

Judaism, An Introduction to the Beliefs and Practices of the Jews by Michael Maher.  
The Columba Press, 2006

What makes a *good* book about Judaism? This is a simple enough question but it has a number of answers, which may differ depending on who the book is written by and whom it is written for. If it is written by a Jew for other Jews, or even for a wider readership, the contents may well be dictated by the author's denominational affiliation: for example, if s/he is Orthodox by persuasion and practice s/he may dismiss or polemicise against Progressive Judaism, and indeed vice versa (though this is much less likely). If it is written by a Christian for Christians it may be informed by residual attitudes towards Jews, or it may be only partially successful, dictated as it will inevitably be by the author's level of exposure to Judaism and the purpose behind the creation of the text.

All the above taken into account, then, I always approach such catch-all introductions with a wariness born of many past disappointments and frustrations.

I am therefore extremely happy to report that with Michael Maher's Judaism my fears were completely and speedily allayed.

Maher has impressive academic credentials, not the least of which, credibility-wise for the task in hand, are an MA in Jewish studies from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, one of the US' leading Jewish academic institutions informed by the ethos and practice of Progressive Judaism, and a PhD in Semitic languages from UCD.

The purpose of his work is to provide information about Jewish beliefs, festivals, rituals and customs in the hope that 'readers will come away with a more sensitive understanding of Jews, of their way of life, and of the values that have enabled them not only to survive but to manifest such vitality in spite of the victimisation and persecution they have endured for nearly two thousand years.' (p.7)

Maher divides the book into 16 chapters, Historical Overview, Different Branches within Judaism, Sacred Texts of Judaism, Important Jewish Festivals: An Overview, Jewish Festivals, The Sabbath, Pilgrimage in Judaism, The Synagogue, The Shema and its Blessings, The Eighteen Benedictions or The Shemoneh Esreh, Dietary Laws, Rituals and the Lifecycle, Judaism and Christianity: A Troubled History, The Holocaust, The Jews in Ireland, Official Church Documents Relating to the Jews.

Maher deserves plaudits for the detail into which he goes, the clarity with which he writes, and the breadth of material that he squeezes into some of the subject areas: for example, in the second chapter he describes with commendable balance and accuracy the make-up of the Jewish community world-wide, divided between Ashkenazi or Western/Eastern European Jews and Sephardi or Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jews, and then sub-divided into what may be a bewildering range of factions to Christians; Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Secular, Kabbalist and Hasidic. The chapter demolishes more successfully than I think I have ever read the notion of a monolithic Jewish people, and further correctly demonstrates that Orthodox Jewry, which asserts the primacy of its Judaism over all others and seeks to set the ground rules against which all are measured, is numerically in the minority world-wide.

The chapter on Judaism's Sacred Texts takes in the Hebrew Bible (explaining that term as opposed to 'Old Testament'), the great works of rabbinic literature such as the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmud, Medieval Law Codes and the Prayerbook. In addition, both in this chapter and throughout the book there are boxed texts focussing on specific mini-subjects, such as The Torah Scroll and The Shofar.

The chapter on Judaism's Festivals is full enough to inform on all the key areas, and the description of Passover, and especially the Seder ritual, both of such importance and interest to Christians, is excellent.

The chapter on the troubled history of Judaism and Christianity, as well as between Jews and Christians, acknowledges the pain and persecution, and also the steps that have been made in recent years, notably by the Catholic Church, to make redress for centuries of marginalisation, persecution and institutionalised hatred.

The chapter on The Holocaust which follows it, though brief, ducks neither its theological challenges nor its implications for Jewish-Christian relations, both historically and contemporaneously, and Maher also explains why Jews now eschew the term *holocaust* in favour of the Hebrew word Shoah.

There is a comprehensive and well explained glossary of frequently used Jewish and Hebrew terms and a short though adequate bibliography.

As an Irish writer Maher includes a brief chapter on the interesting history of the Jews in Ireland, and it is here that my only cavil comes, for he manages to ignore completely the existence of a thriving Progressive Synagogue in Dublin which, for the last sixty years, has provided a modern Jewish alternative to that on offer in the Orthodox synagogue.

That small criticism apart, though, this is one of the best introductions to Judaism that I have ever encountered, and, though written for Christians, would serve perfectly well as a core text for the teaching of proselytes to Judaism.

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