

REVIEW

Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn, Eds.
Jewish Theology and World Religions
(Oxford & Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish
Civilization, 2012), hardcover, xiv + 344pp.

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Conferences yield many published volumes but few coherent works. The book under review deserves to be regarded as such for its cogency, quality, range, and focus. In June 2005 scholars convened at the University of Scranton to discuss the contemporary theological implications of the Jewish encounter with the religions of the world. Fourteen of these scholars, many of them from the first rank in their respective fields, have contributed twelve chapters, and Alon Goshen-Gottstein has provided important reflections both at the book's opening and at its conclusion.

The three parts of the book denote distinct modalities by which the encounter between Judaism and other religions is broached. The four chapters under the heading "Philosophical Perspectives in Jewish Pluralism" constitute an excellent contribution to the burgeoning literature on this topic. Three essays are included in the middle section, each relating in its own way to "Judaism and the Other." The last section of the work, on "Judaism and World Religions," offers two essays on classical approaches to Christianity and one each on Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Avi Sagi's "Justifying Interreligious Pluralism" is part of a wider exploration of the question of pluralism which has engaged him in recent years. He offers a penetrating critique of the concept of religious exclusivism and makes an important distinction between radical and moderate pluralism. Considering the implications of what he terms "religious loyalty" and the

extent to which pluralism is compatible with Jewish tradition, Sagi's short article is an invaluable survey in English of some of his key philosophical insights into this question. While toleration is in his view more conducive to the worldview of a traditional Jewish believer, Sagi ends his article by stating that "[e]ndorsing pluralism...requires a religious revolution and while it exacts a heavy price, it is pluralism rather than toleration that is compelling to the contemporary Jews living in a modern democratic world" (p. 85).

Paul B. Fenton trawls centuries of Jewish tradition to provide a fascinating examination of "Islam in Jewish Thought and Faith." Eschewing the usual rehearsal of Islamic influences on Jewish philosophy, he considers instead the ways in which Islam is presented in a wide variety of Jewish sources. Alon Goshen-Gottstein's essay on "Encountering Hinduism - Thinking Through *Avodah Zarah*" is a remarkable exploration of a rarely-considered topic. He concludes that "if religion is measured by its transformative power and in accordance with the core components that make any belief system a 'religion', it is clear that Hinduism must be acknowledged as a full 'religion' and is immune to the classical Jewish charge that it is *avodah zarah*" (p. 297).

Yehuda Gellman's article is perhaps the most overtly and literally theological in the book. He offers a compelling analysis of Buddhist concepts of divinity, proposing a method of interpretation to "enable a traditional Jew to perceive a holy source in Buddhist consciousness" (p. 316).

Throughout the work a distinct ideological agenda is expressed. Goshen-Gottstein avers that there is more at stake than the development of an appropriate approach to other religions, for "[o]ur own view of other religions is a function of how we view Judaism and how we view our place in history" (p. 37). He calls for transcending "those forms of identity construction that have made suffering, difference and competition the cornerstones of identity" (p. 37). For him and for other contributors to the volume, this theological rapprochement

with other religions is part of a great process of reconstruction necessary for the revival of Judaism in our time. The book is characterized by a refusal on the part of most of its contributors to hide behind a posture of scholarly disinterest. Thus, for example, Ruth Langer ends a survey of attitudes to the non-Jew in liturgy by stating her belief that “[a] world which perpetuates only oppositional understandings of the Other is one in which tragedies will continue to occur” (p. 186).

If there is anything written in this book with which I would take issue, it is not within its chapters, all of which demonstrate depth and quality. Rather, it is the claim made on the dust jacket that the contributors to the volume represent a range of denominational affiliations. In fact this range would seem to be quite circumscribed. To this reviewer it appears that the book might more accurately be termed a modern Orthodox exploration of Jewish theology and world religions. This appellation suits the overwhelming majority of the contributors (even those who are quite unorthodox Orthodox Jews). Only occasionally, however, does the theological orientation of the authors present a challenge. Eugene Korn’s assertion that “traditional Jews and faithful Christians are nearly alone today in Western culture when they assert traditional core moral values” (p. 213) seems to consign religious liberals and others to the purgatory of relativism in a somewhat over-polemical manner.

Offering important insights on such issues as idolatry, pluralism, and the prospects for future interreligious encounter, Goshen-Gottstein, Korn, and others have produced a work of true quality. The book constitutes a significant contribution to a profound development taking place in Judaism—the attempt by those keeping faith with their tradition to engage with the faith of the Other.