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Alan Brill
A Jewish Trinity: Contemporary Christian Theology through Jewish Eyes

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In my survey introductory course on the study of religion, an undergraduate recently posed the question: "It seems that, whenever the topic of in-group and out-group identity formation comes up in class, it's always negative. But is there anything good about it?" Alan Brill's exposition in this book offers a survey of Jewish-Christian theological divergences and convergences that, in a certain way, implicitly addresses my student's query. In this concise and accessible book, Brill both recapitulates Christian and Jewish engagement with each other and constructs his own Jewish comparative theological position concerning formative and mutually distinguishing theological topics.

Brill proceeds with three interrelated goals. First, he seeks "to explain where the dividing lines are" and how they remain between these sibling traditions even in our current age of openness. Historically, "these minor variances," he notes, "were treated as unbridgeable divides" (ix). Second, he strives "to explain to Jews why Christian theology is not inscrutable and to Christians how Judaism is a very different theology" (ix). Third, he tries to demonstrate "the unacknowledged deep convergences in theology in the last half century" (ix) while not erasing "irreconcilable differences" (ix).

The book is divided into six chapters, each dedicated to a central Christian theological topic: Trinity, Incarnation, Original Sin, Salvation and Atonement, Messiah, and Covenant. Commenting on the positions of the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020), Brill notes that "a covenant is predicated on difference from other covenants. Difference can compete…or…cooperate. If we were completely different, we could not communicate. If we are totally the same, we have nothing to say to each other" (163). This tension critically and constructively shapes the structure of each chapter.

For example, in Chapter One, "Trinity," Brill underscores the sharp differences between Jewish monotheism and what became Christian conciliar orthodoxy regarding the Triune God. However, he likewise notes that Biblical and Rabbinical Jewish views did not propose an undifferentiated, unqualified, and absolute Godhead: "Historians accept that Judaism in antiquity had a variety of intra-divine structures, logos theories, angelic divine forms, divine manifestations, and bitheism" (4). Jewish thought, therefore, developed theologies similar to—sometimes indistinguishable from—what Christian conciliar orthodoxy labeled as heresies, e.g., monarchism, modalism, and adoptionism. He then turns to the modern approaches of Karl Rahner (Catholic) and Jürgen Moltmann (Reformed). In Rahner's critique of "person" language for the Trinity, he comes "closer to a Jewish perspective" (12). In the end, however, Rahner maintains that the Trinity is intrinsically three "distinct manner[s] of subsisting" (13), diverging once again from the Jewish position, which "is in fact [modalism]" (13). Moltmann, too, "seeks to explain the social Trinity using Jewish concepts of *shekhinah*, *tzimtzum*, and *tikkun olam* as understood by Elie Wiesel, A.J. Heschel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Gershom Scholem, as well as his readings of rabbinic thought" (15). Once again, there is a brief convergence of ideas, but the differences remain substantial. Brill's intention is neither to confuse nor conflate the two religions, but "to move beyond the widespread view that Jewish thought has a pristine monotheism and Christianity has tritheism" (27).

This nuanced structure shapes the remaining chapters on other topics. Premodern divergences and convergences are explored, for example, vis-à-vis Incarnation and divine immanence in Chapter Two. Then, the modern Christian approaches of Karl Barth (Reformed), Rahner, Moltmann, and Elizabeth Johnson (Catholic) are explored in comparison with Jewish thought. Brill observes, "No longer is the incarnation only the scandalous mixture of irreconcilable divine and human of the Chalcedon creed, rather it is another example of coming from the common spiritual neighborhood" (51).

Indeed, "common spiritual neighborhood" emerges as a theme for the book. As a scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, I found this concept analogously instructive. The ways in which Jewish thought is not diametrically opposed to Christian positions, say, on the Trinity, Incarnation, and Original Sin (Chapter Three) is analogous to how Islamic theologies—from *kalām* to philosophical theology and Sufism—are not the irreconcilable opposites to Christian positions they are made out to be. Brill does a great service in noting the intra-religious diversity of these traditions that gainsays their popular conceptions as static, essential monoliths.

The chapters on Original Sin, Atonement and Salvation, Messiah, and Covenant are equally illuminating in underscoring how, despite occasional convergences, it is their respective religious narratives that keep these two spiritual neighbors divergent. For example, Brill lists both common and disparate elements of "original sin" and its analogue in Jewish traditions that are tremendously instructive (76-79), and how, despite common theologies of the Messiah, the centrality and "agency of Jesus remains the divide" (135) between the traditions. Throughout,

"the difference remains our sacred narratives" rather than the behavior demanded of them. After all, Brill writes, "both religions" require "inner change and responsibility for outer change of behavior" (107).

At the end of the book, one wonders how to theorize the impact of modernity on these two traditions, as Brill observes frequently how modern ideas and experiences shape these two traditions in ways that bring them closer together. In this way, Brill offers a necessary prolegomenon to exploring how Christian contextual and liberation approaches—feminist, Black, *mujerista*, womanist, queer, and disability theologies, to name a few—may likewise converge and diverge with Jewish theologies today.

The book would serve as an excellent text for the undergraduate classroom, not just for a class on Comparative Theology or Jewish-Christian Relations, but even for a survey Introduction to Theology course. It could be read alongside other texts on the topics Brill explores and students would learn of the genealogical and analogical comparisons that shaped Christian theology. On this note, it should be noted that only 164 of the 232 pages form the body of the book; the remaining are endnotes and bibliography. It would likewise serve as an instructive volume to explore with graduate students who would engage creatively, critically, and constructively with Brill's expositions relevant to their areas of study.