Reviews

Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion. By Steven Gimbel. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 256 pages. Hardcover $24.95.

Einstein's Jewish Science by Steven Gimbel is an important work of intellectual history and a valued parsing of a hateful assertion. Gimbel is a philosopher who is intellectually eclectic enough that he also edited a volume of "pop" philosophy on the Grateful Dead—this man has my attention!

Gimbel uses the Nazis' vulgar argument that Einstein's work is/was worthless because it was "Jewish science." The ability of the Third Reich to internally ban Nobel Prize winning scientists from the academy required much more than slick propaganda. Gimbel takes seriously the social framing of how Einstein's theory of relativity was turned into a corruption that only a Jew could conceive. The book offers readers a process of deconstruction that leads through the complex overlapping histories of physics, religion, German philosophy, and the development of Einstein's theory.

When I teach the Hebrew Bible to undergraduates, I constantly remind them that there is no text without a context and when we add a reader we add yet another context. Gimbel is able to take very complicated and often dense material and parse it by showing how each item has a context and then add our own perspective as twenty-first century readers with our post-Holocaust context. Einstein's popularity permits Gimbel to expend very little biographical energy even as he outlines the work of many German scientists whose work is foundational to Einstein. Most challenging is Gimbel's attempt to contextualize the Jewish intellectual elements of Einstein's thinking.

"Why Did a Jew Formulate the Theory of Relativity?" is the title of Chapter Three and Gimbel uses this and other rhetorical questions to lead his readers far beyond the Nazis' hateful label. "Is there a Jewish style of thinking, an approach that may not be limited to Jews or found in the work of all or even most Jewish thinkers, but which is typical of a certain type of Judaic inquiry?" (69). Gimbel does not want us to imagine Einstein as a Talmudist, but he does want us to think about Descartes as a Catholic thinker and Newton as influenced by Protestant theology. Therefore, it is only logical that Einstein, a Jew, should be "methodologically [using] Jewish science" (69). He pushes his assertion without a conclusion: While there is certainly no link between Einstein's work and rabbinic tradition, there is an interesting resemblance between their approaches to problems. We can find formal patterns that resemble Talmudic reasoning in "Einstein's special theory of relativity . . . " (86).

"The heart of the Talmudic view is that there is an absolute truth, but this truth is not directly and completely available to us. We can only see it through our experience, which is limited to a context. In our search for deeper meaning, we must try to understand how that limited view of the truth fits together with seemingly contrasting views of the truth from other different perspectives and contexts . . . . The problem isn't in the science, it is in the interpretation" (96–97).

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Like the early rabbinic sages who created hermeneutic principles that opened the biblical text to the challenges of life outside the biblical context, Einstein thought about time, space, and measurement in a way that conceded earlier perspectives and then shockingly offered a paradigm shift that goes beyond all prior understandings of time and space. In this way, Gimbel invites his readers to celebrate Einstein's daring as doing physics "Jewish style," which simultaneously permits readers to repudiate the Nazis' bigotry.

Gimbel distracts this reviewer with his choices of idiomatic discourse. "Jewish style" is his attempt to model that, unlike the Nazis who used Jewish as an anti-Semitic stereotype that has no objective foundation, we can find an acceptable aura of what Jews among themselves sometimes call *Yiddishkeit* or *Landsmannshaft*—ethnic attributes that other family members recognize. Jewish style is used to describe deli food that meets a certain ethnic communal standard but is not Kosher—religiously sanctioned. Hence, Einstein does his scientific thinking within the experience of Jews: questions, answers, and then more questions—a communal hermeneutic of understanding an always-expanding text and context. I take exception to Gimbel's unfortunate assertion: "The problem is that scientists before him have all been doing *goyishe*-style science. They think there is an absolute state of the aether" (97). *Goyishe* is a disparaging Yiddish idiom (referring to Gentile-like), and to describe Descartes and Newton in this way is tragically stereotypical of something said by Jews among Jews with an assumptive shrug of the shoulders, "Nu? What can you expect?"

Our author stumbles trying to find a discourse that is supportive, but not stereotypic, of the values and methodology from within which Einstein forever changed science. In the conclusion, he offers another curious idiom: "The method labeled as 'Jewish style' reasoning in which an absolute truth exists, but is unavailable to any particular frame of reference, provides the groundwork for what we might call a 'cosmopolitan epistemology,' that is, a new way of treating human knowledge in which we take seriously different perspectives, but do so in a fashion that does not undermine our belief in a real world or the human ability to develop objective truths about it" (213). Gimbel's choice of "cosmopolitan" is ironic because, like "Jewish science," it too is tainted with its own anti-Semitic stains.

