

**Emma O'Donnell Polyakov**  
***The Nun in the Synagogue:***  
***Judeocentric Catholicism in Israel***

(University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020),  
xii + 242 pages

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Emma O' Donnell Polyakov states at the beginning of the fascinating book she has written that it "explores encounters along the border between Christianity and Judaism" (6). At the center of the study is what the author has termed "a Judeocentric Catholic phenomenon in Israel" (4). The book integrates two genres, short biographical narratives, which present portraits of people with riveting stories to tell, and longer analytical pieces, which gingerly tease out possible theoretical explanations. The result is a good read that gently weaves together personal confidences and sociological, anthropological, and historical insights regarding the Holocaust, the State of Israel, and contemporary Catholicism, and that focuses on Jewish-Catholic relations before and after the Second Vatican Council.

Significantly, the author does not hide the fact that most Catholics in Israel are Palestinian and generally have no Judeocentric tendencies at all. She does refer quite fairly to opposing Christian positions on the Israel-Palestine conflict held by Palestinian liberation theologians who protest Israeli policies of occupation and discrimination. She insists that she is not taking sides but rather documenting a fascinating phenomenon on the margins.

She has chosen to study a group of Catholic religious, monks and nuns, men and women, who have immersed themselves in Jewish life in Israel. Within this group, there is an important and distinct subset, Jewish converts to Catholicism, who insist that they are still Jewish and feel at home in Israel. She sets out to encounter them, to listen to them, and to report on their reflections and their struggles to integrate their Catholic faith with their deep sense of solidarity with the Jewish people.

In an astute analysis of philosemitism and its relationship with antisemitism, the author distinguishes Judeocentricity from these more classic forms of obsessive focus on Jews. She also distinguishes this phenomenon from the better-known

forms of Christian Zionism, particular in its Evangelical manifestations. Her subjects study Jewish texts and traditions, deepen their own spiritual lives in living interactions with Jews in Israel and, as her captivating title suggests, frequent synagogues and bring their insights into their lives in the Church. They each attempt to capture what it is that draws them to live a relationship of profound attraction to the Jewish people and contemporary Judaism, when for centuries many of their co-religionists felt only anger and even disgust at the mere mention of the word "Jew."

The author navigates sensitively on a yet untraced path that takes her subjects from the Church to the Synagogue and back again. She does not offer simplistic analyses that would invariably betray the sophisticated reflections of those she interviewed. Among them are Sister Paula, a Jewish survivor of the Shoah who ended her days as a Catholic Benedictine nun in Israel and who never allowed one identity to negate the other, and Sister Anne-Catherine, a French Sister of Our Lady of Sion and teacher of Judaism and Rabbinic texts who tirelessly worked for greater inter-religious understanding. The reader gets to know numerous other figures, who Polyakov always presents respectfully and without imposing an artificial theological or existential coherence on their complex lives. This book is mostly impressionist and respectfully allows readers to make up their own minds about the issues discussed.

This is a book that challenges the "either-or" of religious identity without promoting any kind of syncretism. One of the many themes treated with wisdom and nuance is the tension between mission (trying to convert Jews to Christianity) and dialogue (opening up to the other in an acceptance of her otherness). The reader is reminded on every page of how much Jews and Christians share and yet how much they might indeed differ. Polyakov shows how her subjects experience life at the very place of the separation of the ways, a place that tears the human soul as it refuses to conform to a separation that would be for some of them a betrayal of a double belonging. These subjects hold Catholicism and Judaism together within themselves without suppressing the differences, however painful that can be. The author observes about one of her subjects, "The condition of not belonging is exactly where she belongs" (160).

In conclusion, I would like to point out one element in this book that might have broad relevance for the vibrant dialogue between Catholics and Jews that has been progressing since the Second Vatican Council. It is marginal to the main thrust of this book but I found it remarkable nonetheless. Many of the protagonists in the book, who share with the author their uncompromising and passionate love for the Jewish people, for Judaism, and for contemporary Jewish life in Israel express their awareness of the ongoing tragedy of the Palestinian people. Indeed, it is riveting that many of these men and women, Judeocentric Catholics, include in their prayer, reflection, and conversation an ardent intercession that justice and peace might come to Israel / Palestine. Indeed, they seem to be saying that today, a true love for the Jewish people should never obscure the hope that the Palestinians might know freedom, justice, and peace.