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# MENORAH REVIEW



NUMBER 21 • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • WINTER 1991

## For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

### Van Gogh: A Case History in Religion and Art

#### *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*

By Cliff Edwards  
Chicago: Loyola University Press

A Review Essay by  
Cliff Edwards

Writing about one's own book runs the same risks as talking about one's own children. It is difficult to avoid being overly sensitive to an offspring's faults, on the one hand, and overly impressed by an offspring's achievements, on the other. Nevertheless, I believe there are significant enough lessons to be learned in the story of the writing of *Van Gogh and God* to justify my telling it.

Four years ago my interest in Asian studies led me to read the three large volumes of Van Gogh's personal letters to his brother, Theo, and others close to him. Certain works in art history had led me to believe the artist had been deeply influenced by Japanese art, and I wondered whether this might also include an interest in Buddhist thought. Reading the letters not only confirmed this "Oriental connection," but amazed me with an unexpected introduction to Van Gogh's knowledge of the Bible and poetic musings on the Judeo-Christian tradition. I pieced together the artist's lifelong wish to become a Dutch Reform pastor, his years of reading the Bible in five languages, his study of biblical languages with a sensitive young Jewish scholar named Mendes da Costa, tutoring in church doctrine and history, training in a school for evangelists and service as a Bible teacher, as a lay preacher in England and as an evangelist in the Belgian mining district.

I was disturbed by the fact that years of graduate training in religion had introduced me to thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Dostoevski, Freud and Marx as theological resources but had never mentioned Van

Gogh. Could the answer to such an omission be as simple as the fact that the artist's letters are cataloged in the art section rather than on the religion or wider humanities shelves of libraries? Or is it perhaps studies in the Judeo-Christian tradition so favor religion as "hearing and obeying" that any suggestion that religion might be expressed as "seeing and creating" is dismissed?

My next surprise came when I began reading the expensive art history volumes dealing with Van Gogh's life and works. With few exceptions, they assumed the artist's spiritual musings and biblical citations were little more than occasional lapses or aberrations on his part. When Van Gogh described his father's comparing him to "Esau" while brother Theo was "Jacob," few scholars seemed interested in looking up the Genesis story. When the artist painted a large Bible opened to a clearly marked "Isaiah, chapter 53," few seemed inclined to take seriously its implications for his manner of life and death.

By then I had begun wondering whether Van Gogh's paintings themselves had meanings that had escaped the critics who were so little interested in the artist's religious life. Could it be that the deeper significance of Van Gogh's life and paintings had fallen through the crack between two disciplines? I traveled to the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh in Amsterdam and studied the paintings and archives, following a variety of leads across Europe.

To put it simply, the results of my findings became the book, *Van Gogh and God*, focused on bringing together the artist's own words describing his religious thoughts

### IN THIS ISSUE

- *Van Gogh: A Case History in Religion and Art*
- *Lessons From the Holocaust*
- *Evil Is Alive and Well*
- *Religion and State: The Israel Model*

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and his paintings. I believe the reader will find a Vincent Van Gogh whose spiritual quest deeply influenced his paintings in ways not previously explored. I also believe the reader will find in Van Gogh an independent religious thinker whose creative mode of imaging makes a distinctive contribution to religion and spirituality.

Just as I began writing *Van Gogh and God*, I phoned a theologian I had never met but whose works had always meant a great deal to me, Henri Nouwen. A friend had told me she had once been in a seminar on Van Gogh taught by Henri Nouwen at Yale. Perhaps he was already writing the needed volume. During our conversation, Dr. Nouwen explained his deep interest in Van Gogh but noted his complete involvement in "Daybreak," a l'Arche community in Canada. He wished me well and even offered his own collection of slides and notes on Van Gogh for my use. In the "Foreword" Dr. Nouwen later contributed to *Van Gogh and God*, he wrote:

And now here is the book: *Van Gogh and God*. It almost seems that Cliff Edwards is telling me that I was not crazy after all when I spoke of

Vincent as one of the main spiritual guides in my life and when I invited students to discover him as a true source of theological reflection.

Perhaps the very making of *Van Gogh and God* "names" a legitimate resource persons here and there have already discovered but have been unable to discuss with a sympathetic community. My concern is that numerous creative resources in religion await such public "naming," and my guess is that many such resources lie hidden in the works of creative persons in the arts, a territory largely left unexplored by students of religion. Visual artists, in particular, seem to have been largely ignored by the mainstream of religious studies in the West. Some religious thinkers did speak for the rights of a maker of words in the "Rushdie Affair," but few have spoken for the visual arts in the current "Art Endowment Crisis." In fact, at this critical time for the arts, the American Academy of Religion has shamefully suspended its Arts, Literature and Religion Section at the 1990 National Meeting in New Orleans, and some within the organization have hinted there may no longer be a place for the arts within the Academy of Religion.

