

## REVIEW

Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), paper, xiv + 274 pp.

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Irving Greenberg is widely recognized as a provocative thinker and writer on a variety of subjects of great concern to the Jewish community, including, but not limited to, Jewish-Christian relations. This volume consists of seven previously published essays as well as two written specifically for this volume.<sup>1</sup> Greenberg is sometimes described as a Holocaust theologian, a term with which he himself was never comfortable, “for the category seemed to turn the *Shoah* into the ‘God’ of the system, the source of command and obligation. As an Orthodox Jew, I felt totally commanded by *ha-Shem* and embraced the entire tradition.” Nonetheless, he admits “the Shoah was the occasion – the adventitious, personal stimulus – but not the essential cause of the needed shift in religious thinking” (p. 29).

These words come from one of Greenberg’s new essays, “On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey,” which, true to its title, is both a spiritual and an intellectual autobiography, charting the evolution of his thought and the influences of personal experience, history, and the writings of others. The two scholars he credits as his most important influences are the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (p. 5). The latter, a leading Orthodox authority, was wary of interreligious dialogue; his view set the standard for much of American Orthodox involvement in Jewish-Christian relations and is still influential.<sup>2</sup> Greenberg differed with his beloved teacher on interfaith dialogue and some of Greenberg’s writings, especially his views on pluralism and Jesus, eventually brought him into conflict with the Orthodox community and led to his “being brought up on charges of heresy and violations of Orthodox disciplines before my rabbinic organization, the Rabbinical Council of America” (p. 33). Though this process was never completed, it was clearly very painful for Greenberg. The tribulations he endured may have helped pave the way for the recent increased involvement of Orthodox Jews in Jewish-Christian dialogue in North America.

In the previously published essays one sees how Greenberg has developed the key concepts that define his essential theological question: How are Jews to make sense of major historical events? Greenberg argues that there is revelation in history, as seen not only in Sinai, but also in the emergence of Christianity, the destruction of the Second Temple, the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are brief responses to the book by James Carroll, David Novak, Michael Novak, Mary C. Boys, and Krister Stendhal, as well as a Study Guide.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this subject, see “Rabbi Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later” (<http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/>) and Marshall Breger, “A Reassessment of Rav Soloveitchik’s Essay on Interfaith Dialogue: ‘Confrontation’” in this volume of *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* (<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art18>).

The most provocative aspect of this theology for Jews, and for Christians for that matter, and most relevant for this review, is the concept of covenantal pluralism and, more specifically, Greenberg's treatment of Jesus. Accepting at face value the reports of the followers of Jesus to have experienced the risen Christ, he writes "Far be it for me as a Jew to prescribe for Christians or for God what happened in that religious experience" (p. 194). He rejects the view that pluralism is a code word for relativism: "[W]e hold on to our absolutes, however, we make room for the other's as well" (p. 196). Indeed, "[p]luralism is a profound form of *imitatio dei*... that must lead to partnership – my truth/faith system cannot alone fulfill God's dream" (pp. 210-211). Each tradition was shaped in both positive and negative ways by the historical circumstances in which they developed. However, "Judaism and Christianity were jointly and severally intended to play a part in an infinite creator's plan to perfect the world" (p. 49).

Greenberg's assessment of Jesus is probably the most provocative aspect of the book. He describes Jesus as a "failed messiah," a concept that, "to my regret has gone almost nowhere with Jews and Christians alike..." (p. 32). Greenberg offers "failed messiah" as a more positive evaluation than the more common Jewish view of Jesus as a "false messiah." There have been many "failed messiahs," individuals who have helped move the world toward redemption but have not completed the task and thereby must be considered failures. However, most Jews are unwilling to grant any religious significance to Jesus, while Christians will struggle to understand that Greenberg intends "failed messiah" as an "honorific." Greenberg is aware of the challenge this poses but notes that other responsibilities have prevented him from pushing his views more aggressively in either community.

Post-Holocaust Christian theologians, in an effort to purge Christianity of supersessionism have offered different ways of affirming Judaism's covenant with God and its continuing role in the unfolding of God's plan for humanity. Greenberg is among the few Jews who have attempted a similar task in regard to Christianity. This collection, especially with the new essays, is an important contribution to the dialogue between Jews and Christians.