

REVIEWS

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Todd M. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, Princeton University Press, Oxford and Princeton, 2015, 440 pp.

Todd M. Endelman is professor emeritus of history and Judaic studies at the University of Michigan. He is the author of, among other works, *Radical Assimilation in Anglo-Jewish History, 1656–1945* (1990), and *The Jews of Britain, 1656–2000* (2002). *Leaving the Jewish Fold* is his most recent publication. It is a study on radical assimilation in modern Jewish history, and the result of his many years of research into the phenomena.

The publication is divided into eight chapters and covers, in great detail, over three hundred years of a varied and complex history. The work is of a synthetic nature, and employs a highly comparative approach. It provides the reader with a picture of modern conversion in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the West (France, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States). The author deliberately omitted – in order to go into more detail in his work – such countries as Switzerland, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, and French and British enclaves outside Europe, such as Algeria, South Africa, and Australia. The analysis also excludes the Jewish communities in Canada and Latin America.

The expression ‘radical assimilation’ is an umbrella term referring to various routes by which Judaism and the past were erased, lost or – as Endelman puts it – ‘buried’. It includes conversion, secession (an act of formal withdrawal from the community), mixed marriages, and other forms of losing contact with one’s Jewish descent which was often seen as a burden.

According to the author, the decisions about conversions were not linked to character ‘flaws’ (cravenness, cowardice) that were more visible among some groups of Jews than others. They were rather – as he posits – “determined by how Jews viewed their present and future chances for success and happiness while remaining Jewish” (p. 7). For this reason, the author identifies those cultural ideals, social structures, and political systems that allowed Jews to participate in social and civic life without having to conceal or jettison their ties to the Jewish community.

It is vital that, although the American author refers to antisemitism, he changes the vector of questions and approaches this issue differently: he emphasizes its social reception, and not its character and the ways in which

it was revealed (in culture, politics, etc.). In contrast to several generations of Jewish historians, who generally used to condemn the converts, Endelman avoids judging, since he assumes that it is unproductive (in terms of analytics). He tries not to get trapped by the older meta-history – a Zionist one, which draws a critical picture of the diaspora in the pre-war and war period – and its antithesis, which gives the diaspora a positive value regarding its creativity when it came to survival and preserving the Jewish identity (despite the decreasing meaning of knowledge and religious practices). *Leaving the Jewish Fold* attempts to restore the balance of living in a diaspora.

The book is only partially based on statistical data, in part because some of the records did not survive, and in part because of the fact that in the West the relationship between the state and the churches was different than in Central Europe. The state did not monitor the religious movement of its citizens, and required neither religious affiliation nor registration of the act of leaving or joining a new religious group. In the absence of conversion statistics for liberal states, Endelman must turn to non-quantitative evidence. He draws information about the scope and character of radical assimilation from ‘anecdotal’ or ‘literary’ sources: memoirs, diaries, correspondence, newspapers, journals, sermons, tracts, and novels.

In the first chapter (‘Conversion in Medieval and Early Modern Europe’) the author presents a brief overview of medieval conversions, emphasizing the political and religious context that conditioned the status of Judaism and its followers. He considers the turning point to be the year 381 A.D., when Christianity became a state religion. The author claims that without the support of secular power the new religion (creating the mythical view of a Jew) would not have had any influence on the life of Jews. Previously, the Jewish leaders could ignore the new religion and its claims. The change in its status meant a radical redefinition of the position of Jews, namely their marginalization (in the societies they lived in) and stigmatization (regarding both their thought and culture). According to Endelman, those two facts constituted the background of the history of conversion up to the twentieth century. He views Paul’s (Saul of Tarsus’s) conversion as utterly atypical. “It occurred in a context in which Jews had not been marginalized for centuries. Whatever the meaning of Paul’s transformative experience for the sociology or psychology of religion, it is not paradigmatic for the history of Jewish conversion in Christian Europe” (p. 22). This is one of the most crucial theses presented in the paper, and it diversifies the fixed division into compulsory and voluntary, spiritual and pragmatic.

Chapters 2–5 constitute the main axis of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 (the former discussing conversion in the time of Enlightenment and emancipation, and the latter presenting it during the period when the liberal course was abandoned) define the modern type of conversion by explaining the context of a given time and place. The author describes its specificity and contrasts it

with the conditions of the pre-modern diaspora, which was characterized by social and cultural consistency and autonomy, clearly defined borders (between the Jewish communities and the surroundings), and the lack of 'neutral' or 'half-neutral' societies, i.e. places where individuals from both groups could interact voluntarily, freely and spontaneously. This changed in modern times, and this 'correction' is the main object of the author's considerations.

While explaining it, Endelman exposes the role of the changes in Europe, the modification of the social system and the importance of the French Revolution that inspired the emancipation movement. The author rightly emphasizes the *modus* of incorporating the Jews in the Western world – not as a coherent, separate group, but as individuals (deprived of autonomy and incorporated into a web of regulation). He accurately notes that leaving the partially self-imposed isolation implies changes in auto-perception, including the way in which Jews want to perceive themselves and how they want to be perceived by others. He also points out that the emancipation gesture is one of homogenization, of imposing a universal order. Regrettably, Endelman does not develop this idea further.