The above underlines a few lessons and lingering questions my work on the *Van Gogh and God* book has impressed upon me. The content of the book, the direction of Van Gogh's own spiritual search, is best demonstrated in his words and works as presented in the volume itself, but a hint or two is in order as I conclude. Van Gogh employs what I have come to call an "idiomorphic" approach to understanding God, experiencing God's nature through one's own deepest, personal experience of life. Because Van Gogh was an artist, he experienced God as an artist, and saw God's creativity through the prism of his own creative struggle through many failures. With some good humor, he wrote to comfort his ill brother regarding this flawed world:

I feel more and more that we must not judge of God from this world, it's just a study that didn't come off. . . . this world was evidently slapped together in a hurry on one of his bad days, when the artist didn't know what he was doing or didn't have his wits about him.  
(Letter 490)

Van Gogh's approach may remind one of rabbis who dared argue heatedly with God, or may suggest certain aspects of Process Theology. Van Gogh imagined this world as a noble failure, for only great artists attempt so much that they fail on a grand scale. This very provisional failure, however, assures one that the success of the Divine Artist's total "oeuvre" lies in its future development,

and hence this world's flaws become our "proof" of a more expansive future life. Death and human fragility, as in Isaiah's Servant Songs, signal humanity's future salvation. Van Gogh's God is preeminently a "Vulnerable God," best experienced in the presence of suffering and aged persons on the one hand, or in the love of a family for the fragile new life in the cradle. Van Gogh sketched, painted and wrote about such things.

But there is, of course, much more to Van Gogh's religion and art. Disappointed by institutional religion, he was drawn to a hope expressed by Tolstoy, whose words he quoted in his letters:

. . . there will be a private and secret revolution in men, from which a new religion will be born. . . .  
(Letter 542)

For Van Gogh, that spiritual revolution would issue in a global religion in which the Judeo-Christian tradition would join hands with Buddhism, and humanity would rediscover its deeper relationship with nature. I believe it is this global vision, and Van Gogh's discovery of a way of expressing the life of nature as it

interpenetrates with our own lives, that has made of his sunflowers, cypresses, fruit orchards, olive trees, irises and wheat fields iconic images that have haunted the populace East and West, and exploded the ceiling of the art market. The global appeal of a "nature mysticism" that was informed by cosmic images in the Psalms, Wisdom Literature, parables and Buddhist poetry in Van Gogh's mature words and works, an "oeuvre" completed at age 37 after only 10 years of painting:

I feel so strongly that it is the same with people as it is with wheat, if you are not sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter? — in the end you are ground between the millstones to become bread.

The difference between happiness and unhappiness! Both are necessary and useful, as well as death or disappearance. . . .  
(Letter 607)

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## Book Briefings

*The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages.* By Gershom Bader. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc. This monumental encyclopedia is the most comprehensive collection of biographies of the sages of the Talmud available in the English language. Details of their lives have been gathered, offering an understanding of their words, deeds, their personal lives and the historic setting in which they lived. The work is divided into three parts: "Mishnah," "Babylonian Talmud" and "Jerusalem Talmud."

*Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews.* By Sander L. Gilman. The John Hopkins University Press. The author examines the historiography of Jewish self-hatred and traces the response of Jewish writers, from the Middle Ages to contemporary America, to the charge that Jews are unable to command the language of the larger society in which they live. At the center of Gilman's provocative study is a problem of assimilation and identity. What do supposedly monolithic societies demand of an outsider before they will admit him/her to their fold? What happens to this outsider if he/she is never truly granted entrance?

*Between France and Germany: The Jews of Alsace-Lorraine, 1871-1918.* By Vicki Caron. Stanford University Press. This social and political history of Jews in Alsace-Lorraine during the period of German annexation serves as a case study of one of the central themes of the modern Jewish experience: the impact of national identification upon the processes of acculturation and integration. The author breaks new ground, focusing on the religious and cultural aspects of migration rather than giving the usual emphasis to economic determinants. The portrait of the Alsace-Lorraine Jews that emerges is considerably more nuanced and complex than that depicted by the polemics of the past.

*Biblical Themes in World Literature.* By Sol Liptzin. Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV Publishing House Inc. This volume calls attention to biblical characters, ideas and events that stimulated the creative imagination of writers in diverse lands and centuries. Poets, novelists, dramatists and scholars have reinterpreted biblical happenings and personalities. Topics range from a rehabilitation of Lilith, a discussion of Cain as an anti-establishment hero to Belshazzar's folly and the biblical tradition of democracy.

## Lessons From the Holocaust

### *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat*

by Robert Jay Lifton and  
Eric Markusen  
New York: Basic Books, Inc.

