

REVIEW

Leonard A. Schoolman

*The Changing Christian World:
A Brief Introduction for Jews*

(Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008), paperback, viii + 163 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher, Saint Leo University

The title of this insightful book for the educated lay reader could just as easily have been *The Changing Jewish World: A Brief Introduction for Christians*. In describing for Jews the similarities and differences between Christian and Jewish theological and moral positions and the historical memories that have framed them, Rabbi Schoolman goes into almost as much detail on Judaism as he does with regard to the various Christian positions (Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical).

Schoolman, who for eighteen years was national director of programs for the Union for Reform Judaism, is the director of the Center for Religious Inquiry at Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York and founding director of the Center for Theological Studies at Christ Church Cathedral (Episcopal) in Houston. He is well-qualified to present his intended Jewish readership with a fair, balanced, and informed understanding of the beliefs of Christians, which he does admirably.

Schoolman argues that because of the doctrine of original sin put forth by Augustine, Jews and Christians have differing views of human nature, with Christians taking a more grim view of human nature as "inherently sinful," and Jews having a more optimistic view of humanity's innate goodness (p. 24). For Christians, Jesus' redemptive sacrifice is the solution to this problem of the human condition; Jews do not think there is a problem that needs solving.

Schoolman begins with the Bible and explains how both Jews and Christians can and have read it literally (as in a literal interpretation of the Creation in Genesis), or less literally and more open to biblical scholarship and re-interpretation of the ancient texts in the light of recent insights into them. Schoolman presents varied understandings of Jesus through this bi-focal lens in a way that is quite fair to both traditions. He also emphasizes at some length that Christians have drawn notions of a resurrection of the bodies of all humans at the end of time, a final judgment, and a rectification from its Jewish roots. However, Christians have tended to define and describe what will happen with speculative details that are missing from the Jewish tradition, which has never lingered overmuch on what will happen at the end of time beyond the assertion of a bodily resurrection and judgment. It is in this light that he asks the question "Are we still waiting for the Messiah?" which indeed we both are, whether defined as a coming or a return (p. 77).

After offering a basic understanding of the diversities and commonalities between (and within) contemporary Judaism and Christianity, Schoolman takes up key issues in the relationship today, such as Christian efforts to convert Jews and the State of Israel. He has an excellent chapter on Protestant churches and trends in American Christianity and one on church / state issues. He concludes with thoughts on what the future may hold. The book contains "A Glossary of Christian Terms," a bibliography, and suggestions for further reading.

The main problem I have with the text as an introduction for Jews is his unrelievedly, and I think inaccurately stark assertion that “Judaism and Christianity view the human condition totally differently” (p. 23), a dichotomy that colors much of his presentation. It flows from his presumption that original sin permeates all of Christianity in monochromatic fashion, with perhaps the exception of a few, unnamed individuals. I would like to engage with Schoolman in dialogue on this for a moment.

First, in Catholic tradition it is simply not true to say that all humans (save Jesus and Mary) are born sinful. Catholicism represents not some or just a few Christians, but its largest single portion, so Catholic teachings are not irrelevant for this issue. In modern Catholic teachings, all humans are born without sin. At one time Schoolman could have argued otherwise, because of the idea of limbo, where children too young to have sinned were consigned to a pleasant afterlife but without direct exposure to God. Limbo was necessary when most Catholics did have the idea that all humans are inherently tainted with original sin. But it was never a doctrine, much less a dogma, just a logical necessity if one took a stringent view of Augustine’s writings. Today, however, because the Church in fact has a nuanced, not literalist understanding of Augustine, the idea of limbo has been officially rejected (put, as I cannot resist saying, in limbo). The Catholic Church teaches that children too young to have sinned go directly to heaven. There is no inherent, evil taint in their nature. Contrary to Schoolman’s presentation, all are born totally innocent and good, whether Christian or non-Christian.

The Catholic Church does believe, though, that like Adam and Eve, all of us are fallible and have, along with our natural attraction to the good and the doing of good, a tendency to do evil. Without God’s grace sooner or later all of us will do something against God’s will, despite our natural goodness and likeness to God, just as did Adam and Eve. Nobody is perfect, as I think Schoolman and I can agree. Nobody resists all temptations to the attractions of what he and I agree is evil, in a greater or lesser way.

Indeed, though Schoolman inexplicably fails even to mention this, probably to protect his erroneous absolute dichotomy, Jewish tradition agrees with Catholic (and much other Christian) teaching on this core point. In Judaism, humanity is described as having not only a *yetser ha-tov* (tendency toward the good) but also an equally strong *yetser ha-ra* (tendency toward evil). Intriguingly, the *yetser ha-ra* can result in positive creations, but more often in wrongs committed against others. Hence, one of Judaism’s most solemn holy days is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement or Repentance (in Hebrew *teshuvah*), when the entire Jewish community, not just a few, is required to participate. Catholics can best understand this as a combination of Good Friday and Confession. But Jews, no less than Christians, are required to repent and make retribution, since Jews, no less than Christians, believe that human nature is such that humans will, inevitably, sin. So the difference is not “total” and what we have in common is worth exploring, rather than simply writing off, as Schoolman does.