



Yaacov Deutsch. *Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe.* Translated by Avi Aronsky. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 304 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975653-7.

Reviewed by Aya Elyada (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

“Polemical Ethnography” in Early Modern Europe

The beginning of the early modern period marked an important turning point in Christian-Jewish relations: instead of focusing solely on the theological issues that divided the two religions, as was customary in the medieval tradition, Christian authors in western and central Europe began, from around 1500, to show a growing interest also in Jewish ritual, language, and way of life. This transition from an essentially theological discourse on Jewish tenets to one that covers all aspects of Jewish life is clearly manifested in the rise of what came to be known in recent years as “Christian ethnographies,” a genre of Christian-authored ethnographic writing on Jews and Judaism that aimed to present a systematic and realistic depiction of the customs and rituals of contemporary Jews. The fact that between the appearance of the genre in the early 1500s and its decline in the late 1700s almost eighty works of this kind were published—many of them in multiple editions and translations—attests to the wide scope of this phenomenon as well as to the substantial interest in Jewish praxis and lifestyle in early modern Europe.

Despite the relative popularity of the genre, and hence its important role in forging the image of the Jew in early modern European consciousness, the ethnographic writing on the Jews has attracted only limited attention in modern scholarship. Yaacov Deutsch’s book, *Judaism in Christian Eyes*, addresses this lacuna by putting the entire corpus for the first time at the center of a comprehen-

sive study. Deutsch’s broad, groundbreaking effort delivers a detailed survey of the genre’s principal features as well as an erudite, in-depth analysis of representative case studies. With the ultimate goal of “divulg[ing] the inner workings of the early modern discourse on Jews and Judaism as well as the objectives that it was intended to serve” (p. 2), Deutsch addresses several main questions: the manner in which Jews and Judaism were portrayed in the ethnographic accounts and the level of accuracy of these accounts; the authors’s motivations for writing these accounts and the different strategies they applied; the lines of continuity and change this genre displayed in comparison to earlier modes of Christian polemics; the role these texts played in shaping the image of the Jew in larger society; and the wider ramifications of this mode of presentation for the history of Christian-Jewish relations. On the way, he touches on important issues in the cultural and intellectual history of early modern Europe, such as early modern Orientalism and ethnographic writing, religious conversion, Protestant-Catholic polemics, and Christian Hebraism.

The opening chapter of the book offers a general survey of the ethnographic works about the Jews, including the main characteristics of the genre and its authors; the chronological and geographical dimensions of the phenomenon; and information regarding the circulation of the works (number of editions, translations, etc.). It also offers a meticulous mapping of the central topics in the

ethnographic texts, divided into three categories: annual cycle events, such as Jewish holidays and fast days; life-cycle events, such as birth, bar mitzvah, marriage, and death; and daily rituals, such as prayers, ritual slaughter, and forbidden foods. The next three chapters, which form the heart of the book, examine three of the more popular topics discussed in the Christian works, one from each category respectively: the Day of Atonement, circumcision, and issues pertaining to food. In each of the chapters, Deutsch first attempts to assess the credibility of the Christian works by comparing their depictions of Jewish rituals to what is known from Jewish sources of the time. Deutsch demonstrates that although the Christian accounts are by and large trustworthy, they nonetheless reveal their authors' bias and polemical intentions against the Jews and their religious praxis. In particular, the decision of every author regarding which information to include and which to omit, which details to highlight and which to ignore, "points to a bias which reverberates throughout this corpus" and "divulge[s] the writers' polemic aspirations" (p. 246).

Deutsch's analysis of this principle of selectivity reveals that the ethnographic accounts support a few principal anti-Jewish claims. First, the view that Judaism is an anti-Christian religion. This can be seen, for example, in the special attention given by many Christian authors to certain aspects of the *kapparot* ceremony or to specific prayers recited on Yom Kippur that were—or were believed to be—of anti-Christian nature. Another popular claim maintained that Judaism was a faith of superstitions. By designating a Jewish ritual as *Aberglauben* (or with the adjective *abergläubisch*), as in the case of the candle-lighting ritual on Yom Kippur Eve, the authors wished to emphasize not only that this custom was ridiculous, but also "that those who perform such a rite have skewed off the true path of God." According to Deutsch, the fact that a considerable number of the authors chose to bring up and discuss such a minor custom in the overall scheme of the Yom Kippur ceremonial suggests that "they sought to highlight what they perceived to be the ludicrous and superstitious elements of early modern Judaism" (p. 111). Finally, the claim that postbiblical Judaism deviated from biblical law appears in many of the accounts. The fact that two of the three components of the circumcision ritual (*peri'ah* and *metzitzah*) are not mentioned in the Bible, or that certain *kashrut* observances were introduced in later generations, made these and other postbiblical Jewish customs an easy target for the Christian authors, who used them to attack early modern Judaism as an unbiblical religion. The du-

ality of credibility and bias, accurate descriptions and polemical intentions, which characterizes the Christian accounts, induces Deutsch to term the genre "polemical ethnography," and allows him to point to the lines of continuity and change this genre displays in comparison to the medieval tradition: while the focal point of the anti-Jewish polemics shifted from Judaism to Jews and from belief to praxis, these texts nonetheless perpetuated the age-old polemical spirit that underlined Christian-Jewish relations for centuries.

The concluding chapter weaves together the ideas and arguments presented in the analysis of the case studies, and discusses the reasons behind the emergence of the genre and its historical development, its ramifications for Christian-Jewish relations, and its impact on intra-Jewish transformations. The many interesting points that Deutsch raises in his discussion include, for example, the tension and rivalry that existed between the authors of the ethnographic works who were converts from Judaism and those who were born Christians, and the ways in which the mainly Protestant authors of the genre used their ethnographies on the Jewish religion as a platform for anti-Catholic polemics. Another interesting point concerns the impact of the ethnographic writing on the attitude of early modern Christians toward their Jewish neighbors. As Deutsch convincingly argues, the changing focus in the Christian discourse from Judaism as a religion to the Jews as an ethnic group led to a certain paradox in the Christian attitude toward the Jewish minority. On the one hand, the realistic depictions of Jewish ritual "helped lift the veil of secrecy (what [R. Po-chia] Hsia calls the 'disenchantment' process) from over Judaism and debunk many of the anti-Jewish prejudices," thus contributing to "a better understanding of Judaism and more favorable views about the Jews" (pp. 251, 252). On the other hand, not only did the ethnographic writing serve as yet another venue for traditional anti-Jewish polemics, but in its focus on the Jews' everyday life it also "reconfirmed and underscored their status as aliens" (p. 252). By inserting concepts of culture and ethnicity into the Christian discourse on the Jews, the ethnographic literature contributed to the secularization of the discourse and to a better understanding of the Jews as human beings, but at one and the same time it highlighted the vast differences between the Jewish minority and its non-Jewish surroundings, and "further distanced the Jews from Western European society" (p. 251).

Deutsch's book provides an expansive and conscientious presentation of a significant and highly interesting historical phenomenon, which sheds light on various is-

sues in the history of early modern Europe, and opens up a vast array of questions for further research. With its careful analysis of a large body of primary sources, and its knowledgeable discussion of a plethora of details and topics, this scholarly book presents an important contribution to the study of Christian-Jewish relations in early modern Europe and beyond.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Aya Elyada. Review of Deutsch, Yaacov, *Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36682>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.