A Review Essay by  
Herbert Hirsch

That we study history to derive lessons is an oft-quoted aphorism. This book is an interesting but problematic attempt to derive from an examination of The Holocaust — the Nazi destruction of the European Jews — lessons that apply to the nuclear capability for world destruction. Lifton and Markusen argue that since there are “certain parallels” and similar “cast of mind” between Nazis and nuclear weapons strategists and designers, human beings should be able to examine The Holocaust and learn something of relevance for our time. The spirit informing the book is that a consideration of the psychological and moral dimensions of atrocities such as The Holocaust and the nuclear threat will allow human beings to become aware of how precarious their planetary being happens to be and will lead to the development of what Lifton and Markusen call a “species mentality.” How they travel from the “genocidal mentality” of The Holocaust and nuclear weapons strategists to the “species mentality” is a journey worth the price of a ticket even if the tracks are littered with barriers and the rails in less than prime condition.

In his preface Lifton points out that after completion of his monumental work, *The Nazi Doctors*, he “was convinced that certain forms of behavior in German society during the Nazi period had relevance for American and Soviet behavior in connection with nuclear weapons.” (p. xi) The comparisons and differences, he thought, would illuminate the contemporary crisis and, in Lifton’s words, “help open the way to alternative possibilities in the direction of human realization.” (p. xiii)

Lifton and Markusen begin by quoting Elie Wiesel:

“Once upon a time it happened to my people, and now it happens to all people. And suddenly I said to myself, maybe the whole world has turned Jewish. Everybody’s lives now facing the unknown.” (p. 1)

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The extermination of the Jews of Europe, Wiesel is pointing out, was a prologue rather than a conclusion. The Holocaust signified the crossing of the abyss so that, as Terrence Des Pres correctly notes, “The Final Solution has become a usual solution” (Des Pres, 1970, p. 4). Governments now are all too aware that genocidal extermination is a viable policy option when dealing with opposition or minority groups. Therecent extermination of the Kurds by Iraqi poison gas is simply one more example. Lifton and Markusen extend this notion to include human extermination as a policy option when nations confront each other in the sphere of international politics. Previous genocides, in particular The Holocaust, they argue, should force human beings to face the awful possibility that genocide, the extermination of a single group, might in the contemporary world of thousands of more efficient and more destructive weapons have been transformed into “omnicide” (Beres, 1984).

Lifton and Markusen believe there are “common patterns in Nazi genocide and potential nuclear genocide. . .” (p. 12). Each of these is manifested “genocidal ideology.” The Nazi’s genocidal ideology was found in their “biomedical vision” of racism —

“the idea that a cure for the sickness of the Nordic race lies in destroying the infecting agent — namely Jews; and in the case of the weapons, the ideology of nuclearism, the

exaggerated embrace of the weapons and dependency on them for security, peace and something close to salvation. Both ideologies were embraced as a resolution or “cure” for a severe historical trauma: the humiliating defeat in the First World War in the case of the Nazis; and the appearance of atomic weapons and their use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the nuclear case.” (p. 12)

Both ideologies, according to Lifton and Markusen, also included relatively large scale participation of professionals. In the Nazi case, physicians and biologists and in the nuclear case, physicists and strategists. A third parallel involves the psychological mechanisms that protected “individual people from inwardly experiencing the harmful effects . . . of their own actions on others.” Lifton and Markusen identify several of these, all of which function to “blunt human feelings.” (p. 13) The mechanisms include “dissociation or splitting, psychic numbing, brutalization and doubling.” (p. 13) Having identified these mechanisms they next define what they take them to mean.

Dissociation or splitting “is the separation of a portion of the mind from the whole, so that each portion may act in some degree separately from the other.” (p. 13) Psychic numbing “is a form of dissociation characterized by the diminished capacity or

inclination to feel, and usually includes the separation of thought from feeling." (p. 13) Doubling "carries the dissociative process still further with the formation of a functional second self, related to but more or less autonomous from the prior self." (p. 13) Finally, numbing and doubling may enable a person "with little psychological cost, to engage in sustained actions that cause harm to others," that is "brutalization." (p. 13)

