

John M. Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter Between Christians and Jews*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1985, 470 pp., bound.

The author, who was one of the driving powers behind the adoption of the Vatican II resolution on the Jews, has assembled a number of papers relating to that resolution. The external structure of the book is, however, somewhat deceptive, and the reader who approaches it in expectation of finding a set of memoirs on the events and decisions leading up to that declaration will find him- or herself surprised, probably quite pleasantly. Though the book does include a lengthy chapter in which the day-by-day negotiations and deliberations are recounted with all the liveliness and intrigue that are to be expected from the author's "insider's" position (and there is much valuable material here for the contemporary Church historian), it is clear to me that the principal blessing of the book is to be found precisely in the fact that Msgr. Oesterreicher seems ill at ease in the mere description of the events which he has witnessed, and frequently uses the "reportage" structure as a pretext for wandering off onto serious theological investigations. This is especially true of the first two chapters, which make up close to half of the volume. The first is professedly a biography or appreciation of Augustin Cardinal Bea; in fact, less than seven pages (in a seventy-two-page chapter) deal at all with this supposed subject. Msgr. Oesterreicher uses his subject as a springboard to some incisive discussions on the relationship of his Church to the Jews, and it is never entirely clear to what extent his own views reflect those of Cardinal Bea. This characterization applies to some extent to the second section, which does actually include detailed descriptions of the Vatican II deliberations, but is surely far more than a mere memoir of events it describes.

The second half of the book contains a variety of short studies and lectures on various topics which relate in one way or another to the general theme of Jewish-Christian relations, and to the importance of Jewish studies for the proper understanding of the New Testament.

One is immediately impressed by the rare constellation of strengths displayed by Msgr. Oesterreicher in his treatment of the sensitive problems with which he is dealing. I will limit myself here to a few of the most significant.

At the top of the list, one must place his simple intellectual honesty and common sense. In a work such as the present one this expresses itself for the most part in the refusal to be satisfied with simplistic or platitudinous pseudo-solutions or formulations. The author never once loses sight of the unbridgeable gaps which separate the Christian and Jewish conceptions of their respective religious truths. Whatever good will and tolerance may dominate the spirit of the discussion between members of the two groups, underlying it all is a conviction that the other's belief is founded on an error, if not on a perversion of the truth. Note, for example, his quotation from Pope Pius XII on p. 52, describing the Jews as those who "sincerely but vainly await His coming..."—a perfectly honest rendering of the Chris-

tian position. (However, on p.115 he rejects the position which holds “that Christians are without doubt true descendants of spiritual Israel, the authentic heirs of the faith of Abraham ‘our Father in faith, and of the blessing of Jacob”). He wisely observes that “in a true dialogue, one partner does not suit his or her beliefs to the views of the other, real or alleged...”(85). He is equally conscious that the relationship was not always one-sided. The Jews have also had a long history of hostility to Christianity, and he even presents a sensitive evaluation of those aspects of Jesus’ personality and teachings which would have aroused the dislike of the ancient Rabbis (see p.73). He is particularly conscious of the fact that Jews and Christians will frequently be using the same religious vocabulary, but with very different connotations. This phenomenon serves to create division, rather than demonstrate agreement, as would appear from a superficial understanding of the problem (see p.49). Oesterreicher does not have illusions of changing this fundamental relationship. He has defined his task as that of removing the fog of factual inaccuracy that has perverted much of the Christian outlook concerning the nature and function of the Jewish people. In particular, he is determined to rid Christianity of the anti-Semitic images which, he argues, are not authentic teachings of Christianity or of the Church. He does however believe that, within carefully defined parameters, a fruitful dialog is possible between intellectually open scholars of the two faiths (333f and elsewhere).

This brings us to a second distinctive feature of Msgr. Oesterreicher’s approach, namely his deeply-held conviction that a scientific approach is essential to the true understanding of the Scriptures. This takes the form of a religious commitment to the use of all the tools of scientific scholarly investigation in order to uncover the original meanings of the authoritative texts, especially the historical or literary analysis of the problematic passages in the New Testament, which come to show that, once understood and evaluated in the light of their contemporary background, these passages reveal a different meaning from the ways in which they were traditionally understood. This methodology often includes far-reaching use of critical standards of evaluating the historical value of the various Gospels, which might not be to the liking of more traditional exegetes. Thus, for example, he comments concerning the problematic passage in Matthew 27:25, “His blood be on us, and our children,” that “The historicity of this cry is doubted by several exegetes,” (though ultimately his principal argument is not to attack its historicity, but rather to remove its theological sting by interpreting it in its original context, as a statement made by particular people under specific circumstances).

In all such discussions, the author makes an impressive demonstration of his skill and erudition in the areas of Hebrew, and of the Judaism of the Second-Temple, Talmudic, and subsequent eras. He quotes liberally and accurately from a variety of Rabbinic writings, and I was unable to catch him at any real inaccuracies—a remarkable achievement in my experience among non-Jewish scholars of post-Biblical Judaism. (There are some minor points on which one might take issue; for instance, on pp. 70-71, his evaluation

of the "broadminded" character of Bet Hillel's exegesis does not seem warranted by the example he cites, in which their position is that Deut 6:7 refers to formally reciting specified texts at defined times of the day, rather than to constant, unceasing consciousness of the totality of God's teaching. In any case, such minor disagreements should not distract us from the author's general mastery of Jewish sources).

It should however be noted that at times the author appears to be using the elements of critical scholarship as tools in order to support predetermined conclusions. This sometimes leads to unconvincing exegesis, as, for example, in his determination to remove the anti-Jewish overtones from John's gospel by claiming that the expression "the Jews" is being used allegorically, to designate humanity in general (145); or in his readiness to accept that the expression *perfidia Judaica* does not really have negative overtones (52 and elsewhere).

I have addressed myself to certain aspects of Msgr. Oesterreicher's book which fall within the circumscribed domain of my qualifications (classical Jewish studies). Let the reader be aware that the volume also includes interesting contributions to many other related areas, such as Christian theology and contemporary history. In particular, the discussion of the negotiations in the Vatican, leading up to the pronouncement on the Jews, particularly the problematics produced by Arab diplomatic pressures on the Church, is sure to be of interest to the political scientist and contemporary historian. All in all, this book is a provocative and seriously thought-out work by which we hope will set the tone for subsequent discussions of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

E. Segal
The University of Calgary

W. Herschel Ford, *Sermons You can Preach on John*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1986, 430 pp.

Michael J. Hostetler, *Introducing the Sermon: The Art of Compelling Beginnings*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1986, 89 pp.

These two books represent some sort of poles in the world of homiletic literature. I am sure that each would meet the specific needs of someone, but I am not sure whose.

Herschel's book is an old-fashioned collection of sermons such as have been published for centuries. As such it fills the bill for those who enjoy reading competent sermons from a distinguished preacher now departed. They cer-



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