Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal

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Ву

Patrick Madigan

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By Patrick Madigan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introductionxxvii
Reviews
1
24 What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden? by Ziony Zevit
36
Doing Without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin by Patricia A. Williams
4
5
How the Bible Became Holy. by Michael L. Satlow
6
Historical & Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Israel and Judah by Reinhard G. Kratz
7
8
9

10 Esther's Revenge at Susa: from Sennacherib to Ahasuerus by Stephanie Dalley	23
11 Exile and Return: the Babylonian Context, edited by Jonathan Stòkl & Caroline Waerzeggers	25
12	27
13 The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory by Jennie Barbour	29
14 Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV by Sylvie Honigman	31
15 The Holy One of Israel: Studies in the Book of Isaiah by John N. Oswalt	33
16	35
17 The Templeless Age: an Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the 'Exile' by Jill Middlemas	37
18	38
19	40
20	42
Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: the Reception of Enochic Literature by Annette Yoshiko Reed	-

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, vii and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal
21
22
23
24
Ritual and Christian Beginnings: A Socio-Cognitive Analysis by Risto Uro
25
26
27 59 Christian Origins and the Ancient Economy by David A. Fiensy
2861
Enoch and the Gospel of Matthew by Amy E. Richter
29
30
31
32
The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke by Simon J. Gathercole

3370
The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and the Spirit in New Testament
& Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament by Matthew W. Bates
34
The Jesus Movement and Its Expansion: Meaning and Mission
by Sean Freyne
3574
Paul's Summons to Messianic Life; Political Theology and the Coming Awakening by L. L. Welborn
3670
The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: a Social-Scientific Approach
to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity
by Magnus Zetterholm
3779
From Q to 'Secret' Mark: a Composition History of the Earliest Narrative Theology by Hugh M. Humphrey
388
Who Should Be King in Israel? A Study on Roman Imperial Politics, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Fourth Gospel by Travis D. Trost
20
39
by Carsten Peter Thiede
40
The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple by John W. Welch
418°
The Resurrection of God Incarnate by Richard Swinburne
42
From Alexander to Jesus by Ory Amitay

	Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	1
	sh Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other Schäfer	9
44		9
	orative Identities: Jewish Social Memory and the Johannine Booths by Mary B. Spaulding	
45		9
Perfect N	Martyr: the Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Chri y Shelly Matthews	
46		9
	Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories	
	er Jews: the Search for Gnostic Origins by Carl B. Smith II	9
48		. 10
	Religion in Antiquity by Roelof van den Broek	
The Only	True God: Early Christian Monotheism in its Jewish Contex F. McGrath	
50		10
	Pagan and Christian by Christopher P. Jones	
Religious	Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians h by Isabella Sandwell	10
		11
Marcion	and Luke-Acts: a Defining Struggle by Joseph B. Tyson	
		11
D .	ce in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing	

54114 A Political History of Early Christianity by Allen Brent
, , , ,
55
Walking in Their Sandals: a Guide to First-Century Israelite Ethnic Identity by Markus Cromhout
56118
Theodoret's People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria by Adam M. Schor
57
'We Have No King But Christ': Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400–585) by Philip Wood
58
59
60
Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy by Richard Seaford
61129
One and Many in Aristotle's Metaphysics: the Central Books by Edward C. Halper
62
Aristotle on Homonymy: Dialectic and Science by Julie K. Ward
63
64

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, xi and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal
65
Teleology, First Principles, and Scientific Method in Aristotle's Biology by Allan Gotthelf
66138 Aristotle's Ethics: Moral Development and Human Nature by Hope May
67140
The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics by Paula Gottlieb
68142
Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception, Phantasia, Thought & Desire by Jessica Moss
69144
Pleasure in Aristotle's Ethics by Michael Weinman
70
71147
Aristotle: Political Philosophy by Richard Kraut
72149
Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom by David Bradshaw
73
74
75
76

77	159
Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education	
by Ryan N. S. Topping	
78	161
Grace For Grace: The Debates after Augustine & Pelagius, edited	
by Alexander Y. Hwang, Brian J. Matz & Augustine Casiday	
79	163
Evil and the Augustinian Tradition by Charles T. Mathewes	
Ç Ç	
80	165
Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome	
by George E. Demacopoulos	
-,g- <u>-</u> . <u>-</u>	
81	167
Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama	
by Theodore K. Lerud	
oy 1110000010 12. 20100	
82	169
On the Historical Development of the Liturgy by Anton Baumstark	10)
on the Historical Development of the Bitth gy of Thitoil Buthleark	
83	171
The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy, edited	1/1
by Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor	
by I clot Madifison and Richard C. Taylor	
84	174
The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy, edited	1/7
by D. H. Frank & O. Leaman	
by D. H. Hank & O. Ecaman	
85	176
Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians	170
in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages by Israel Jacob Yuval	
in Dute Antiquity and the Middle Ages by 151act Jacob 1 avai	
86	178
80 Mirage of the Saracen: Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Peninsula	1/0
in Late Antiquity by Walter D. Ward	
in Luie Antiquity by watter D. Watt	