As an example of "doubling" Lifton and Markusen focus on the Nazi doctors at Auschwitz who could participate in the "selections" and killings and yet carry on "normal" relationships with family. While the notion of "doubling" is theoretically appealing, I wonder if the authors aren't actually talking about the learning of differential roles. In contemporary society, for example, police officers who spend their time dealing with some of the most horrendous aspects of society have to develop mechanisms to adapt to their non-police roles. Do they double or do they simply learn to discriminate? What Lifton and Markusen refer to as "doubling" may be a survival technique employed by any human asked to perform functions they might find upsetting or distasteful. In addition, it will involve "numbing" only if one assumes that human beings aren't rewarded by and for performing such tasks. If, on the other hand, there is a reward structure that provides positive enticements to develop nuclear weapons — enticements such as prestige, large monetary reward, access to the corridors of power — then are those engaged in those actions numbing or doubling or have they learned to play the roles society has designed to gather the rewards of status and privilege? Similarly for the Nazis. While there are important insights to be derived from the concept of "psychic numbing," the assumptions upon which it is based are plainly individualistic and it is also necessary to examine the culture, the society, the politics and the economics of these complex situations. Individualistic explanations can take the historian only so far. One of the major problems with the Lifton and Markusen analysis, therefore, is that it essentially ignores the complexity of the human environment placing undue emphasis on individual psychology and, consequently, oversimplifying a genuinely complex set of problems into a much too neat set of answers. The "issue of how men and women can be apparently normal and yet killers" (p. 14) cannot be examined only within the content of the individual psyche.

In fact, this very issue has received attention from some of the best minds of the late twentieth century. Hannah Arendt, mentioned only in passing (p. 232), examined what she referred to as "the banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963). For Arendt there is no

doubling or dissociation. In fact, congruent with the arguments put forth by Stanley Milgram (1974), Arendt points out that evil is most likely committed by "normal" people pursuing their everyday jobs — following the orders of authority and obeying without question. If these jobs happen to include manufacturing, targeting or firing nuclear weapons into Soviet or American cities, or releasing Zyklon B into gas chambers, the dynamic isn't any different from that of any bureaucratic functionary. In any case, people learn, according to Milgram, to perform their jobs without asking questions about the moral or ethical outcomes. They are numb because they have been trained to be numb and because the reward structure of the society reinforces numbness.

Even with these limitations Lifton and Markusen have interesting things to say about the historical parallels between The Holocaust and nuclearism. Based on interviews with weapons strategists and using Lifton's earlier interviews with Nazi doctors, they describe the evolution of the genocidal mentality in all of its frightening clarity. The historical precedents, including the strategic bombing during World War II, the role of technology, the development of atomic and hydrogen bombs, and the allure of nuclearism are all described as leading to the development of the doctrine of deterrence and ultimately to the strategy of war fighting with nuclear weapons viewed as part of the strategic arsenal.

A large portion of their analysis is focussed on the strategy of deterrence. Deterrence, they argue, is a prime example of the process of dissociation because it "requires a psychological aberration by which the mind separates, or 'dissociates,' from certain of its elements." (p. 192) What they mean is that certain mental processes are separated from the rest of the mind and separated from feelings as well as from consciousness of other categories. Dissociation involves numbing, doubling, disavowal and denial and, in short, is the psychic cover over the pot filled with the developing genocidal mentality. Basically, according to Lifton and Markusen, dissociation is the means people use to "remain sane in the service of social madness." (p. 193) After demonstrating how these mechanisms operated in both the Nazi and nuclear case, Lifton and Markusen focus on deterrence. They define deterrence as part of what they refer to as "the dissociative field," which was based on the assumption that "we must be prepared to kill hundreds of millions of people in order to prevent large-scale killing, to cure the world of genocide." (p. 226) The contradiction was that killing was the cure for large-scale killing, but does this require "dissociation"? Can people be motivated to kill without

dissociating? Suppose, in fact, all people have within themselves the contradictory impulses for helping or killing, and suppose these are expressed or not, depending upon the cues emanating from one's society and culture — as I argued earlier in referring to Arendt's theses on the "Banality of Evil." Further, suppose these impulses aren't the result of dissociating or numbing, and, in fact, "normal" human beings operate this way in the pursuit of their daily lives. The person picking up a child who has fallen off her or his bicycle may very well be the same person who tells anti-ethnic jokes or who condemns minorities or who, when ordered to do so, might commit violence. In short, suppose the Nazis did know, suppose they supported Hitler because they didn't like Jews or because they could benefit from their destruction — why should they like them, after all, after thousands of years of antisemitic propaganda? Suppose those making weapons do know how the blast and heat will tear apart human bodies. Probably, humans are neither wholly good nor evil but influenced by political and social conditions and expressions of their leaders. It is, therefore, possible for the same person to pick up the hurt child and stand over a Vietnamese child in the village of Son My, hamlet of My Lai, and pull the trigger. All this would mean that creating the conditions to tap the better side of our nature becomes the single most important factor, and dissociation and doubling, if that is what they are, are symptoms or are caused by the conditions. In this case, the type of society, the type of polity, the type of economy, the language of leaders and the cultural traditions that are socialized and passed to future generations are all more important in shaping the psyche. Lifton and Markusen, while they have a great deal to say, miss this complexity. Their book, which is very well intentioned in its criticism of the destructive impulses and calls for the development of a species mentality, neglects these aspects and, consequently, cannot even offer suggestions as to how one travels from the genocidal mentality to the species mentality.

