

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

Volume 2, Issue 1

2007

Article 12

FEATURE TOPIC: THE CENTENARY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Exploring Our Commonalities and Our Differences

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REVIEW

Isaac C. Rottenberg, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue:
Exploring Our Commonalities and Our Differences*

(Atlanta: Hebraic Heritage Press, 2005), paper, 275 pp.

Reviewed by Alice L. Eckardt, Emerita Professor, Lehigh University

Anyone seeking a single volume to understand the long and complex story of Christian-Jewish relations and its many issues, including the State of Israel, will find Rottenberg's well-written and well-organized book most helpful. The wealth of information will benefit both newcomers and veterans to the field.

Rottenberg is convinced that "encounter with Judaism and with the reality of Israel is of immense significance to the life of the churches, including their search for greater unity among Christians" (p. 200). For he holds that despite basic differences Judaism and Christianity share a basic vision of faith and history, and we are experiencing a new era in Christian-Jewish relations. Nevertheless, many traditional Christian beliefs must be challenged, a view some Jewish thinkers embrace for Judaism as well (including David Flusser, Michael Kogan, Irving Greenberg, Michael Wyschogrod, pp. 42-44).

The first (of six) sections introduces and explores the dynamics of dialogue from a number of perspectives including "danger signs along the road." The second and largest section deals with many doctrinal issues including the "Holocaust and Belief in a God of Holy Love," covenant, contrasting fulfillment theologies, differing views of messianic redemption, law and sin, and apocalypse. Unlike many who write in this field the author confronts the divisive issues of mission, Jewish converts, and "messianic Jews" several times. The penultimate section, dealing not only with theology but also with various Christian responses and reactions to the State of Israel - - the "great ecumenical catalyst" (p. 200) - is of particular importance.

Rottenberg not only has a personal relationship with converted Jews and with the Holocaust but a long professional career in the church and Christian-Jewish organizations. He considers viewpoints of a multitude of Jewish and Christian scholars on the many issues he explores. At the same time his own responses and thoughts are openly expressed both in agreement and disagreement. Yet the reader does not feel belabored but is free to reach his or her own conclusions.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, most of the Christian world slowly came to acknowledge the many centuries of church denigration of Judaism and its people and the consequent need for fundamental changes in its theology in this regard. Some participants in the dialogue contend that even though many of the new insights have not reached the congregants of either community we have reached the time when we must each tackle more of the other's troubling teachings with a new openness. For example, Jews should recognize that "incarnation" was already present in the covenantal God's dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and in a study of the gospels they might possibly hear the divine voice in the teaching of "the last of the great Jewish prophets." Christians ought to take into consideration the Jewish view of Jesus as a Jew living in expectation of the messianic age and dying while still hoping for its arrival; and see the kingdom of God concept as already current in that first century Jewish community of which Jesus was an intimate part.

Despite the dialogue the churches have been more hesitant in their consideration of the reborn State of Israel. Rottenberg traces a positive stand on Jewish return to the Land back to 16th century Restorationists and follows this that forward through 17th century Puritanism, some 18th and 19th century American Protestantism, to the 1930s' Pro-Palestine Federation of America, the early 1940s' Christian Council on Palestine, and the post- World War II American Christian Palestine Committee. After the 1967 Six Day War the National Christian Leadership Council for Israel brought together Roman Catholics and Protestants, as did the "Israel Study Group" (later renamed). Evangelical Protestants initiated Bridges for Peace and the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem. But antithetical developments have occurred as well: in the World Council of Churches, in the Vatican's vacillation, among Christian denominations with historical missionary roots in Arab countries, and most recently in a move among some American Protestant denominations to withdraw funds from companies doing business in Israel so as to hurt that country's economy (pp. 207-08).

The Jewish "love affair with the land of Israel" persisted through "some of the darkest moments of history." And Rottenberg sees the State of Israel as "one of the great signs of hope in modern history [for it] represents a triumph of the human spirit in the post-Holocaust era" (pp. 258-59).

In the concluding chapter on "History: Horror and the Challenge of Hope" Rottenberg argues for the necessity of memory as we work for a better future, for otherwise we become dishonest and irresponsible.