

Book Reviews

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Judaisms: A Twenty-First-Century Introduction to Jews and Jewish Identities. By Aaron J. Hahn Tapper. Oakland, CA: University of California, 2016. Pp. xii + 261. \$35.

A man returned from Warsaw and told his friend, “I saw a Jew who *was* poring over the Talmud day and night. I saw a Jew who *was vaving* the red flag of communism. I saw a Jew who *was* passing out leaflets to come see his new play on Spinoza.”

“So? Vat’s so unusual about that?” his friend responded. “There are a lot of Jews in *Varsaw*.”

“But you don’t understand, my friend!” the man yelled. “It *was* all the same Jew!” (244b)

In his approachable yet challenging new *Twenty-First-Century Introduction to Jews and Jewish Identities*, Hahn Tapper draws on this infamous yarn retold by Nobel Laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, to underline the complexity of the *Judaisms* explored within the pages of his book. This choice of expanding rather than contracting the nature of identities to hybridity explains that subtle positioning of the plural *Judaisms* in the title. The structure of this introduction is quite sophisticated for the genre, insofar as it applies an interdisciplinary approach to Jewish memory and its reconstitution of diverse identities. T. explains his methodological approach from the outset, insofar as: “the Jewish diaspora is looked at within Diaspora Studies; the Jewish genocide (the *Shoah*) is discussed within Genocide Studies; Jewish nationalism is examined within the context of other communal nationalisms” (ix). His ordering of this introduction seeks to prove that “Judaism, after all, is more than a belief regarding the divinity of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, it is the sum total of ways that Jews have communicated, and continue to communicate, their Jewishness, which includes the collective canon of Jewish ideas and rituals” (3a).

The argument proffered throughout is that Jewish identities are diverse as a function of their emergence from an “ancient, ever-changing community, a group whose primary signifier has shifted multiple times (e.g., from Hebrew to Israelites to Judeans to Jews)” (9b). T. sets out each chapter with an accessible personal anecdote to draw in the reader, then shifts to content and then returns oftentimes to re-examine the anecdote in light of the information presented, which is an effective pedagogic method. He recounts how in “using early drafts of this book with my students at the University of San Francisco, many students were confused with the book’s seeming hesitation to

say, for a given time and place: “*This* is what happened.” Nonetheless, the book summarizes dominant scholarly perspectives on a variety of historical events in an attempt to show the variety of ways people today understand the past” (10b). This postmodern approach to truth will indeed not only confuse his students but also confuse many non-specialist readers. Further disruptions are stated goals of this book, including dominant Jewish binaries, like Zion vs. Diaspora, to show how, in the twenty-first century, such couplets have become, practically speaking, obsolete, despite maintaining their ideological dominance (11a). This approach is consistent in the overall structuring of this book’s twelve chapters: (1) Narratives; (2) Sinais; (3) Zions; (4) Messiahs; (5) Laws; (6) Mysticisms; (7) Cultures; (8) Movements; (9) Genocides; (10) Powers; (11) Borders; and (12) Futures. All these chapters are highly effective, even if at times awkward, as in the case of the second chapter’s title. The third chapter, on Zionisms, is an especially important contribution for the non-specialist and beginner student encountering the growing antipathy towards thinking at all about Zionism, never mind Zionisms. Likewise, the chapters on Messiahs and Mysticisms are illuminating, especially in navigating the complexities surrounding multiple failed messianic missions (66) as well as the role of mysticism in normative Judaism. Given there is already overlap between chapters four and six, it would have made more sense to have them follow each other and place the fifth chapter on Laws in advance of both of them, linking them together as a natural progression of the law and its redemption. Clearly, this is a noble effort on the part of a seasoned teacher to challenge all readers as serious learners, even if these kinds of suppositions can be radically destabilizing.

I would suggest this approach is not destructive; rather, the goal is to awaken deeper curiosity for more learning—and nothing could be more worthwhile. Aside from serving as a comprehensive introduction that will be effective in eliciting a broader understanding of Judaisms, T. earnestly concludes that “the future of this [Jewish] community cannot be predicted with certainty. Any attempt to do so would fail to reflect the factual messiness of Jewish identities” (244b). T. is hopeful for the future of Judaisms and their relation to Jews and non-Jews alike, and remaining so hopeful bodes well for an unpredictable future in need of redemption.

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Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. and Ecclesiological Hermeneutics: An Exercise in Faithful Creativity.
By Michael M. Canaris. Brill’s Studies in Catholic Theology, Vol. 3. Boston: Brill,
2016. Pp. x + 214. \$124.

Some years ago, I had the chance to attend a lecture given by the subject of this book, the Jesuit ecclesologist Francis A. Sullivan. Sullivan walked his audience through Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, as well as the commentary on it authored by Joseph Ratzinger and Tarcisio Bertone. Sullivan paid special attention to the examples given by the commentary of “truths of the second paragraph” of the