"Species mentality," according to Lifton and Markusen, is a "moral equivalent" to the "genocidal mentality." It is life enhancing as opposed to life destroying. How the world develops this species mentality isn't clear. What is clear is that Lifton and Markusen hope, as I do, that when confronted with the situation in which one might be ordered to commit an act of human destruction one will say "No, I won't do it!" (p. 257) Other than calling for the replacement of the deference system, and becoming "conscious of ourselves as members of the human species . . ." (p. 258) it isn't clear how humanity will move from genocidal to species mentality. Of course,

developing an ethical core for the professions is a necessary thing to do, but how? And how do we escape from the "Cartesian sickness" of scientism and technicism when they dominate our views of the contemporary world? Lifton and Markusen, along with many other recent analysts (Hirsch and Hirsch, 1990) argue for the formation of a global consciousness. Once again, however, there are no proposed alternative processes. They describe global consciousness, meaning, that all human beings share the fragile globe and that we must act to preserve rather than destroy it. And they conclude with an eloquent call for each of us to "join in a vast project — political, ethical, psychological — on behalf of perpetuating and nurturing our humanity." (p. 279) But all of this, while inspiring and important, becomes problematic when it neglects to confront the hard question of how humanity gets from here to where we all might wish to be.

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## Evil is Alive and Well

*Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*  
by Jon P. Levenson  
San Francisco: Harper & Row

A Review essay by  
Matthew B. Schwartz

In a scholarly, finely honed and interesting book, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Professor Jon Levenson of the University of Chicago argues that in a current of thought proceeding from the ancient Near East through the Hebrew Bible and into later Rabbinic writings, forces of evil are seen as playing a role both in the creation of the world and in the later covenants between deity and man. How did the ancients view the nature of these forces and what was their role in a divinely ordered universe? Levenson uses historical method and perhaps this book can be classified as "History of Ideas." But it is also theology, although sensitive and insightful rather than ponderous, combative or irritatingly didactic. Levenson has made admirably good sense of a difficult topic. We shall offer (1) some account of Levenson's ideas and then (2) suggest a separate approach to the issue of evil from the ancient Hellenic to modern psychology and sociology, which parallels and perhaps supplements Levenson's, yet is quite different.

I. Levenson: While Hebrew accounts of creation bear little resemblance to the Mesopotamian theogonies like the *Enuma Elish*, several biblical sources do speak of conflicts between the Creator and monsters like Rahab, Leviathan and the like. The Divine mastery isn't extant from eternity but is something won. Creation signifies a restoration rather than an instituting of order, and the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* must be considered inadequate.

There is a continuing tension between the forces of chaos and creation in which chaos occasionally shows its great strength, as with the flood of Noah's day (and perhaps the Holocaust). Biblical creation is thus a continuing not a definitive act, and God must be a continuing lord of a covenant as well as of the initial creation. Evil remains a formidable force in the world, and part of the continuing drama of divine history, a fact that other optimistic religionists generally don't appreciate.

Chaos in the biblical scheme doesn't work counter to the divine plan for the world. It serves an orderly purpose and shall

pass on when it is no longer needed. These ideas are clear, proceeding from Near East mythology to the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic eschatology, although more legalistic and exegetic than passionate or hysterical, also recognizes the conflict between chaos and creation. There continues in Jewish thinking a sense of the conflict and disequilibrium inherent in the world.

In the biblical set, however, the dark forces can be controlled and eventually overcome by means of obedience to the cultus established in the Bible. The cultus builds and maintains order, transforms chaos into Creation, ennobles humanity and brings to realization the kingship of God. Man can himself become holy, "You shall be holy because I am holy," and can take part in the creativity of the world. It is fundamental to the Hebrew Bible that the Israelite can live only by obeying God. This differs quite sharply from the view that concentrates on rights not duties. The continuation of order is a function of the subordination of human beings to God, who holds in check the virulent persistent forces of destruction.

How shall a human being relate to God through obedience without surrendering his individuality and creativity? Or in biblical terms — how does the Abraham who argues so persistently with God against the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18) mesh with the Abraham who is so quietly willing to sacrifice his son at the divine command (Genesis 22)? Levenson sees no contradiction. Both are necessary. Genesis 18 alone would lead to "human values practiced because they are right, not because God commanded them," and lacks the compelling necessity of personal obedience and faithfulness to the divine master, which is the essence of the covenant. Genesis 22 alone would lead to a fanaticism in which faithfulness would be indistinguishable from mindless slavish obedience. Together the two stories exemplify a theology in which human judgment neither replaces God's command nor is superfluous.