When we characterize Einstein's theory of relativity as a paradigm shift, we are also noting that there are incommensurate differences in how we think about the contexts that preceded and then follow Einstein's thinking. Gimbel's sometimes-awkward discourse is the rhetorical confirmation that we are still searching for the discourse that describes a difference that is so starkly different, we still cannot fathom how different. The Nazis understood that it was their culture in which Jews had thrived for centuries that provided the intellectual environment from within which Einstein's paradigm shift emerged, but the repugnance of Jews required that they reject anything that was not Aryan. Gimbel's challenge of parsing their anti-Semitic repudiation is a fascinating intellectual exercise that stimulates the way we think about our thinking—it is a wonderful reflection worth our time and serious consideration.

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The Promise of Religious Naturalism. By Michael S. Hogue. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. xxx + 253 pp. $74.95 (cloth).

Michael Hogue's *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* is an ambitious attempt to defend a naturalistic approach to religion. He executes this project by describing four recent writers in religious naturalism, asking of each what makes it both naturalistic and religious. Then, in his major focus, he asks how each position might engage ethical issues surrounding the planet-wide ecological crisis. Hogue's four representative religious naturalists are: Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, Jerome Stone, and Donald Crosby, each of whom has made major statements in religious naturalism. Hogue's extensive exposition and analysis of these thinkers is superb and is the best part of the book. Showing richly how each of these thinkers develops powerful, though very different, conceptions of religious naturalism, Hogue's own constructive focus emerges in pulling forth from these positions their ethical implications for addressing ecological responsibility, implications that are not themselves directly engaged in the primary focus of any of these thinkers.

Hogue is more successful in describing the content of religious naturalism in his analysis of these thinkers than he is in defending the actual promise of religious naturalism as a viable social and cultural movement. It is not clear at all how any of these positions, or all of them together, could ever mobilize the religiously social movement Hogue takes as necessary to address the threats to the ecosphere. On the other hand, each of these positions is philosophically and theologically sophisticated and deep, and Hogue is excellent in exhibiting their richness.

In some respects, however, the book is too complex, with too many threads that cannot be successfully woven together. The book is very strong in exhibiting the promise of a religiously naturalistic viewpoint, both in the depth of Hogue's exposition of the points of view of his four thinkers and in the articulation of his own naturalistic viewpoint. But this strong focus is blurred by the urgency with which Hogue wants to address the ecological crisis. Though Hogue is successful in drawing from these thinkers an ethical concern that can be shown relevant to the ecological crisis, the very lengths to which he goes to make these points detracts from the purely theological content of religious naturalism, the latter being the real strength of this book. There are really two books here that are not entirely blended into one.

The book suffers from another issue that has beset almost all attempts to articulate a religious naturalism over the last 200 years. This is connected to the fact that neither Hogue himself nor his representative thinkers develop their religious naturalisms from within the Christian and/or biblical theological traditions, as an attempt, that is, to articulate a religiously naturalistic Christian theology. Within the history of religiously naturalistic positions, this is not surprising since most thinkers in this tradition (including the ones represented here) have developed their positions in reaction against Christianity (and against the tradition of classical theism generally). But by avoiding the Christian tradition, these thinkers fail to take advantage of the deep conception of "sin" or "human fault" that otherwise would have been available to them. The result is that none of these positions has a robust conception of sin or fault, and none of them show any concern for the problem of idolatry, which can be shown to be at the root of all sin from within the biblical tradition. [That more robust conceptions of sin are available to religious naturalists

can be seen in works that do develop a Christian version of naturalism. See Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Karl Peters, *Dancing with the Sacred* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), and especially Karl Peters, "Confessions of a Practicing Naturalistic Theist," *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 40 (September 2005), esp. pp. 710–18. See also Jerome Stone, "Christian Naturalism," *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2012).] The result is that, despite the depth and richness of their religious naturalisms, all share a rather thin conception of human nature and particularly of human fault. Human fault here is really confined to blindness to or neglect of the environment. Prior to the twenty-first century, most forms of religious naturalism were self-conscious forms of humanism. Though none of Hogue's four thinkers use the term "humanism," the same can be said of their positions. As with all humanisms, the criticism above is applicable precisely because they lack the more robust conception of human nature they might have found by a closer alignment with resources from the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, they all smack of the same kind of simple, good-hearted, well-intentioned innocence we see in looking back on the humanisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This latter criticism should not detract from Hogue's accomplishment. He skillfully shows that rich forms of religious naturalism are being developed today. His work demonstrates that there truly is a promise of religious naturalism today that goes well beyond earlier nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions. The reason is that these positions, including Hogue's, bring a depth of philosophical and theological sophistication to bear on religiously naturalistic viewpoints that was largely lacking in the earlier period. This is a very good book, and Michael Hogue is to be commended for it.

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