

## REVIEW

Gilbert S. Rosenthal

*What Can a Modern Jew Believe?*

(Wipf &amp; Stock, 2007), 255pp. + index

Reviewed by Alan L. Berger, Raddock Family Chair of Holocaust Studies, Florida Atlantic University

Over a half century ago, Rabbi Milton Steinberg's *Basic Judaism*, a learned yet accessible book, became a classic for those interested in the Jewish religious tradition. Steinberg's book was read by contemporaries, both Jews and non-Jews. In addition to his command of the Jewish material, the author had a firm grasp of Christian philosophy and, especially, theology. Despite the subsequent appearance of many other basic texts in the intervening decades, some of them quite good, Steinberg's book is still being sold and read. I mention this as background to Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal's well written and sensitive response to the title query of his newest book, which may well attain the same status as Steinberg's text. Rosenthal, who is Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues, served as a pulpit rabbi for over three decades. His book combines the wisdom of the scholar with the insights of one who, like Steinberg, was in the "theological trenches" and knows well what concerns his congregation when tradition seems under assault by modernity.

The book, divided into sixteen chapters and an Afterword, may be seen as an intelligent and sensitive discussion of Jewish religion and how its main tenets can continue to address twenty-first century Jews. Rosenthal cites Jonathan Swift's satirical observation: "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another but not enough to love one another" (8). The author then proceeds to demonstrate that religion is far more than satire. The wisdom of the rabbinic dictum that the commandments are to live by is the unstated premise of Rosenthal's work. He contends that "it is not enough to 'do Judaism;' it is essential that we [Jewish people] 'believe in Judaism'" (xiii). Contra the Swiftian position, Rosenthal discusses *tikkun ha-olam*, mending or repair of the world, as an eternally valid demand for social justice and activism. Extra-biblical in origin, the idea of *tikkun* has undergone various meanings in the course of Jewish history; in the Talmud it refers to the protection of women from unscrupulous husbands. Perhaps the two best known uses of world repair, however, are the Lurianic kabbalah, where it is tied to the concept of elevating fallen divine sparks, and in the post-Holocaust thought of the philosopher Emil Fackenheim that calls for a repair of the world, in so far as this is possible after death camps and crematoria.

*What Can a Modern Jew Believe?* focuses on key concepts in Judaism, describing how the meanings have been re-interpreted by various sages and in response to changing historical circumstances. Furthermore, Rosenthal distinguishes intra-denominational positions on the Jewish theological map, writing with understanding about the differences between Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Judaism on key issues. Consequently, Rosenthal's volume helpfully illuminates the constant tension between tradition and change present in any revealed religion. To take but one example, the concept of Chosenness is still valid, attests Rosenthal for several reasons: "it recognizes the unique contribution of this tiny speck of a people that spawned two major faiths" (77); "it is "inspirational" in the Jewish people's ongoing engagement with *tikkun ha-olam*, mending or repairing the fractured world; the re-birth of the State of Israel "added a new dimension to the ancient summons" (77). Israel "must be different and extraordinary" (77), a light to the nations; and "election offers us a transcendent

*raison d'être* for remaining Jews in a gentile society even as it has inured us to withstand the pressures of paganism, Christianity, and Islam" (77).

Each chapter is enriched by two additional features. First, Rabbi Rosenthal, after discussing the history and transformation of the particular concept, states his own personal view on the topic. Thus, the volume's scholarly dimension is enhanced by the wisdom of the author, a modern Jew, enlarging the text's scope and contemporary relevance. Second, every chapter concludes with a page of questions which Rosenthal terms "Points to Ponder." These points are guidelines to the reader and serve a two-fold purpose: helping her/him better understand the chapter and compelling a personal response to the points raised. Rosenthal's entire text can in fact be seen as an invitation to the reader to think seriously about her own perspective and, in so doing, enrich both that perspective and contribute to the continuation of the Jewish tradition. Consequently, this book is ideally suited both for classroom use and for the intelligent lay reader.

Although Rabbi Rosenthal contends that he is "not a theologian, [but] a rabbi and historian of ideas" (xi), his claim is too modest. Rosenthal's text, like that of Steinberg, bears great theological import. He is personally committed to, and involved at a high level in, interfaith dialogue, having co-produced six film segments under the rubric "Walking God's Path: Christians and Jews in Candid Conversation." His chapter "How Can Jews Relate to Other Faiths" offers a wealth of insight into basic ground rules for doing authentic interfaith work. After first noting some Jewish thinkers who were years, sometimes centuries, ahead of their time in interfaith understanding, beginning in the ninth century and including the well known Moses Maimonides [died 1204] and Franz Rosenzweig [died 1929], the author offers important guidelines for authentic interfaith exchange.

Dialogue is not to be used as "a camouflage for proselytism" (215). Rather, the key point in dialogue is communication. Rosenthal emphasizes that "Dialogue means conversation, not conversion, consultation, not confrontation (215). While Reform Judaism has taken the lead in interfaith dialogue, it is by no means alone in this effort. Rosenthal approvingly cites the Orthodox Jewish thinker Michael Wyschogrod's statement: "Where there is communication there is hope, but where there is no communication, the very basis of hope is absent" (cited by Rosenthal on p. 215). Rosenthal is saddened by the lack of meaningful dialogue between Jews and Muslims. Suspicion and mistrust have proven untenable, and bloody. Dialogue and, by extension, dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths may make us all worthy of God's blessings.

Rosenthal does make certain claims the validity of which is questionable. Two in particular I found startling. Writing about prayer, he states that psychologically, "prayer puts us in touch with the Transcendent, coupling us to the element of Divinity in the universe" (126). This is true, but not exclusive. Contemplating the beauty of Zion National Park or the Grand Canyon can also yield the same result. Furthermore, prayer, especially as supplication, e.g., if You grant my wish, I promise to do . . . , is very far from appreciating divinity. In his chapter "Are Jews the Chosen People?" Rabbi Rosenthal writes "But the suffering ennobles our people" (73). I believe that suffering is not ennobling. Victims of the Holocaust were not ennobled by being gassed and incinerated. They were martyred, but not ennobled. Suffering is no guarantee of anything except suffering.

But *What Can a Modern Jew Believe?* is an important book. The author distills a half-century of wisdom gained through serious study, scholarly writings, and, most importantly, living as a congregational rabbi committed to living life as a proud, knowledgeable, and practicing Jew. This is the inheritance he wishes to pass on to successive generations of Jews. His book is an excellent text to help accomplish his goal and, along the way, enlighten all people.