II. A reaction to Levenson: The word "evil" has become alien to modern thinking, calling up, as it does, troubling images of Elmer Gantry, Charles Manson and Jonestown. We prefer to deal with such matters by relegating them to the world of cults and deep psychoanalysis and we like to hear our leaders speak of a "kinder, gentler America." We gloss over the sort of chaos so visible in ancient literature. Yet Sigmund Freud, who reintroduced in a new form into Western thinking the idea of a turbulent, destructive subsurface, rooting many of his ideas in another ancient culture, the Hellenic, developed the concept of a human unconscious mind in which the unrestrained waters of chaos surge triumphant. Freud and Levenson are closely related, although one



deals in theological and the other in psychological terms, with highly significant implications for modern thought in both.

Let us explore briefly this sort of chaos of the human mind and thought that is so pervasive in Greek literature and that supplements the concept of evil Levenson sees in the ancient Middle East. Despite a widespread view of the Hellenic world as one of sweetness and light, as in writers like Edith Hamilton, the Greek hero was in reality forced into a struggle that he could never win and from which he couldn't step out. He was trapped into Hobson's choices in which every decision was self-destructive.

As the *akedah* may be a foundation story of Judaism, the story of Oedipus and the sphinx is a foundation story for Greek thought. The monstrous sphinx waylays travelers near Thebes and propounds to them a riddle. If they fail to answer, she will devour them. What walks on four legs in the morning, two at mid-day and three in the evening? Oedipus is the first to answer correctly. It is man who goes through this cycle of birth, maturation and decline. Oedipus is enabled to slay the sphinx; but by answering the riddle and accepting its premise, he has shown himself to accept the cyclical view that life must end in human destruction. In theological terms, he accepts the existence of inescapable forces of evil and ultimate doom in himself and in the world around him. In fact, this premise seems central in Greek literature. It is a world in which, unlike the biblical, the forces of evil Leviathans and the like (harpies, furies, medusas, shades and, indeed, Olympian gods) serve in place of a beneficent Creator as wielders of power. This was a current in Greek life and thought understood profoundly by brilliant writers like Sophocles and Euripides. But they had no better answer for man than to lie low and try to avoid trouble.

The Athenian theater depicted man in a hopeless struggle against undefeatable pressures — not merely against an idea of Fate but against a world dominated by capricious and chaotic forces that demanded from the individual more than the greatest heroism could pay. It was of the nature of heroism to be ultimately useless. The earth thirsted for human blood (as in *Antigone*), contrary winds exacted human sacrifice before ships could sail (as in *Iphigenia at Aulis*), and long dead ancestors demanded control over the lives of offspring whom they preferred to slay aborning.

Man cannot fulfill his obligation to these powers merely by carrying out a certain cultus or set of commands, as Levenson notes in regard to the Hebrew system. In the Hellenic schema, the hero constantly seeks new challenges and heroic deeds of self-sacrifice in a futile drive to appease

capricious, chaotic, super-human powers. The highest attempt to satisfy these unappeasable forces is suicide or at least heroic self-sacrifice, a sort of ritual self-murder in which one must give all of himself in a hopeless effort to satisfy the insatiable. Self-destruction was an end sought by all sorts of famous Greeks from Homeric warriors like Ajax to Hellenistic philosophers like Zeno the Stoic. Even a man so full of *joie de vivre* as Socrates was said by his student, Xenophon, to have conducted his trial before the Athenian jury so as to ensure the passing of the death sentence he desired.

The Greek, in his world view, lacked two major elements of which Levenson speaks: (1) a god who created Order and restricted Chaos, and (2) a Covenant that involved obligations to and from a friendly and fair deity.

Once the Greek hero was in trouble and under pressure, there was no stopper in the steady deterioration into a suicidal mood. Biblical figures who express despair or even a death wish like Moses, Elijah or Jonah can rely on a nurturing God to intervene and to help them through their troubles. They need not face a superhuman power that thirsts for their blood.

Two final points. The Greek Chaos is intensified by the fact that, unlike biblical man, the Greek is often deprived of knowledge. Oracles were teasing, ambiguous and self-serving, like Teiresias' warnings to Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* and the Delphic Oracle's reply to King Croesus (Herodotus *History* I: 52f). They were designed not to reveal knowledge but to increase the power of the oracle. Narcissus, like Oedipus, can survive only as long as he doesn't know himself. The biblical prophet and teacher, however, must give over information, explaining ambiguities in the clearest manner. Parables are used (like Nathan's to David) as a sophisticated teaching device to clarify a point, not to obscure it. God and man intercommunicate. Thus the Greek system fosters and submits to chaotic tensions; the biblical world controls and reduces them.

