



McGarry, Michael B. C.S.P. | 31.08.2007

Challenges in Jewish-Christian Relations

**James K. Aitken and Edward Kessler, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006.
280 pages, including bibliography and index. \$24.95.**

Review by Rev. Michael B. McGarry, C.S.P.

More than thirty years of experience in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in North America have conditioned my eyes and mind to look for regular themes, positions, and players in books about Jewish-Christian relations. At the same time, my geographical location –now close to nine years of living in Jerusalem –has heightened other sensitivities that necessarily affect the way I look at new literature in the field. From that experience, I have now read James Aitkin and Edward Kessler’s new volume *Challenges in Jewish-Christian Relations*.

As a series of reports on interreligious themes of interest in North America and English-speaking Europe, *Challenges* is a fine book, a very fine book indeed. Although one cannot avoid using the word “uneven” in any essay collection, this compilation fares better than most in sustaining a consistently high standard. Furthermore, Aitkin and Kessler have gathered essays from scholars who, for the most part, are not as popularly known in the field and certainly many of whom represent a new generation who will move relations forward. And they have addressed an array of topics which – for good and ill (more on this below) –represent an agenda that has become *de rigueur* in North America and the UK.

These topics include the *Shoah*, the State of Israel, feminism, history, and Jewish-Christian relations within a wider framework of interreligious relations. And why should this agenda not be regularly attended to? How can one speak as Jews and Christians to one another without attending to history, to the *Shoah*, and to the State of Israel? Indeed. So for that reason and for the regularly high quality of the essays, especially for those beyond the “beginner’s stage” of Jewish-Christian relations, I wholeheartedly recommend this book as representing the *status questionis* of the traditional Jewish-Christian dialogue. Let me point out four particularly thoughtful pieces.

Seldom have I not been profoundly educated when reading anything by Marc Saperstein. His clarity, evenhandedness, and insight regularly exemplify why historical study in Jewish-Christian relations need not only be a lugubrious litany of bloody incidents, but also –and more importantly – a reflection on salutary moments when Jews and Christians nourished one another. As he rightly notes, “when contemporary Jews approach contemporary Christians with the attitude, ‘Your ancestors persecuted my ancestors,’ all communication is tainted by smug self-righteousness on the one side, and either an understandable defensiveness or a self-abasing vicarious contriteness on the other” (p. 18). Saperstein does not claim that relations are symmetrical, but he makes the case by dramatic illustrations that historical study is more for enlightenment about how we can be better in the future than about scoring points about the misdeeds of the past.

In another, less evenhanded essay, the late, much beloved Dominican Remi Hoekman writes with some frustration about different expectations emanating from each side in the Catholic-Jewish encounter. This happens when, for instance, a Catholic agenda, usually irenic and theological, bumps into some Jewish agencies’ agenda whose interests are less theological and more to serve their constituencies interests. To be sure, his is an expression of aggravation. As he approvingly quotes

Rabbi Henry Siegman, "it is [clear] that we [Jewish and Catholics] come to each other with different agendas" and that sometimes these differing agendas have sought to manipulate the other. (p. 70)

This reminds me of the great Jewish theologian Eugene Borowitz (sadly cited only once or twice in the volume) who once said that we will know that the Jewish-Christian conversation has reached a state of maturity when it moves from dialogue to argument. While not fully agreeing with Borowitz, I do believe that Hoeckman's argument accurately reflects one feeling by one veteran in the relationship. Sometimes those outside the usual "club" of the dialogue have been regarded, by their co-religionists, as having "sold out" to the other in order to maintain good relations and a place at the table. The trust that some have built up in long years of thoughtful, but polite conversations sometimes yields a new stage, a new moment when what was formerly "improper" is allowed to become the main topic on the table. And that, from my perspective, is progress. However, those who cannot or will not move from their private agenda often have a vested interest in keeping certain pots stirring. Hoeckman makes us reflect on one uncomfortable "challenge" in our relations with one another.

From my perspective, the most important development from the Jewish side over the last ten years was the publication of *Dabru Emet* which the editors ably and thoughtfully review. This is probably the most substantive and important contribution of the whole volume.

Finally, both Nicholas de Lange's and Irina Levinskaya's essays on Orthodox Christianity's engagement with Jews and Judaism are wonderful examples of how humble and honest scholarship illuminate an awkward situation...and how it might change.

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that the array of topics was - for good and ill - the agenda which must be addressed. I now return to why I said "for ill." It is not really "for ill" as such, but rather that parts of the agenda have become tired or worn.

What I would have liked to have encountered in this volume were voices from Oriental Judaism who might speak to relations, historical and contemporary, between Jews and Christians. Or how about how/whether new American and British immigrants encounter native Jewish communities? I would have liked to have less of an emphasis on the Vatican and *Nostra Aetate* in particular and more of a consideration of Protestant (Orthodoxy was well attended to) engagement with Judaism. Too often here and in other places, Jewish-Christian relations is equated with Jewish-Catholic relations and, more narrowly, with Jewish-Vatican or Papal relations. Finally, from my vantage point at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, I would have liked to have read reflections on how Jewish-Christian relations emerge where,- and there is only one place for this,- Jews are a majority. Since 1948, a new reality in the world allows for a new dialogical context and maybe new challenges.

Having said this, again I highly recommend this book for parish and diocesan ecumenical officers, seminarians, priests and anyone who wishes to review, in an orderly and intelligent fashion, the current state of Jewish-Christian relations. Among well educated Jews and Christians, *Challenges* might profitably be used as a weekly, chapter-by-chapter discussion project.

One should never review or lament the book that was not written. But one can yearn for what I would call, "*More Challenges*" or the "*New Challenges*" in Jewish Christian Relations. And I can think no one more capable of preparing this than Aitkin and Kessler. Perhaps Marc Saperstein's final sentences might mark such a direction. During medieval times, "Judaism survived and flourished not because of its insularity but precisely because of [its] openness. Indeed, each side was capable of learning from the other, of using the other not just as a dangerous or demonic adversary, but also as a challenge to creative competition in ethical and religious living. Perhaps that is a mold that can help us set our agenda today" (p. 30). Or at least write our next book.

Paulist Father Michael McGarry is the Rector of Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem