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	xii
87	18
The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades by Paul M. Cobb	10
88	18
The Eve of Spain: Myths of Origins in the History of Christian, M and Jewish Conflict by Patricia E. Grieve	uslim
89 Dante and the Blessed Virgin by Ralph McInerny	18
90	18
Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider by James A. Diamond	10
91 Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the Universi c. 1100-1330 by Ian P. Wei	
92 The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquina and Dionysius the Areopagite by Brendan Thomas Sammon	
93 Aquinas on Simplicity: an Investigation into the Foundations of his Philosophical Theology by Peter Weigel	193
94 The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas Aquinas by Bernard Montagnes	195
95Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes by Gregory T. Doo	
96Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil by John F. X. Knasas	
	202

by A	nthony T. Flood	
99		
	nas Aquinas on Persuasion: Action, Ends, and Natural Rhetoric effrey J. Maciejewski	
100.		
	Incarnate Word: A Thomistic Study in Christology homas Joseph White, OP	
Aqui	nas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good Iary M. Keys	••
Robe	ert Schuman: Neo-Scholastic Humanism and the Reunification urope by Alan Paul Fimister	••
103.		
	ving the Truth: Discretion in the Spiritual Writings of Saint Cath ena by Grazia Mangano Ragazzi	ıe
104.		
	omenology of the Human Person by Robert Sokolowski	
105		
The .	Promise of Christian Humanism: Thomas Aquinas on Hope ominic Doyle	•••
106.		
	Evolution of Morality and Religion by Donald M. Broom	
107.		
The .	Foundations of Natural Morality: On the Compatibility of Nature ts and the Natural Law by S. Adam Seagrave	
100		

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	XV
109	228
The Myth of the American Superhero by J. S. Lawrence and R. Jewer	
110 Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement by Andrew Dean Swafford	23
111 Thought and World: the Hidden Necessities by James Ross	23
112	23:
Ignorance of Language by Michael Devitt	
113Liberal Societies and the Memory of God by David L. Schindler	23′
114	239
Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Interpretation and Contri in Medieval Languedoc by Gregg Stern	
115	241
116	243
The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII by Michael Everett	=
117	24:
Atheism, Fundamentalism and the Protestant Reformation: Uncovert the Secret Sympathy by Liam Jerrold Fraser	ing
118 The Theological-Political Origins of the Modern State: the Contribetween James I of England and Cardinal Belarmine by Bernard Bo	oversy
119	249
Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe by Jon R. Snyder	

120	1
121	7
12225: Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World by Leo Damrosch	5
123	7
Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment by Dabney Townsend	
124	0
125	2
12626. Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud by Michael Mack	4
127260	6
Leibnis: an Intellectual Biography by Maria Rosa Antognazza	•
128	8
129270 Britain's Bloodless Revolutions: 1688 and the Romantic Reform of Literature by Anthony Jarrells	0
130	2

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	3
131	
132	
Wicked Company: Freethinkers and Friendship in Pre-Revolu Paris by Philipp Blom	
133	
The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution by Timothy Ta	
134	
The Private Life of Lord Byron by Antony Peattie	
135	
Byron's Women by Alexnder Larman	
136	
Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecra & Mary Shelley by Charlotte Gordon	ft
137	
Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism by John Bug	g
138	
Wordsworth & Coleridge: The Radical Years by Nicholas Roe (Second Edition)	
139	
140	
141	
Hazlitt the Dissenter: Religion, Philosophy, and Politics, 1766–181 by Stephen Burley	
142	
Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake	

143
144
145
146
Schelling versus Hegel: from German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics by John Laughland
147
Living Forms of the Imagination by Douglas Hedley
148
Kierkegaard: A Single Life by Stephen Backhouse
149
150
151
152
153
The Phantom of Thomas Hardy by Floyd Skloot
154
Challenging the Bard: Dostoevsky and Pushkin, a Study of Literary Relationship by Gary Rosenshield

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	xix
155	326
The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s by Kate Holland	
156	328
Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Class, 1815-1848 by Mary Ann Smart	Century
157 Leo Tolstoy by Andrei Zorin	330
158	332
Gustave Flaubert by Anne Green	
159 Proust: The Search by Benjamin Taylor	334
160	335
161	337
Something in the Blood: The Untold Story of Bram Stoker, the Ma Wrote Dracula by David J. Skal	
162	
163	
164 The World Broke in Two: Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawren E. M. Foster and the Year that Changed Literature by Bill Goldstei	ce,
165	346
166	

