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://www.h-net.org/~tenn/

Citation: Charles A. Israel. Review of Besmann, Wendy Lowe. *A Separate Circle: Jewish Life in Knoxville, Tennessee.* H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8136