

REVIEW

Yaacov Deutsch

Judaism in Christian Eyes:

*Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism
in Early Modern Europe*, trans. by Avi Aronsky

(Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012),
hardcover, ix + 304 pp.

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Yaacov Deutsch's book provides a careful examination of a fascinating corpus of material composed in the early modern period. Over seventy-five texts that describe Jewish ritual life, often in great detail, were written by both Jewish converts to Christianity and Christian Hebraists between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Deutsch terms these texts "polemical ethnographies" (p. 2).

In his initial chapter, Deutsch provides an exhaustive survey of the polemical texts. At "the heart of the book" are three case studies that convincingly demonstrate the polemical aspects of these texts (p. 32). In a fifth chapter he provides an overview and synthesis of the main themes of the book. As Deutsch acknowledges, the minutiae included by the early modern authors necessitated detailed discussions for each of the three topics; as such, Deutsch's final chapter is sometimes redundant as it reviews themes with which he already dealt. That said, this chapter is a useful overview for undergraduate students.

Deutsch's main argument is that a careful examination of the choices that these authors made when composing their texts reveals the polemical nature of the genre. In chapter two, for example, Deutsch surveys the authors' descriptions of Yom Kippur, and notes that most authors chose to focus on rituals such as *kapparot* (symbolic transfer of one's sins to an animal, usually a rooster or hen) and lashes. This stands in sharp

contrast to contemporaneous Jewish custom books, which highlighted liturgy. By choosing to highlight certain rituals rather than others, the authors of the ethnographic texts created an opportunity to point to what they perceived as anti-Christian and superstitious elements of Jewish practice.

Deutsch makes the nuanced point that the ethnographers' descriptions were often quite accurate; it was what they opted to include or omit that gave the texts polemical overtones. This comes across in his discussion of rituals surrounding Jewish food. Deutsch explains that the authors did not focus on special or uniquely Jewish foods. Indeed, one can see that Jews and Christians often ate similar foods. Rather, the authors included lengthy discussions of practices such as ritual slaughter, which allowed them to highlight the ways in which Jewish practice was a "misguided" interpretation of the Old Testament (pp. 227-28).

That authors' editorial decisions were the key element in the construction of these polemical ethnographies is made explicit in Deutsch's discussion of descriptions of Jewish circumcisions. He compares the polemical ethnographers' descriptions with three types of (non-Jewish) contemporary texts by other authors: travel literature, ethnographic descriptions of Muslim circumcisions, and Christian discussions of ancient circumcision practices. The polemical ethnographers, unlike the other authors, highlighted the cruelty and/or the supposed anti-Christian aspects of this Jewish ritual (Chapter 3). The comparison of these texts with other contemporary European ethnographies of "foreign" cultures underscores some of the reasons for the emergence of polemical ethnography during the early modern period. The polemical ethnographies were a subgenre of descriptive texts that were part of an emerging print culture, made popular as European exploration led to contact with new peoples and cultures. The religious battles between Catholics and Protestants were also an important context for some of the polemical aspects of this genre, as some of the characterizations of Jewish ritual as superstitious could be "interpreted as veiled criticism against Catholics" (pp. 29-30).

Through his meticulous analysis of texts written over a three-hundred-year period, Deutsch establishes polemical ethnography as a discrete early modern stage in the history of Jewish-Christian polemics. Previous scholars have traced other developments in polemical literature, noting how polemics about the Bible were expanded in the twelfth century to include references to rationalism. The thirteenth century witnessed the emergence of disputes about the Talmud. Deutsch explains that the early sixteenth-century converts who initiated polemical ethnography were heavily influenced by the Spanish Dominicans who served as their patrons (pp. 230-38). Like medieval mendicants and converts, these sixteenth-century authors sought to reveal “Jewish secrets” to their readers and to justify their own conversions; the secrets that they revealed were about the ritual practices of contemporary Jews. By contrast, Christian-born authors who also composed polemical ethnographies focused on the divergence between Jewish praxis and biblical law (pp. 28, 118).

The polemical ethnographies were mostly written in German lands, one of the only places in which there was a Jewish presence in Western Europe during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (pp. 242-46). The genre is not only crucial because it influenced no less a theologian than Martin Luther, who cites Antonius Margaritha (p. 26), but also because the texts were extremely popular, as documented by the many different volumes and multiple editions which are surveyed by Deutsch (pp. 51-76). These texts proliferated in the seventeenth century, when there was a surge in Jewish conversion to Christianity (pp. 238-42), and by the mid-eighteenth century, the texts took on a less polemical tone, as Enlightenment-era debates about the political status of the Jews replaced these ethnographic inquiries (pp. 254-57). Deutsch sees this shift in the genre as a “connection between the ethnographic accounts of the Jews and the emergence of the modern critical approach to Judaism...that deems human wisdom to be the most appropriate tool for making sense of the history, laws, and institutions of Judaism” (p. 254). This provocative idea, which connects converts’ writings, contemporary Jewish

critiques about Judaism, and modern critical Jewish Studies could have been expanded upon slightly in the conclusion.

Deutsch's work accurately captures the painstaking descriptions provided by ethnographers, providing readers with a book as rich in detail as the texts which he examines. Scholars, theologians, and students will benefit from Deutsch's identification of an important stage in Jewish-Christian polemics and from his close readings of these influential texts.