167
168353
The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life: Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy by Ido Geiger
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
Miguel de Unamuno's Quest for Faith: A Kierkegaardian Understanding of Unamuno's Struggle to Believe by Jan E. Evans
177
178
Chesterton and Evil by Mark Knight

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal	
179	
Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: the Making of GKC, 1874-1908 by William Oddie	•••••
180	
The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961: Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh by Ian Ker	New
181	
Literature and Theology by Ralph C. Wood	
182	
The Passion of Charles Péguy: Literature, Modernity, and the Cr of Historicism by Glenn H. Roe	risis
183	
Thomas Mann's Artist-Heroes by Jeffrey Meyers	
184	
Wittgenstein and William James by Russell B. Goodman	
185	
Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author by Ruth Coat	tes
186	
From Ecclesiastes to Simone Weil: Varieties of Philosophical Sp. by Ernest Rubinstein	iritua
187	
Why Arendt Matters by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl	
188	
The Impossible Exile: Stefan Zweig at the End of the World by George Prochnik	
189	
The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo o by Lucienne Kroha	di Fei
190	

191
192
193
194410 Alasdair MacIntyre, edited by Mark C. Murphy
195412
Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture by Rene Girard with Pierpaolo Antonello and Joa o Cezar de Castro Rocha
196414
Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion by Christina M. Geschwandtner
197
198418 Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror by Louis Betty
199420 A World Without Why by Raymond Geuss
200
201424
Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: the Uncanniest of Guests by Shane Weller
202426
Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage by Philip Weinstein

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, xxiii and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Betrayal
203
204430
David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value by Jeffrey Severs
205
When the Eternal Can Be Met: the Bergsonian Theology of Time in the Works of C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden by Corey Latta
206
The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams by Philip Zaleski & Carol Zaleski
207
Reading C. S. Lewis: A Commentary by Wesley Short
208
209
210
211
212446
Philip Roth: Fiction and Power by Patrick Hayes
213
Nathan Scott's Literary Criticism and Fundamental Theology by William D. Buhrman
214
Ted Hughes, Class and Violence by Paul Bentley

215	452
Seamus Heaney's Regions by Richard Rankin Russell	
216	454
Female Maturity from Jane Austen to Margaret Atwood and Jane Austen's Religious Imagination: a Balance of Reason and Fee by Michael Giffin	eling
217	456
A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Wor of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch by Donna J. Lazenby	ks
218 The Philosophy of Elisabeth Anscombe by Roger Teichmann	458
219 Faith in Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe	460
220	462
Has Marriage for Love Failed? by Pascal Bruckner	
221In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition by Lucy E	
222	467
Philosophy and the Novel by Alan H. Goldman	
223	469
Politics and Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union S in New York by Ronald H. Stone	
224	471
225	473
Walter Lippmann: Public Economist by Craufurd D. Goodwin	
226 The Myth of Development: the Non-Viable Economies of the 21st C	475 enturv
hv Oswaldo de Rivero	2.0001 y

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Mo and its Modern Romantic-Narcissist Be	
227	478
228	48
Not Working: Why We Have to Stop by Josh Cohen	
229 Orhan Pamuk and the Good of World Literature by 6	
230The Dark Side of Church/State Separation: The Free Germany, and International Communism by Stephen	nch Revolution, Nazi
231 Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Pra Judaism by Elias Sacks	
232 Before Forgiveness: the Origins of a Moral Idea by	
233	491
The Jews and the Bible by Jean-Christophe Attias.	
Essays	
1From Fusion to Divorce: the Reversal between Overtures towards the Divine	
2	500
From Luther's Theology of the Cross to Nietzse Ubermensch: Growth in the Modern Rhetori Intimidation	che's Probing for the
3Proportionate Love and Literature: the Revenge of the	
4	514
The Sorrow that Dare Not Say Its Name: the Inadequ of History	

The 'Curse' of Monotheism; Or, the Search for a Logical Justification to
support it, Given the Heavy Social and Psychological Price we Pay for Retaining it
536
The Devil Made Me Do It: How the West Disguised its Diabolical Switch of Messiah
The Clandestine Theological Insurrection in Western Christendom Orchestrated by John Milton
The Historical Origin, Social Promotion, and Cultural Validation of the Varcissistic Psychonathic Personality

INTRODUCTION

During my 16-year service as the editor of the *Heythrop Journal*, I reviewed many books and wrote several articles. In retirement, I have had occasion to read through these again and was struck by how a selection could be arranged in a sequence such that the reviews would enter into a 'discussion' and mutually 'pollinate' one another in the reader's mind, such that the resulting experience would be educational, stimulating and satisfying. Beginning with contemporary biblical criticism, I uncover how the Jews, resenting being a 'small' nation, 'backed into' monotheism for primarily political reasons, as a way to argue that their god was distinct and different from the gods of other nations (who followed the 'family of the gods' model or pantheon). This 'one god' with whom they had a special relationship was only punishing them through military defeat for dallying with the other's religion. Thus, in spite of their small size and inglorious military history, they really were superior.