In the chapters that constitute the core of the book, the historian explains why the conversions, theoretically useless with respect to the equalization of legal statuses, still happened in practice. According to the author, they took place because emancipation did not translate into social acceptance ("the improvement of legal status does not necessarily mean the improvement of social status", p. 67) – particularly (but not only) in Central and Eastern Europe, where the late implementation of emancipation coincided with the new form of antisemitism, which destroyed the guarantee of equality and the constantly-emphasized and increasing aspirations and hopes for social acceptance (fuelled by the Enlightenment).

I find it particularly valuable that the author emphasizes the great role of the emotional sphere (despite the fact this topic is not much discussed). By exposing the emotions, the author questions the conventional knowledge that conversion was caused by material needs and calculation. Endelman proves that a significant number of conversions were not 'driven' by impoverishment (quite often these converts were very rich), but by an incomplete, ambivalent acceptance. This was particularly true of the representatives of the middle class who, we may assume, are characterized by a greater need for respect.

The baptism constituted a hope for lifting the burden of a stigma, the last sign of strangeness, and escaping social isolation; "the emotional hurt that motivated them, were themselves novel, a product of the age, for they derived from a sense of identification with and admiration for the larger society and at the same time alienation from and distaste for Jewish tradition" (p. 62). Endelman entertainingly illustrates how Jewishness becomes a taboo; it is unwanted and embarrassing (in my opinion the latter deserves some deeper investigation).

Chapters 4 ('Defection and Drift – Early- and Mid-Twentieth Century') and 5 ('Integration and Inter-marriage – Mid-century to the Present') present in a panoramic fashion the evolution of the problem during the time of open hostility and after the Second World War. Chapter 6 ('Conversions of Conviction') is focused on authentic conversions, not on those who escaped 'the handicap of Jewishness', but on those who changed their faith spontaneously and honestly. Endelman emphasizes the fact that although not typical, they have attracted more attention on the part of researchers. As he did previously, he again warns us against easy binary oppositions (conversions driven by money or spirituality, secular and religious, egoistic and noble ones) and states convincingly that "converts whose piety was exemplary were not immune to the emotional and social disabilities of Jewishness, even if they did not acknowledge their role when they embraced Christianity. How could it be otherwise? Christian representations of Judaism and Jewishness were inseparable. The ways in which converts viewed their old and new faith were not the outcome of a speculative process that took place in vacuum. High-minded converts internalized and employed the negative evaluations of Judaism of the day" (p. 277).

Chapter 7 ('Neither Jew nor Christian – New Religions, New Creeds') presents an interesting overview of other religious or quasi-religious ways of solving the integration crisis. The author follows people who rejected both religions, yet believe that religion itself is necessary, spiritually and ethically, and necessary, in terms of society and politics, to solve the afore-mentioned crises, as well as others. Endelman follows people who tried to transgress the limits of existing religions and make the dream of a new, more universalist religion, come true. Although they are often ephemeral or fail to go beyond visionary plans, according to the author "[t]hey vividly testify to the pervasive power of the integrationist impulse within European and American Jews in the century and a half between the French Revolution and World War II" (p. 276).

The final diagnoses by Endelman are not disappointing. He perceives radical assimilation as a sign of failures; the limits of emancipation and tolerance. While writing about the Diaspora, the historian in fact is diagnosing (as was done by others in different contexts) the illnesses affecting the body of modern societies – their oppressiveness, exclusiveness, and the primacy placed on homogenization, where Other could potentially become Own, provided that they were eager to become somebody else and, in fact, deny themselves and their past.

The idea behind the work is not limited to the experiences of converts – its analysis also brings us knowledge (the dilemmas, emotions and identity) about those who, despite their distress, did not choose to undertake a radical gesture of adaptation. Understood this way, *Leaving the Jewish Fold* is a story about the Jewish identity in modernity. Its main value is the suggestion that there was another, less vivid, kind of mental abuse that was not good for ethnic pride and emotional balance.

In spite of the undeniable value of this work, it causes the reader (albeit only at some points) to reflect on certain (minor) drawbacks. While writing about the limits of emancipation, the author does not refer to the Enlightenment itself and the philosophical discourse of modernity. Does this mean that he locates the problem of exclusiveness/intolerance apart from them? References to the theses of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer (the Enlightenment) and Zygmunt Bauman (the dark sides of modernity itself) might be useful. My second remark refers to the sphere of emotions. In my opinion, the presentation of this topic is the most valuable aspect of this work. It would be useful to refer to the existing source literature (through a reference to more general issues, like the protection of self-esteem) in order to strengthen the author's own diagnoses, which are very intriguing. It would also be interesting to refer to symbolic violence (Pierre Bourdieu) apart from the mental abuse described.

proofreading James Hartzell

Paweł Jasnowski