

Egal Feldman, *Catholics and Jews in Twentieth-Century America* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), xvi + 326 pp.

Feldman's third major work on Christian-Jewish relations in the U.S. is a mine of information and will be useful for any student of recent developments in relations between the Catholic and Jewish communities. *Catholics and Jews in Twentieth-Century America* argues that progress in Catholic-Jewish understanding has created an honest exchange over such contentious subjects as the attitude of Pius XII to the Holocaust and the relationship between Christianity and antisemitism. Written before the publication of *Dabru Emet* and before the controversies surrounding the works of James Carroll, John Cornwell, David Kertzer, and Gary Wills, the book summarizes key aspects of existing historical research on the subject and provides much new material — albeit nothing from the archives — on the current state of Jewish-Catholic debate.

The first half of the book gives a chronological account of the major events in Jewish-Catholic relations, from the Dreyfus affair to the Second Vatican Council, describing the success of American bishops in overcoming two thousand years of the “theology of contempt.” In the second half of the book, Feldman turns to the religious questions that dominate Catholic-Jewish dialogues today — the nature of Catholic antisemitism, the nature and objectives of the dialogue, the Catholic rediscovery of living Judaism, and the significance of the Holocaust, Zionism, and the State of Israel. Feldman draws extensively on material from Catholic journals and adds useful introductions to the motivations and biographies of figures not usually given the attention they deserve. He has also included a highly informative presentation of trends in Catholic missions to Jews and makes a distinctive contribution in examining the significance attributed to history in treatments of Jewish-Christian relations today.

Because he focuses on events at an international level, however, the examination of Jewish-Catholic encounters in the U.S. is less than thorough. There are no references to Louisiana, Texas, California, or New Mexico, where Jews and Protestants formed alliances in the face

of pre-existing Catholic settlements, nor to the Bible Belt, where Jews and Catholics alike lived at the margins of overwhelmingly Protestant societies. The book similarly lacks reference to developments in Jewish-Latino relations, there is only one footnote on Polish Catholics, no reference to black Catholics; and nothing on the impact of inter-ethnic politics on the Church in America. We learn virtually nothing of the unique political relationships that Jews and Catholics developed on the national level, particularly in New York, both in trade union and left-wing or liberal politics early in the century and later in sustaining support for the State of Israel in Congress. Instead, we are left with the impression that the political dimension of Catholic-Jewish relations was primarily a function of disagreements over the international threats posed by Communism and Nazism or Fascism and ideological opposition within the Church to Zionism. The book also overlooks distinctive Catholic-Jewish relationships in other major cities such as New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago, while the treatment of Catholic antisemitism in Baltimore appears with only the vaguest reference to the impact of one factor: Irish and German working-class prejudice. Without a broader social and political analysis going beyond a common stance against the Klan, it is difficult to understand the development of solidarity between Jewish and Catholic representative organizations and the development of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), phenomena driven by the insistent solidarity of many Jews and Catholic figures at the local level.

The many strengths of Feldman's treatment of theological questions faced in Catholic-Jewish dialogue are also counterbalanced by a few oversights. The shift of American Catholics from an apparently "anti-Jewish" stance before 1945 to increasing acceptance of the strengths of Judaism after 1960 is given remarkably little explanation. There is no reference to the struggles over "indifferentism," which meant many Catholics felt unable to participate in dialogue with Jews before Vatican II. Nor does the subsequent narrative treat the influence of Cardinal Ratzinger, of the Paulists, or of Catholic universities and seminaries. On the Jewish side, there is no examination of the impact of interdenominational politics within America on international dialogue with the Vatican and little discussion of differing Orthodox

responses to interfaith encounters, on the local level or amongst religious leaders.

At a number of points the narrative is strongly influenced by interpretations which appear unnecessarily partial, and this is aggravated into an impassioned polemic by a tendency to speculate and to generalize without supporting evidence. On key issues the assumptions underlying the narrative are not confronted with Catholic perspectives. A prime example is the suggestion that the “teaching of contempt” is not simply an error but an integral feature of Christian theology. Favourable treatment is therefore given to the minority of Catholic theologians who advance similar arguments or who believe that Christians must grapple with Auschwitz as a special theological category. Many in the Church would not accept the claim that “The Catholic Church admitted that its theology had engendered contempt for the Jew,” (227) a suggestion which Feldman advances in order to underline that the Church has completely repudiated supersessionism, but which is nevertheless a simplification. By contrast, Feldman gives short shrift to one theologian who believes that strengthening Christianity would distance Christians from antisemitism, and the book does not engage with those leading American Catholics who believe Pius XII’s silence was justifiable. A potted history of Zionism underscores the impression that this is a frankly partial account, with no mention of the Intifada or of American responses to the onset of the peace process, and without justification for dismissive remarks about King Hussein of Jordan and the very notion of “Palestinian refugees.” (214-16) Without detailed archival evidence, it is also hard to know whether and how far the “theology of contempt” prevented Catholics from countenancing support for Jewish rights. (e.g., 47)

Feldman has an eye for an important subject, and until there is further archival study covering the century, this book will remain the most useful overview of the subject in print.

---

*George R. Wilkes is a fellow of St. Edmund’s College and lectures there for the Theological Federation/Divinity Faculty. He is currently writing a history of Jewish-Christian relations in the twentieth century.*