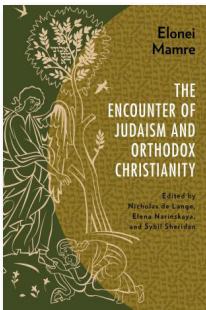


## BOOK REVIEW

***Elonei Mamre: The Encounter of Judaism and Orthodox Christianity.*** Edited by Nicholas de Lange, Elena Narinskaya & Sybil Sheridan. Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022. 206 pages. £77.00. ISBN 9781978715987.



This volume is published along with a sister volume: *Tois Pasin ho Kairos: Judaism and Orthodox Christianity Facing the Future* (2023), which examines challenges posed to both faiths by the changing world in which they are both situated. The volume under review here examines several neuralgic theological issues that reside in the complex layers of Jewish and Orthodox dynamics. It is particularly complex for three reasons. First, one element of the Orthodox world, the Moscow patriarchate, is generally hostile to this project. The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Aleksii II delivered a speech to rabbis in New York in 1991, breaking the ice, calling Jews “brothers” and strongly rejecting antisemitism. He received a very critical reception from the Russian Church abroad and within the Moscow patriarchate. The Constantinople patriarchate has been more positive. Most of the Orthodox contributors to this volume come from western theological contexts. Second, while most mainstream Christian denominations (Roman Catholic and Protestant) have condemned supersessionism (the notion that the Jewish covenant with God is invalid and no longer relevant) in its multiple forms, the Orthodox Church has not done so. This is in part because of its special anchorage in liturgy and tradition, and thus its resistance to shed or edit that patrimony. While being a possible weakness, it is also a great strength in treasuring the past and thus resisting over-quick dismissal of such treasures. As a Latin Roman reviewer, I have learned much from this conserving instinct. Third, because of the geographic history of Jewish persecutions at the hands of Christians, this is a dialogue with very painful and difficult memories. Hence, this volume is a treasure, for it marks a thoughtful attempt by both Jews and Orthodox Christians to address theological issues that have generated

hostility, but which nevertheless provide the resources to bring these communities together.

The collection contains most helpful and penetrating essays on the following topics: mysticism, apophatic theology, the unity of God, the contrasts of law and grace/love, supersessionism (sadly, without any matching piece reflecting on Jewish supersessionism), anti-Jewish prejudices within Christian sources, icons and idolatry, worship, and the blood libel. These essays vary in length and focus. Some topics are addressed from both Jewish and Christian perspectives; with others, the focus is on Orthodox Christianity.

One cannot summarise in a short review every essay, but on every topic, it is fair to say that new ground and the breaking of stereotypes is achieved. There is no attempt to compromise on one's own tradition in trying to move the dialogue and understanding forward. Jewish objections to icons, for example, is questioned both on historical archaeological grounds (early Byzantine Judaism) as well as a careful selective reading of rabbinic texts and Jewish theology. The Orthodox theology behind icons is well explicated and we see a rich opening for further conversation on this matter. Or, looking at a strident anti-Jewish voice such as Ephrem the Syrian, one is reminded how the context helps to understand (though not necessarily to endorse) that voice.

This kind of critical thinking about tradition is vital. Interestingly, the Jewish contributions come from a variety of traditions; but, at times, the Orthodox Jewish tradition—which mirrors some of the dynamics of the Orthodox Christian—shows signs of rethinking that are perhaps required from each tradition. For example, one finds the *Aleinu* prayer in the British Orthodox prayer book has omitted words that Christians might find offensive: where “the nations of the world” are viewed as those “who worship vain and worthless beings and make supplication to a god who cannot save.” The smallest changes in prayer are destined to have a far greater impact upon communities than theologies (which are less widely engaged with). This leaves us with a question: How many other elements of the tradition must such a change require? Does one have to reject Maimonides's view of Christians as a result? What of various Talmudic sources that suggest otherwise? Of course, this entire dialogue requires the revisiting of traditions of thought and practice.

I think the volume would have benefitted from a single essay on the great Russian theologians who had made tentative moves in their theologies of Israel and the Jewish people. The invisibility of this tradition is odd. This is

a small matter of omission, but the creative and welcome commission of this volume is something that any reader will enjoy and praise.

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