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Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations

REVIEW

Alan Mittleman, Byron Johnson, and Nancy Isserman, eds.

Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations

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Long largely ignored by most Jews engaged in interfaith work with Christians, Evangelical Protestants suddenly and increasingly insistently entered the conversation in the opening years of the twenty-first century. Driving this change was the growing political clout of the American Evangelical community, especially as it rallied behind George W. Bush, combined with this community's strong support for Israel at a time when mainline Protestant criticism of Israel was becoming increasingly strident. Because the traditionally liberal American Jewish community found (and finds) itself at odds with the Evangelical community over a long list of critical public policy issues, particularly regarding the role of religion in the public square, it has found itself "uneasy" over calls to develop alliances with Evangelicals in response to their support for Israel.

Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations publishes the proceedings of a conference convened November 30 – December 1, 2005, to address this phenomenon. As the editors point out, unapologetic resources for Jewish-Evangelical understanding were sparse. What existed mostly served questions of theological understanding, not fully relevant to this new set of issues.¹ The resultant collection of essays reflects the work of the interdisciplinary and interreligious gathering of Jews and Christians who approached their contemporary questions with the combined tools of journalism, history, sociology, psychology, religious studies and theology. While there are inevitable weak points in such a volume, the following discussions are of particular significance to the readership of *SCJR*:

The introductory article, Yaakov Ariel's, "Is America Christian? Religion in America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," argues that Christianity is deeply embedded in American culture, playing a "decisive role in shaping American attitudes towards Jews and Israel."⁽¹⁾ While, as a Jew, I personally find this argument obvious, clearly not all do, and Christians, particularly, may find this essay helpful in gaining perspective on aspects of American life that they take for granted.

¹ The most obvious exceptions to this generalization are three volumes that grew from conferences focusing on questions of interreligious dialogue in 1975, 1980, and 1984: *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation on Scripture, Theology and History*, *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. M.H. Tanenbaum et.al. (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1984); and *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter*, ed. A.J. Rudin et.al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

Gary Dorrien's article, "Evangelical Ironies: Theology, Politics, and Israel," perhaps teaches all too little about Jewish-Evangelical relations – but for good reason. Dorrien provides a succinct history of Evangelicalism but then proceeds to suggest that the phenomenon is incredibly complex, encompassing both political conservatives and liberals. He suggests that the Christian Right, which has been the Evangelical movement's political voice, simply is not representative of the movement's diversity, and that if this group were to seek to represent the broader Evangelical world, it would find itself less at odds with mainstream Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.(121)

Gerald McDermott's article, "Evangelicals and Israel," is one of the most important pieces in this volume. After providing his understanding of "Evangelical," he presents a history of Evangelicals' relationship to Zionism and the state of Israel, followed by an exploration of their theology of the land. In all these, he compares and contrasts Evangelical and Fundamentalist approaches, as well as drawing regular comparisons to mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic positions. As a result, while the center of this essay is Evangelical views, it functions as well as a helpful succinct analysis of a broader spectrum of contemporary Christian understandings of Israel.

Two of the bolder pieces are placed towards the conclusion of the volume. Yehiel Poupko, in his "Jews and Evangelicals – Between Prophecy and *Mitzvo!*" observes that while the return of Jews to Israel is for Evangelicals "an event of profound religious and theological significance[, it] is for the majority of Jews a secular event."(160) This challenges Jews better to understand their own return to Zion. He claims, it cannot be seen as an act of divine prophecy, as a radically new communication from God,(162) but rather as a covenantal "summons to just, righteous, and holy living, to being worthy of the miracle."(163) At the same time, Poupko is deeply disturbed when this challenge comes from those actively seeking to convert Jews to Christianity.(158)

Mark Silk adds a pessimistic note to the conclusion of the volume in his "Last Things: The Future of Jews and Evangelicals in American Public Life." Reflecting on the public controversies where Evangelical leaders have voiced shock at the "failure" of American Jewish leaders to support the Evangelical social agenda in return for Evangelical support for Israel, Silk suggests that this is precisely the source of the unease between the two communities. The Evangelical community "should not expect their devotion to Israel, however expressed, to be enough to win a *nihil obstat* or vow of silence from American Jews."(185) Though he suggests that individual Jews and Evangelicals will continue to get along just fine, the two communities will have substantially different social agendas, making formal reconciliation difficult, if not impossible.

Beyond these, the volume includes a pair of articles by John C. Green and Barry Kosmin that give sociological profiles of the Evangelical and Jewish communities, Lawrence Grossman's history of the interactions between the organized Jewish community and Evangelical America, and George Mamo and Ethan Felson's somewhat more narrative reports of recent interactions between the two communities. The last three all work for community organizations and write from these perspectives. Carl Schrag's analysis of the factors determining current relationships is also useful.

Of course, since this 2005 conference, Republicans foundered badly in the midterm elections and Bush's approval ratings hit all-time lows. When this volume first appeared, it was not clear that the Evangelical vote would still carry organized clout in the 2008 elections. Thus, it is possible that in many ways, the moment addressed by this volume had already passed. The power of its analyses to explain more than this limited historical moment remains to be seen.