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Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Scholarship. By Yaacov Deutsch

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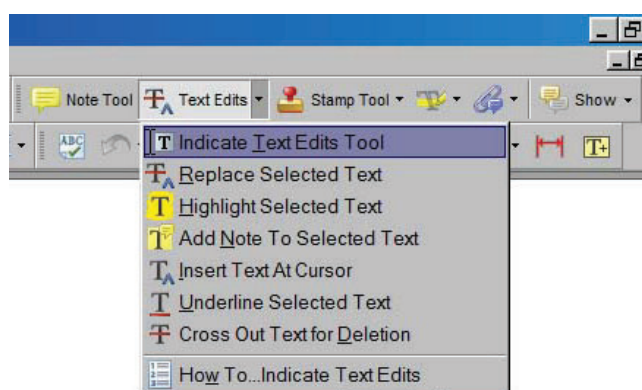


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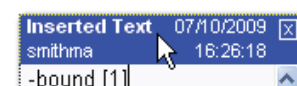
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BOOK REVIEW

Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Scholarship. By Yaacov Deutsch. Translated by Avi Aronsky. Oxford University Press, 2012. 320 pages. \$74.00.

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Yaacov Deutsch has written a terrific book on an important subject. When taken together with Stephen G. Burnett's insightful book on Christian Hebraism, we now have a much more detailed, accurate, and nuanced picture of the changing ways Christians viewed Jews in the early modern period and the motivations that lead Christians (and this includes Jewish converts to Christianity) to produce what Deutsch describes as "ethnographies" of Jews and Judaism. Among the important points Deutsch makes is that these early modern ethnographies represented a significant shift in Christian interests from the theological critique of Judaism characteristic of early Christian and medieval polemics to a new concern with Jewry and Jewish ethnicity. This shift of interest reflected the economic and cultural changes accompanying the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the encounter with foreign peoples promoted by increased trade, travel, and European colonization, and the new validation of curiosity and emphasis on eye-witnessing characteristic of the Scientific Revolution. While both medieval and early modern treatises on Judaism can be described as polemical, the object of the polemics moves away from the short-comings of Jewish theology to the critique of Jewish customs and practices. But as Deutsch points out, the critical nature of the early modern polemic was increasingly muted after the eighteenth century as the number of convert authors declined to participate in such critical endeavors and the enlightenment critique of religion and promotion of toleration took hold.

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The issue of "othering" has also been of great interest to scholars ever since Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949. Like de Beauvoir, Said, and the many other scholars who deal with the way one identity is formed in opposition to another, Deutsch points out how the polemical ethnographies he studies tell us as much, if not more, about Christians and Christianity in the early modern period than it does about Judaism. As he demonstrates, the polemic against Judaism was in important respects an attempt by Christian religious and political authorizes to distinguish true religion from false idolatry and set up new

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norms and values in the wake of the breakdown of social and religious consensus during the Reformation. It is no coincidence that most of the polemical ethnologies studied by Deutsch appeared in Germany, since Jews had been expelled from most other parts of Europe. 35

The ethnographies Deutsch studies were produced between the early sixteenth century and the last decades of the eighteenth century. Deutsch provides a great service by clearly identifying these ethnographies—some seventy-eight in all—and distinguishing them from other kinds of episodic writing about Jews and Judaism since they present sustained discussion of Jewish customs and practices. Although Deutsch claims that the descriptions presented in these ethnographies are largely accurate, the authors clearly cherry-picked their material in order to present Jews and Judaism in a negative light. For example, three basic charges were leveled against the Jews: their practices were directed against Christians and Christianity; their religion was riddled with ritual inanities and superstitions; and they deviated from biblical law. The labeling of Jewish practices as superstitious and ritualistic was more of a feature of Protestant than Catholic polemical ethnographies. As Deutsch points out in making this critique, Protestant authors had Catholics as much in their sights as Jews. 40 45 50

While there is a consensus among scholars that Christian attitudes toward Jews changed in the early modern period, there is disagreement as to whether this change was positive or negative for Jews. Amos Funkenstein argued that relations between the two communities improved, while Jonathan Israel disagrees. He admits that Christians abandoned the common and prejudicial medieval claim that Jews practices magic but contends that early modern criticisms of Judaism were still brutal and detrimental to Jews as individuals and as a group. Shmuel Ettinger is more positive about the beneficial effects that Christian Hebraism and the idea of toleration had for Jews. Deutsch's own position is closest to Ettinger. He convincingly argues that there were three phases in early modern polemical ethnographies: a first phase that carried on the medieval theological polemic; a second that concentrated on a critique of Jewish practices and customs; and a third that was more ethnographical than polemical, as fewer Jewish converts wrote ethnographies that reflected their own need to validate their conversions. 55 60 65

Deutsch's book is lucidly structured. His first chapter gives a general overview of the seventy-eight books he identifies as polemical ethnographies. He provides two useful appendices, one a list of Jewish convert authors and a second of authors born Christian. The next three chapters are devoted to specific topics that are treated repeatedly in the ethnographies: The Day of Atonement, circumcision, and dietary laws. Christians were especially interested in three aspects of the ritual for the Day of Atonement: The *kapparot* ceremony, when an individual's sins were supposedly transferred to a chicken; the lashes (*malkot*) ceremony, in which Jewish males symbolically whip other males to expiate their sins; and the lighting of the candles. These were singled out as examples of ritualism and superstition. When it came to dietary laws, Christians were most interested in Jewish ritual slaughter, mainly to point out how banal and illogical the laws were. Some authors stressed what they saw as the gorging and carousing engaged 70 75 80

in by Jews, using German verbs like *fressen* to describe their eating habits, a verb applied to animals, not humans.

Deutsch's book is the culmination of many years of fruitful research. It will be of great interest to anyone interested in the profound changes in religious practices and sensibilities occasioned by the breakdown of religious consensus in the early modern period and the effect this had on Jewish-Christian relations. Inasmuch as early modern Jewish ethnographies were forerunners of both the modern study of religion and Jewish Studies, Deutsch's book will be of great use to many readers across the academic disciplines. 85

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