Later, when the Romans destroyed their temple and excluded them from Jerusalem, threatening to wipe them out entirely, some Jews sought comfort and psychological compensation through the postulate of a special 'gnosis' or 'knowledge' supplied them by a 'savior' behind their creator god, that 'lifted them up' and restored a basis for their exceptionalism and superior status. To a now 'converted' or Christian Western society the Jews came across as stubbornly 'stiff-necked', defensively haughty, and 'different'. They were tolerated because they performed an essential job that no one else could or would do - money lending - but often were treated as a scapegoat whenever tragedy or disaster struck. Jews were banished from England from 1290 to 1657, from France periodically after 1306, and from Spain for several hundred years after the unification of Aragon and Castile in 1492. The two-beat syncopation of rejection or exclusion, followed by psychological compensation reappeared during the Renaissance in Jewish 'Kabbalah' in Mediterranean Europe in which powerful esoteric predictions were hinted at, shortly thereafter by Spinoza with his scandalous 'atheistic' doctrine of universal determinism, and later by Freud with his shocking prescription of infantile sexuality. The most powerful Jewish 'blasphemy' during modernity has been the Marxist criticism of Enlightenment self-centeredness, and the adequacy of capitalism as a resulting complete, adult or mature social philosophy, able to construct and deliver a fittingly human, vibrant – and compassionate –

xxviii Introduction

social reality without deeper theological supports. In a 'closed' world where they often had no rights or were made to move with only what they could carry, the Jews 'agreed' to play the only 'role' on offer. They were perpetually available as everybody's 'victim', but some alleged that they exacted the psychological compensation of awe and fear as possessing special knowledge or power, which went along with, and flattered in a backhanded way, their self-estimate. Both sides got what they could live with, if not what they wanted. This continued until the 'final solution', when these 'roles' became exaggerated and the syncopation fell apart.

In the move from the classical to the modern period, three mutually succeeding 'arcs' can be discerned: from reason to scepticism (with Descartes), from freedom to determinism (with Spinoza and Newton), and from annihilation to divinization (with Hegel and Nietzsche). The one feeds into the next. With the emergence of 'expressive individualism' as the default ethic of our time, we assist at an experiment to see whether long-term civil, cultural and political society is still possible.

REVIEWS

AKHENATEN & THE ORIGINS OF MONOTHEISM BY JAMES K. HOFFMEIER

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Hoffmeier was born and raised in Egypt. He was able to do graduate work under Donald Redford at Toronto and to work with him on the Akhenaten Temple Project, which pieced together photographs of thousands of inscribed blocks that revealed amazing decorated scenes from Akhenaten's Theban temples, before he built the completely new 'holy city' at Amarna. Such was the reaction against Akhenaten's monotheistic reform of traditional Egyptian polytheism that these temples had been destroyed and dismantled, and their blocks used elsewhere. But the inscriptions were still visible on their undersides. Since then, Hoffmeier has done much excavation work himself, tracing the stages of Akhenaten's attempted purification and 'return' to traditional Egyptian solar religion, dominated by Amun-Re as head of the pantheon during the Old Kingdom (2650-2400 B. C. E.), and the advance, probably based on a powerful personal 'theophany' and reflection on the solar god's unique status as 'formless' (similar to the Hebrews' later ban on statues of their god Yahweh) as well as self-created – and thus the creator of everything else. This involved a tumultuous personal conversion that led Akhenaten to destroy the temples and cults of all other Egyptian gods, as well as a colossal building project of a new sacred city dedicated to this one god under his new (or 'true') name 'Aten' (meaning 'discovered', 'found', or 'manifest'). Akhenaten initially imposed this reform on all of Egypt, but he failed to build up a coterie of followers or disciples who were moved by the same philosophical-theological insights that had led to this purification, and would maintain the cult after Akhenaten's death. This was similar to Muhammed's later purification of traditional Arab religion to radical monotheism - and then what happened during Islam's proselytising expansion when it encountered Hinduism in India; for the first time Islam met a polytheism it could not 'convert' or 'reform'. The people – not to mention the powerful traditional priesthood and sages – were too attached to their scriptures, stories and cults. The attempted monotheistic reform proved too severe; it was defeated or was