Another area worthy of examination is the ways in which the various literatures deal with blood. In the Greek plays, the earth thirsts for the blood of the slain. In the Hebraic view, sacrificial meat and blood aren't seen as nourishment for a Deity. An in-depth study of this area from a perspective like Levenson's would be of interest.

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## Religion and State: The Israel Model

*Jewish Theocracy*  
by Gershon Weiler  
New York: E.J. Brill, Inc.

A Review essay by  
Steven F. Windmueller

Gershon Weiler's efforts to take us into the history of Jewish religious and political thought was unfortunately crafted 12 years prior to the momentous events surrounding the crisis of "Who Is A Jew" that framed Jewish and Israeli political discussions during the fall 1988. This text, originally written in 1976, was first published in Hebrew, but didn't appear in its English language edition until the summer 1987. Beyond the fact that this publication failed to encompass the flow of events marking the most significant crisis in internal Israeli politics, this wearisome text prods and pulls its readers along through the saga of philosophical treatise, all along seeking to dismiss Halakha (Jewish religious law and practice), as having any validity or credibility in a modern political state or system. Weiler's thesis is built on the premise that Jewish law is "strictly incompatible with the liberal-democratic state." To achieve his case, the author carries us through more than 330 pages of argument, designed in the end to frame his conclusion that the idea of Halakha is diametrically opposed to the principles of modern Jewish statehood.

The energy that has been expended by this author is to suggest that a Halakha-based political system runs counter to the notion of a modern, secular, democratic society where loyalties normally and appropriately directed toward the state would be subverted and controlled by a belief system based on a theocratic model. To achieve these conclusions and findings, we are invited to review the philosophies of Philo, Maimonides, Abravanel and Spinoza amongst others, whose thought processes and teachings are offered to us as background to a better understanding of the fallacy of linking religious practice with a modern, secular state system.

Part three of this volume is devoted exclusively to an analysis of the relationship of Halakha to the State of Israel, which could have offered Gershon Weiler an excellent opportunity to analyze and critique the actual relationship and character of religion and state in Israeli society. Unfortunately, the direction that was chosen is one that seeks

*continued, page 8*

## Book Briefings

***The Monological Jew: A Literary Study.*** By L.S. Dembo. The University of Wisconsin Press. Original Paperback. The author analyzes the image of the Jew in fiction and poetry from the perspective of Martin Buber's ideas on human relationships and modes of communication. The underlying motif of this fascinating book is the distinction between "monologue" — self-oriented speech associated with life in an amoral, competitive society — and "dialogue," the speech of true communication in which the individual person becomes fully aware of himself through the presence of another.

***Heroes and Hustlers, Hard Hats and Holy Men.*** By Ze'ev Chafetz. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc. This is an insider's view of Israel and what makes it tick. The book is organized around the disparity between mythological Israel and the real one. It is an essentially affectionate and respectful report on a nation with more internal contradictions and characters than anyplace else on earth. People and events are described and analyzed, the reader is shown how these disparate elements fit together and what they mean for the future of the country. Here are the real people of Israel in a penetrating, iconoclastic and, often, humorous report of the place the author calls "a good country in a bad neighborhood."

***Smashing the Idols: A Jewish Inquiry into the Cult Phenomenon.*** By Gary D. Eisenberg. Jason Aronson Inc. Noted cult expert Eisenberg brings together the observations and insights of the leading cult investigators, speaking powerfully and effectively about the impact cults are having on the Jewish community. Eisenberg demonstrates that, in comparison to the larger U.S. population, Jews are greatly overrepresented in cults. Indeed, some cults even see Jews as their primary targets. But recent decades have shown no age group or religious community is immune to the influence of cults. Anyone in a transitional stage of life may be swept in by the promise of "answers" and new friends. Using a variety of tactics, cults have gained inroads into every area of American society. In this study, 26 experts provide insights into and advice on how to resist the methods these organizations use to attract new members.

***The Inter-marriage Handbook.*** By Judy Petsok and Jim Remsen. New York: Arbor House/William Morrow. This book is a comprehensive guide to the decisions and problems faced by everyone involved in an interfaith marriage. The authors offer practical advice on how to deal with everything from the days of courtship to coping with the wedding and in-laws to the question of how to raise children to the dilemma of how to handle a funeral. The authors provide the reader with a variety of options as well as listing many of the resources available to the intermarried couple: counseling organizations, religious institutions where the couple can feel comfortable, even ways to find someone to officiate at the wedding.

***Jewish Times: Voices of the American Jewish Experience.*** By Howard Simons. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. This is a carefully crafted portrait of Jewish life in America drawn from a series of interviews conducted by the journalist-author who looked for childhood and family stories, folk memories and "grandmothers' tales" that best reveal the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in America.

***A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse Under Islam.*** By Gordon Darnell Newby. University of South Carolina Press. The Jewish communities of Arabia had great influence on the attitudes that Muslims hold toward Jews, and yet relatively little has been written about their history. The sources are sparse, and Arabic literary texts from the early period of Islam remain the greatest source of our understanding of Arabian Judaism. Through techniques borrowed from anthropology, literary criticism, sociology and comparative religion, this book reconstructs some understanding of Jewish life in Arabia before and during the time of Muhammad.

The main sections of the book focus on the Jews we know most about, the Jews of Hijaz shortly before and during the time of Muhammad and the rise of Islam. In addition to reconstructing the history of Arabian Jews, the material is used to develop a perspective on the inter-confessional relations between Judaism and Islam when Islam was at one of its most dynamic stages of growth.

***Women and World Religions (2nd edition).*** By Denise Lardner Carmody. Prentice Hall. In this second edition, the author draws on recent feminist scholarship and presents actual accounts by various women about the meanings of being Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim. She incorporates social-scientific studies that have been sanctioned by the prevailing religious orthodoxy and shed new light on women's images and roles. To give a complete picture of women's experience with the world religions, the author strikes a fair balance between women's testimonies and the official, usually male-dominated authorities or traditional writings.

***The Jews in Polish Culture.*** By Aleksander Hertz. Northwestern University Press. One of Poland's most distinguished sociologists meditates on the history of the Jewish community in Poland from its dim beginnings approximately 1,200 years ago, analyzing the relationships that existed between the shtetl and the larger Polish society, outlining the permutations of Polish antisemitism up to the present.

The unifying idea of Hertz's work, as well as its most provocative, is that the Jews of Poland constituted a caste within the rigidly hierarchical framework of Polish society as a whole. With the breakdown of Polish society generally at the end of the 19th and the beginnings of the 20th century, the Jewish population lost its traditional place.

***Beyond Appearances: Stories From the Kabbalistic Ethical Writings.*** Edited by Aryeh Wineman. The Jewish Publication Society. Fifty-four charming and evocative tales, especially translated from Hebrew for this volume, recapture a rich yet virtually forgotten chapter in the history of Jewish narrative. They form the important transitional link between the esoteric mystical teachings of the 16th century Kabbalists and the populist tales of the 18th century Eastern European Hasidim. An overriding message in the stories is that the true meaning of things is not necessarily what they seem; it can be "beyond appearances." Wineman's introductory essay presents the historical setting and the ethos of the community that produced this body of Jewish imaginative writing. He also prepared the excellent commentary around the stories that recapture a rich yet forgotten chapter of Jewish narrative.

*Inclusion of a book in "Briefings" does not preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.*



only to emphasize the ideological conflicts inherent in a "Church-State" relationship; i.e., modern Zionism in conflict with traditional Judaism, rather than examples of actual problems facing Israeli society.

This is clearly not the first occasion in which an author, given the opportunity to address a significant issue, has done so from only a narrow, marginal focus, thereby losing the opportunity to appropriately address and frame the historic, institutional and political basis pertaining to the debate between religion and state in Israeli society. If all one can draw from the exercise of the Weiler text is the generalized conclusions outlined below, then it is quite apparent the subject matter requires another, more profound effort than has been put forth here. Weiler notes: "... the interest of the state requires that such a competing normative system be limited in competence to those areas of life that are typical of the competence of religious authorities in the modern democratic state. This requires, first of all, that the state should not use its own sanctions to enforce the subjection of the citizen to that other normative system. In other words, the state should keep clear of religious matters by establishing not only freedom of religion, which is a fact in Israel, but also freedom from religion, which is, at this time, a dream of a far away future. The state should be

concerned only with citizens and with establishing norms pertaining to citizens. Any other capacity that a citizen may have, such as his religious affiliation, should be of no interest to the state."

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its Israeli counterparts, leaving aside many other religious communities, would welcome a research venture designed to document the actual character of religious and state relationships operating in Israel and in other societies, including Iran and Pakistan. Such a documentation could help frame particular valuable insights into the origins and practices of state religions and the manner by which

certain societies have gained a level of agreement and balance between the principles of state and the criteria of religious law and practice. This type of investigation could well lead us to an understanding of both psychological and theological motivations that drive and shape such individuals and groupings as the Ayatollah Khoumani and the religious political right within Israel. The Western mind, and in particular its political traditions, that have nurtured the concept of separation of religion from the power of the state, has little or no experience or perception in dealing with the integrationist mentality of the religious fundamentalists. As such, fear and anger emerge over efforts to "impose" religious practice on a nation-state system.

The material prepared by Gershon Weiler to aid us in understanding these concepts falls short of that mark. What it does offer us is the challenge to frame a different direction in our quest for understanding theocracies, and the need to pursue a well-grounded social history of the phenomenon of church-state politics.

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